The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West

David Kilcullen (Oxford University Press, 2020), 336, notes, index.

Reviewed by George P. Lewis

In *The Dragons and the Snakes,* counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen persuasively shows how, over the past three decades,US adversaries have successfully adapted the way they fight the West by mitigating the effect of US primacy in conventional warfighting capability. The book's title is an allusion to the 1993 confirmation hearing of former DCI James Woolsey, during which he stated that the United States had defeated a "large dragon"—the Soviet Union—"but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes" (11), referring to the wide array of state and non-state actors threatening US interests. Kilcullen draws analogies from biology, ecology, and psychology to explain how countries (the "dragons") and non-state actors (the "snakes") learn from failure and adapt to new circumstances. He largely focuses on Russia, China, and several militant groups in the Islamic world, while sadly only briefly discussing Iran and North Korea, which he labels "little dragons." (224)

The non-state actors Kilcullen examines have robustly evolved since 9/11. He illustrates how some are taking advantage of off-the-shelf consumer electronics the West has proliferated, including Google Earth, GPS sensors, phones, tablets, and hobbyist drones, which they have used to create sophisticated artillery targeting systems and lethal air strike capabilities. They have also learned that, in spite of sophisticated Western SIGINT capabilities, it is still possible to hide in the noise of the enormous volume of communications data being generated every moment, Kilcullen alleges. He also claims that, in order to minimize the impact of Western air superiority, most groups have learned to avoid concentrating forces, decentralize leadership, and in some cases even operate underground.

Organizationally, non-state actors are adapting and specializing, too. Al-Qa'ida (AQ), in response to punishing Western counterterrorism pressure after 9/11, often aimed at leadership, and has since evolved into a largely leaderless organization focused on providing propaganda and targeting support to a nebulous group of AQ franchises and AQ-inspired homegrown terrorists, according to Kilcullen. Meanwhile, one AQ affiliate, al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), and its successor organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), have demonstrated a boom-and-bust cycle of surging fighters and resources that then contract under temporary Western pressure. Kilcullen speculates that this cycle will persist and that before long a new organization will arise from the ashes of ISIS. In contrast to AQI and ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Kilcullen argues, has charted a different course, opting to avoid large troop concentrations and instead focusing on cultivating support from the population through effective guerrilla-style governance.

But the organization that has evolved into the most capable non-state threat is Hezbollah, according to Kilcullen. Its decades of operations in Lebanon, persistent conflict with Israel, and involvement in the Syrian Civil War have turned it into a sophisticated governing organization with asymmetric combat capabilities that exploit Western—especially Israeli—weaknesses.

Shifting to state actors, Kilcullen argues that Russia is also steering clear of conventional conflict with the United States, while still seeking to compete with the United States and the West using other means. One example he offers is Russia's adapting to Western governments' intelligence capabilities. While numerous terms abound for Russia's recent geopolitical operations short of conventional or nuclear war—active measures, hybrid warfare, gray-zone operations, and asymmetric warfare, to name a few—Kilcullen creates his own term: "liminal warfare." (95) With liminal warfare, Russia conducts operations that are not immediately detected or attributed by its opponents, but he claims they understand that eventual detection, and sometimes even attribution, is often a foregone conclusion due to modern intelligence capabilities. So, he argues, Russia's operations also seek to exploit a "response threshold" (119), where their operations are tailored to fall just short of the transparent political limits and redlines of most Western governments, knowing that, while their actions may be condemned, they will not trigger a military response.

Going one step further, Kilcullen suggests that Russia also uses liminal operations as the geopolitical equivalent of a one-two combo in boxing, where liminal operations temporarily disrupt Western governments' decisionmaking and allow Russia to conduct even more provocative operations, unimpeded. As an illustration of this theory, he claims that Russia's alleged 2016 election interference distracted Western governments from effectively responding to Russian offensives in Ukraine and Syria during the winter of 2016–17.

In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, China also realized that it could not withstand a conventional attack from the United States, according to Kilcullen. While dedicating some of its enormous economic might to addressing shortfalls in their conventional warfighting capabilities, he claims China is also seeking to compete with the United States in a wide spectra of non-military domains, such as trade, cyberspace, and legal warfare. The latter, legal warfare, pertains to China's allegedly using the existing international order (led by the United States) against the United States, leveraging the order's rules, organizations, and norms. He even explores the possibility that China's leaders may be orchestrating (or at least willfully ignoring) the supply of Chinese-manufactured fentanyl to the United States as a form of "drug warfare," though he acknowledges this is at best a shaky hypothesis. (206, 311)

Throughout *The Dragons and the Snakes,* Kilcullen provides numerous examples of actions that fit his theories of how US adversaries have adapted to compete with the United States, such as his liminal warfare doctrine, but he struggles to supply evidence that the leaders of US adversaries are doing this intentionally. Of course, in some cases, especially those of the non-state actors, it hardly matters if it is intentional or not—the impact on the United States is the same—but knowing whether these actions are intentional is crucial to US decisionmaking. The main evidence he provides of Russia's use of liminal warfare as Russian doctrine is a speech and subsequent paper by Russian General Gerasimov, which Kilcullen willingly admits was never intended to be interpreted as Russian doctrine, and in fact was General Gerasimov's state perception of what the west was doing to Russia. For Chinese intentions, he cites a book written by two People's Liberation Army senior colonels with the English title *Unrestricted Warfare*. As with Gerasimov's speech, parts or all of the book could simply be a reflection of China's perception of Western actions. When *Unrestricted Warfare* explicitly mentions drug warfare, it could simply be the authors suggesting that British opium smuggling in the 18th and 19th centuries was a form of warfare against China, not that China should use fentanyl smuggling to undermine the United States. That said, while acknowledging that a single book or speech hardly constitutes proof of a state's intentions, he uses these together with numerous Russian and Chinese actions to make a compelling case that both are using non-military methods to compete with the United States in at least some cases.

Thankfully, Kilcullen also highlights the danger of not understanding the intentions of one's adversaries. He shows that Russian and Chinese leaders sometimes have dubious and even preposterous ideas about Western intentions towards their own countries, which underscores the danger of the United States jumping to conclusions about adversary intent. If the United States fails to understand its adversaries' intentions, then it will not recognize when those countries are taking hostile actions to compete against the West—and, conversely, it may misinterpret benign or unintentional actions as aggressive. Similarly, if the United States fails to clearly and convincingly communicate the intent of its own actions, then its adversaries are liable to misinterpret well-meaning actions as subversive and aggressive. Such misinterpretations have dangerous consequences, particularly in a nuclear-armed world. However, establishing clear demarcations of what constitutes a hostile, non-military action would ironically create more opportunity for liminal warfare to exploit these same response thresholds.

While admitting that the threats facing the United States today are more grave than those at the turn of the century and that all countries that rise must also eventually fall, Kilcullen does not advocate for a defeatist attitude in US foreign policy. Instead, he suggests that the United States should learn from how the Byzantine Empire reigned for a thousand years by successfully parrying numerous and often simultaneous threats. The United States does not need to maintain global primacy in warfighting capability to still pursue its goals on the world stage. He recommends that the United States deliberately exercise its whole-of-government influence in pursuit of peace, prosperity, and liberty, while carefully avoiding so-called "forever wars" and attempts to reassert global US military primacy. (247)

In *The Dragons and the Snakes,* Kilcullen deftly marshals a wide range of reporting to suggest that US adversaries have adapted to US conventional military primacy and he offers a pragmatic solution for how the United States can counter-adapt. Readers will find his discussion on liminal warfare and the concepts of detection, attribution, and response thresholds particularly insightful. Readers will also enjoy his persuasive illustration of the importance of understanding the intent of US adversaries' leaders, underscoring the value that good intelligence can add to policymaking.

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The reviewer: George P. Lewis is the pen name of an officer in CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology.