

A “Global Strategic Narrative”

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A Global Strategic Narrative

An essay by John G. Heidenrich

Sometimes the obvious deserves to be said.

Knowledge is power. Intelligence is awareness. Wisdom is understanding.

Knowledge bestows power through the discovery of an opportunity, or an advantage, or a weakness. Yet, power is not necessarily awareness, and intelligence can bestow awareness but not necessarily understanding. The horrors recorded in human history attest to too many occasions when power, fear and narrow-mindedness ignored or even suppressed ethical wisdom, universal compassion, legal responsibility, and political restraint. Those horrors include physical and mental harm to persons and to peoples; abuses of the planet's environment and of its many species; and widespread devastation. The twentieth century of the common era was the most deadly, the most destructive century in recorded history.

In the present century we cannot afford to be worse. We must do better.

We now live in an epoch unique in the human experience, because today more people have more access to more information than ever before. Tomorrow, there will be even more; and the day after, even more. Yet, more information does not necessarily mean more knowledge, and more knowledge does not necessarily mean more awareness, or more understanding. Faced with rising torrents of information, many individuals and groups have narrowed their awareness to only the immediate or sensational, focused on particular details but with little awareness of context or proportionality. Whether this extreme focus is deliberate or inadvertent, it exemplifies the metaphor of seeing the trees but not the forest.

Yet, seeing the forest would help us to better understand the trees. And more.

Among many academic disciplines there are scholars and experienced experts who well recognize that the world and its ways must be understood as a whole. They well recognize that an event in one location can prompt events elsewhere, sometimes around the planet, with lasting implications. The effects can be political, economic, social, environmental, and sometimes all of these. The influence exerted may not always be obvious and the results not always immediate, but like a small noise or misstep that prompts an avalanche or landslide, we ignore such changes at our peril. We need greater awareness, preferably before the changes begin.

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The bridge between our goals and, for accomplishing those goals, the instruments we employ, is called strategy. A strategy is a pattern of actions and variables orchestrated to achieve an ultimate objective, a desired result. For many centuries strategy was a clever way to overcome one's opponent — a concept for identifying and exploiting that opponent's weaknesses while asserting one's strengths. But is an opponent always required? Today, strategy is no longer an exclusively military, political, or economic concept. Today, strategy is an organized, holistic approach to solving problems.

A strategy may be conceived by the few, but when implemented by the many, their very participation develops the strategy as well. For its details must be determined and dwelt with; aspects must be addressed; and eventually, exceptional circumstances become revealed and are accommodated. The larger the strategy, the more participants are needed to implement it. Hence, those participants, by treating the goals of the strategy as their own, become its fellow creators.

What is called a strategic narrative is a story which draws from history to explain a set of problems, and how a strategy can help to solve those problems. The situation is explained in the context of history, geography, politics, economics, technology, culture, and other fields of study. By explaining how the strategy should work, a strategic narrative also offers a vision of the future, why that vision is worth pursuing, and how people can participate in creating their future by transforming that vision into reality.

A national strategic narrative is, by definition, focused upon the nation-state. In its description of a national strategy, that narrative may speak of war or peace, of competition or cooperation, of making gains against others or sharing the nation's wealth abroad; but whatever the national strategy, the focus is upon the nation and its government — how the nation perceives itself, how it interprets its own history, and how it perceives its situation in relation to other nations. The terms of reference of the narrative are rooted in the nation's self-perception and national identity.

By contrast, this essay is a global strategic narrative. As such, it treats humankind as a whole, treats the world as a whole, and treats nations as the largest communities of our vast human family. A wise man once said that you can choose your friends but you cannot choose your family. This is also true globally.

Global governance means different ideas to different people, but upon one idea most people do agree: a number of problems faced by humankind must be addressed with international cooperation and collaboration. By sharing our perspectives and pooling our knowledge, we gain a greater awareness of the many variables involved and how they interact. Ultimately, we gain a better understanding of what we can do, what we cannot do, and what we must do.

The global strategy that this narrative proposes is the worldwide networking and collaboration of experts devoted to global awareness, holistic understanding, and strategic approaches to the problems of humankind. The goals of this endeavor include a better awareness and a growing understanding of the world as it actually exists, not as pockets of narrow perception but in the globe's interrelated complexity, including changes gradual in their effects but enormous in their magnitude. In this holistic strategic approach, technological issues and economic interests are important components; political, military, and law-enforcement variables are crucial; likewise crucial are a multitude of environmental, regional and local concerns. Through respectful discourse and collaborative research between the world's nations and cultures, we can assess a variety of strategic approaches and help to devise and recommend improved strategies.

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The daily news is dominated, almost by nature, by the immediate, by the sensational, and oftentimes by the tragic and horrific. Yet, if we assess matters with a larger, longer perspective, that perspective reveals that humankind has made some extraordinarily advances — advances are well worth recognizing and building upon, instead of assuming, falsely, that nothing ever changes. Here are but a few examples of humankind's recent progress:

- Of the world's national governments, the majority are more democratic than ever before.
- International conventions, covenants, and treaties have established universal standards for human rights — and societies are increasingly complying with those standards.
- National self-determination, political autonomy, and political sovereignty are now widely considered to be global values, while violent genocide and armed piracy are globally recognized as being crimes, punishable almost anywhere their perpetrators go.
- Globally, more people have a higher standard of living than ever in human history. Two centuries ago, absolute poverty was the economic condition for 80 percent of the

world's population. Today, that number has fallen to about 20 percent. While much remains to be done against the prevalence of poverty, much has been achieved.

- Globally, there is less gender inequality and less institutionalized racism than in prior centuries, and even compared to recent decades.
- While weapons have become more destructive and more accurate in recent years, the number of wars between countries has actually been in decline. Today, most wars occur within countries, not between countries.

Sovereign states, as well as the international and regional organizations which sovereign member-states fund and direct, are important to global governance but cannot be the entirety of global governance. In a world already energetic with the dedication and expertise of non-governmental organizations, private enterprises, large networks and local communities, trade associations and trade unions, religious organizations and philosophical societies, research institutions, colleges and universities, as well as countless capable individuals, there is plenty of talent available.

And there is plenty to do.

Representative of the global strategy this narrative proposes is the Global Challenges Forum Foundation (GCFF). The GCFF has no profit motive and its purposes are purely charitable. The GCFF is oriented primarily towards universities, educational institutions and non-profit research entities, but it also encourages partnerships with governments, with international and regional organizations, and with non-governmental organizations — all in order to foster inclusive, networked solutions that promote good governance. The GCFF is intended as a “Forum of Forums” that sponsors specialized conferences on different global challenges and then unites the proceedings from all of the individual conferences into one larger summit, held annually. By bringing together experts from many different fields to discuss global challenges and possible solutions, the GCFF provides knowledgeable analysis by individuals who have thought about these issues and who are in positions to make a difference.

The Global Challenges Forum Foundation is interested in primarily, but not exclusively, the global challenges of education, economics, development and public health, energy, maritime issues, the interaction of technology and society, international security, as well as philosophy and political science:

Education – When humankind's only “recorded” history was the oral tradition, and when human settlements were but temporary fixtures erected by migrating tribes, people had

already recognized the cultural and moral imperative of education — in the form of teaching, tutoring, mentoring, and by personal example. Driven by survival needs and by sheer curiosity, people explored the natural world, made discoveries about the universe and about themselves, and taught their children the lessons. Knowledge grew, as did cultures, and more and more people became observers of nature, crafters and users of tools, and ultimately elders of experience and wisdom.

As vital to learn as vocational skills are, good education teaches more. With knowledge as our foundation, our tool and our quest, human cultures and civilizations have created magnificent arts and entertainments to see; exquisite language and music to hear; delicious cuisines to taste; fragrant scents to smell; and physical pleasures to touch. Collectively, these can be considered gifts from one generation to the next, the products of not only curiosity and chance but of education.

Many societies have determined that what constitutes a good education is what enriches the mind, develops the body, and encourages ethical behavior and good citizenship. For many people, education is a path to discovery and self-improvement. For others, however, what little education they are permitted is limited to some elementary training in a few basic skills — assigned to groups which are discriminated against based on gender, ethnicity, politics, or social stature. Consequently, most of the world's population is considered to be under-educated, mostly young girls and women. In many places where war or oppression exist, not only do prospective students need access to the teachers, many of the teachers need access to the students — because access is denied, forcibly denied, with intolerance enforcing ignorance. Some oppressors even claim to be benefiting the oppressed by keeping them in ignorance. Yet, history reveals how immoral and delusional this denial is, as stated so eloquently by Simón Bolívar, the nineteenth century Latin American statesman: “Slavery is the daughter of darkness,” warned Bolívar. “An ignorant people is a blind instrument of its own destruction.”

Truthfully if sadly, education often necessitates protective security, along with elements of politics, economics, culture, tradition, and technologies old and new. To achieve such a range of knowledge requires holistic strategies.

Traditional forms of education are fruitful endeavors, and unconventional forms of education offer exciting possibilities as well. One way to think provocatively about education is via the subject of art. For art and education in some ways reflect each other, and in other ways they comment on each other. What are the purposes of art? How is it taught? Should art display individual creativity, even if the result may shock the propriety of society? Or should art

always conform to cultural standards, or to the standards of a powerful institution? Some people say art is a form of education. Should education be considered a form of art?

Another way to think about education is to ask what educational content would encourage global stewardship. When Diogenes, the ancient Greek philosopher, was asked where he came from — in other words, when he was asked what his political and cultural identity was — he replied, “I am a citizen of the world.” His answer gave birth to the Greek word *cosmopolites*, or in English, *cosmopolitan*. If Diogenes was the first to assert the idea of global citizenship, he was not the last. Countless examples exist. In the eighteenth century, for instance, the English-American political activist Thomas Paine declared, “The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.”

The purpose of global citizenship is to foster international cooperation and a holistic understanding of the world. To be a citizen of the world does not require renouncing one’s country: after all, important elections are meaningless without voters, for which national citizenship is often the most important prerequisite. Yet, just as national citizenship bestows privileges and responsibilities, so does global citizenship, for it recognizes that one’s country is part of a global community of nations, and that national security need not preclude international security. An education in global citizenship includes learning about one’s own country and also about other countries: nations of fellow human beings, peoples whose histories and circumstances have produced different cultures, different ways of life, different ideas — but as human beings are worthy of respect and efforts at understanding.

“We made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another,” proclaims the Holy Quran of Islam. Some of the greatest achievements of humankind stem from the idea, supposedly naïve its critics allege, that people from different nations, different worldviews, even different motivations, can identify common interests and work together accordingly. Disagreements are inevitable, of course, but not necessarily counterproductive. If diplomats dealt with only those people they agreed with, most diplomats would be unemployed. And not only diplomats.

Economics – Economics is a relatively “modern” science but whose basic elements are as old as civilization itself. In different parts of the world a variety of economic systems have been tried over the centuries, some of those systems emphasizing centralized decision-making, others encouraging decentralized decision-making. Who is qualified to make important economic decisions? Based on what criteria or agenda? Such questions may never be answered to everyone’s satisfaction, but the questions are still worth posing. And re-asking.

Among many people, their knowledge of economics is fairly personal: the pride and dignity of self-performance, having some amount of self-sufficiency, and being a family provider. With these in mind, what constitutes economic stability? Is it only an income for a decent standard of living? Is it the availability of resources, both for now and into the foreseeable future? Does it go beyond mere physical survival? Is it a situation wherein people have sufficient resources to participate in their societies economically, socially, and politically?

Market forces and more recently globalization have benefited great multitudes of people by raising living standards in general — but not always consistently, nor universally, encouraging efficiency but not necessarily fairness. People innocent in their behavior have become impoverished, while others have always been impoverished. What, then, is the proper balance between private ownership and governmental supervision? Does it depend on the country and culture? How well can that nuance, or those nuances, fit into the global economy?

So many issues which are popularly associated with “economics” are perhaps more accurately described as issues of morality and, by extension, of political economy. In some ways morality and natural phenomena are in accord: compassion, for example, is a natural trait. In other ways, however, morality and natural phenomena are in conflict: selfishness, for example, is a natural trait. Whereas compassion facilitates charity, selfishness facilitates markets. Can compassion facilitate markets, at least in some ways? Can selfishness facilitate charity, at least in some ways? Are these truly desirable? What are their implications?

To such questions only a holistic approach can hope to address them all.

Development and Public Health — An endeavor at least as complicated as economics, and likewise as controversial, is development. The economic problems which afflict long-developed countries — including pollution, public health, price inflation, unemployment and underemployment, inadequate education, insufficient opportunities and lack of investment capital, a widening wealth disparity between rich and poor, the destruction of socio-cultural and historical traditions, conflicts of political and economic interests, limited accountability and unequal access to legal recourse, bureaucratic costs and excessive regulatory complications — these are suffered even more greatly in developing countries.

Development, including economic development, involves more than economics. The South African statesman Nelson Mandela once said, “Peace is the greatest weapon for development that any person can have.” That is a truism understood by millions of people who have struggled to survive amid civil war or other violent strife. Within that truism is a deeper truism: while livelihoods may depend on economics, ways of life depend on politics. Finding

an equitable balance which fosters general prosperity and public health would be difficult under the best of circumstances. It is even more difficult amid the complexity of human affairs, with competing groups, interests, and influence.

Sometimes the obvious deserves to be said. Human societies depend upon institutions for organization, order, and guidance. At what point, though, is an institution actually retarding development or public health, or both, and so has become part of the problem instead of part of the solution?

The possible questions which development and public health concerns raise are too numerous to list. Here, then, are a few samples: What is the correct balance between economic productivity and environmental protection? Pollution imposes costs, of course, but so does pollution reduction. Who pays, and how much? Who does not pay, but ought to? Why?

Energy – For thousands of years, most of the energy which people used was inherent in things: in the muscles of humans and domestic animals; in the warmth of cooking fires; in the rushing waters and billowing winds that powered mills and sailing ships. Only with the Industrial Revolution has energy become its own category of statistics, measured in the production of coal, petroleum, electricity, and so forth.

Since the twentieth century, the technologies and fuel supplies associated with energy have become vital aspects of international trade, economic prosperity, and national security. Nations have literally fought over energy supplies. In the most recent half-century, energy producers have sometimes wielded their advantage like a weapon. Eventually, however, consumers do diversify their energy sources, often aided by market forces, leaving the once advantaged energy producers with diminished influence and less respect.

Sometimes the obvious deserves to be said — although a more strategic perspective may be necessary to see it. Rapid technological change and a myriad of fluctuating variables have transformed energy markets again and again, and these have occurred within surprisingly short periods of time. Sometimes the roles of the net producers and net consumers have even switched. Evidently, no energy advantage is forever. It may not last for even a few years.

Whereas the global economy's dependence on fossil fuels appears unlikely to end anytime soon, there is widespread recognition that energy production and energy consumption must both become more environmentally friendly and sustainable. Of traditional importance, and still crucial today, is the safety and security of energy networks, protecting them against terrorism, piracy, and natural disturbances. Meanwhile, other sources of energy are actually plentiful, including natural (methane) gas, hydro-electric power, wind, and solar. Yet, their

wider adoption faces political, economic, and even socio-cultural complications. Every energy source, no matter how promising, brings with it implications and often surprises.

What will be the great energy source of the twenty-first century? To date, nobody knows for certain, nor can, for there are too many variables to know for certain. Still, the challenges of energy are so important, so central to the global economy, that a holistic approach does make strategic sense.

Maritime Issues – The waterways of the globe have facilitated international trade since the mariners of antiquity and, today, worldwide, most people's living standards would be impossible without such trade. Yet, with increased economic activities have come ever larger cargo ships on the oceans, over-fishing, and a pervasive dumping of pollutants. The reality of global warming, whatever its causes, is a scientific fact: sea levels are rising, erosion is spreading, coastlines are receding, fishing catches are decreasing, and ecological changes are cascading in a transformation of global proportions. Water security is now considered a global issue in its own right.

Amid the changes lives a profoundly complicated and increasingly fragile system of marine life. The oceans play a crucial role in actually mitigating global climate change. The oceans also determine weather patterns, are a key vector of transportation and illegal migration, are scenes of piracy, host undersea cables, are subject to fishing rights, and carry naval power far and wide. To monitor and regulate what is done to the oceans and to other bodies of water, regional agreements and frameworks do exist, but these are subject to numerous challenges, while bilateral agreements are proliferating. What is missing is a holistic approach.

The Interaction of Technology and Society – Prior to the births of most people who are alive today, human ingenuity had already invented technologies that farmed the soil and fed growing populations; built great structures and cities; crossed the oceans and spread communities to every continent and in almost every climate; healed bodily injuries and medical ailments; enabled travel at speeds faster than any creature can achieve naturally, whether on the land, in the sky, or under the sea; generated material wealth and physical conveniences for billions; enabled communications across immense distances instantaneously; and enabled journeys beyond this planet into outer space.

Each of these accomplishments has generated implications, many of them quite unexpected. A permanent challenge which societies face is how to accommodate technological and societal progress, and the cascading changes which result, while also respecting traditions and social practices that are the legacy of long experience. What is commonly called the Information Age is still, even now, in its relative infancy, for the power of the Internet

continues to prompt surprises while the Internet's full potential — in many ways, still theoretical — continues to fascinate. The full implications may not be known for several decades as information technologies continue to develop, and because sizable populations of prospective users have yet to “get online” — but someday will.

Here is a provocative question: Do future technologies hold the potential to transform classical economics?

New technologies need not be electronic to be advanced, and beneficial technologies need not be complicated to be sophisticated. For any new technology, the historical record has proven to be humbling in that theorists, engineers, scientists, even science fiction writers tend to be guilty of overestimating the longer term implications while underestimating the short term impact. In spite of this dubious accuracy, speculative conversations about such things are still worth having, for they encourage us to examine ourselves, our societies, our problems, and our ideals. For better or worse, holistic thinking and collaboration hold the potential to, yet again, surprise everyone. And humble everyone.

Sometimes the obvious deserves to be said. Indeed, what appears obvious to one expert in a particular field may not be obvious to another expert in another field. Once they both know, deeper insights become possible.

International Security – National state sovereignty and the right to national self-defense are principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter. At the same time, a common recognition exists that claims of sovereignty should never be used to justify, nor to legitimize, crimes against humanity such as massacres of non-combatants and blatant acts of genocide. The many Hague and Geneva Conventions, the Genocide Convention, as well as numerous other international treaties and covenants, are globally understood to constitute both national and international law. As such, their provisions are not mere wishful thinking.

Legitimate concerns about national security do render some types of information genuinely too sensitive to be made available to everyone. Yet, because the world has become so interconnected, with vast amounts of information readily available about almost every subject, most of today's national secrets pertain to only specific details and to obscure technical aspects — which means that the general aspects of national security can be openly discussed without exposing any genuine secrets.

The military observer, the liaison officer, and the military and naval attaché are roles formally accepted for centuries, even among countries with tense relations. More recently, various countries have agreed to the creation of de-militarized zones; have signed treaties for military

arms control and disarmament; and are practicing mutual confidence-building measures to help reduce international tensions by lessening opportunities for surprise attack. Yet, what roles can these arrangements fulfill in a future likely to be politically uncertain and technologically dynamic? In the future, at least some of the implications could be unprecedented.

Dag Hammarskjöld, a past Secretary-General of the United Nations who gave his life in the service of peace, once remarked that “The UN was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.” Indeed, the history of the UN Organization is filled with successes and failures, and each case was complex. In a dynamic future, international and regional organizations are likely to experience considerable change. What particular changes would suit governments? What particular changes would encourage international security and global stewardship?

Philosophy and Political Science – According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, politics is “the master science” because whether we see it or not, politics pervades human society. Sometimes politics are associated with deception and manipulation, but at the core of politics — whether practical or ideological, whether heavily controlling or light in influence — politics refers to the decisions made to govern society. How should society be structured and governed? Who should govern and how? Politics is so pervasive that to “take politics out” of something, or to “shield” something from a political agenda, is still a political decision.

Before Aristotle’s time and since his time, philosophers and sages have presented humankind with analyses, interpretations, and revelations as answers to many of the great questions: What is the meaning of life? What is the good life? What is the purpose of society? What are society’s rights and obligations? What does society owe the individual person? What is an identity and how important is it? Religion, nation, vocation, clan, class, tribe, family, individual — each of these can be treated as an identity and, in so being, generates implications.

In some respects every culture is unique, and to ignore or belittle that uniqueness risks misperceiving and oversimplifying what could be holding a society together and giving people meaning in their lives. Yet, every human culture is by definition an association of human beings, which means they must contend with biologically instinctive — that is, universal — human needs and desires. Local traditions can be philosophically and politically valuable, but for some people the answers they find most satisfying might not be found in the traditions of their locality. “If ideas and beliefs are to be denied validity outside the geographical and cultural bounds of their origin,” noted Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese

stateswoman, “Buddhism would be confined to north India, Christianity to a narrow tract in the Middle East, and Islam to Arabia.”

History shows that knowledge can be misused, misapplied, misunderstood, or even inaccurate — and the consequences have included crimes which shock the conscience of humankind. The solution lies not in ignorance, but in higher, wiser forms of knowledge called awareness and understanding. Consider that every major religion teaches what is popularly called the golden rule: what is hurtful to you, do not do to others. That every major religion proclaims the golden rule is an example of intelligence which cannot become known except through awareness: through curiosity, active inquiry, and receptiveness to ideas of outsiders. That every major religion understands the importance of the golden rule is a manifestation of wisdom — a wisdom now incorporated into countless philosophies and legal codes.

Reasons for hope. Reasons to keeping trying.

It is probably inherent in the human psyche that throughout our lives, most of us tend to feel more dissatisfied than satisfied. We see the ordinary as ordinary, not as remarkable, despite a plethora of variables which could have produced a very different result, even remarkably easily, but somehow did not. Whether the attitudes we grasp gravitate towards cynicism or towards complacency, either extreme can be dangerous when it encourages us to assume that nothing can be changed and never will change. In fact, change is almost always inevitable.

Whether as individuals or groups, when we compare ourselves and our actions to the world at large, whatever we do may appear irrelevant, even futile. Profoundly, however, both history and history-makers inform us otherwise. For in the words of Mohandas Gandhi: “Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.” The influential anthropologist Margaret Mead offered this observation: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

What changes do we desire? What changes ought we desire? Beware of what you wish for, because you may get it. Only through experience, study and discussion have human beings learned what consequences are possible and how we might mitigate the risks. The answers are unlikely to be found in national seclusion, however, because today no technologically advanced society can thrive without being integrated into the global economy and the community of nations. Indeed, throughout most of human history, cultures and civilizations separated by vast distances nevertheless learned of each other, traded with each other, and influenced one another. Sometimes the influence was violent and destructive, but more often

the influence was gradual, appreciated, and enriching. The benefits and richness of those innumerable interactions continue to this day.

In this global strategic narrative, all of the people quoted here had their human faults and failings — and in the twentieth century, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was no exception. Yet, Churchill once observed something about himself which offers advice to all people, at all times. “For myself,” said Churchill, “I am an optimist. It does not seem to be much use being anything else.”

Sometimes the obvious deserves to be said.