

# UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY STRATEGY BY THOMAS M. KANE, DAVID J. LONSDALE

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## About the Author

Thomas M. Kane is Lecturer in international politics at the University of Hull. He specialises in the art of strategy, with a particular interest in its application in China. Relevant publications include *Ancient China on Postmodern War* (2007), *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power* (2005) and *Military Logistics and Strategic Performance* (2002).

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Understanding Contemporary Strategy provides an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the theory and practice of modern strategy.

Covering all the main issues in the field, the book explores the major themes through a combination of classical and modern strategic theory, history and current practice. The book is split into three main sections:

- Definition and Context : including discussion of the human, technological, intelligence, ethical and grand-strategic dimensions
- Strategy in the Geographic Environments: land, sea, air and space
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This book will be essential reading for upper-level students of strategic studies, war studies, military history and international security.

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This is a book ostensibly on contemporary strategy but only in old-fashioned British senses, something along the lines of "modern warfare", although perhaps it would be more aptly titled "The Dummy's Guide to War" - the structure is actually a mix of rather childish chapters on aspects of warfare that have been analyzed better elsewhere, and each chapter is a disorienting mix of historical anecdotes and maxims, thrown down at such a pace that one gets the sense that the writers were typing up whatever they recalled from their own undergraduate experiences, presumably towards the end of the Cold War. The authors rely far too heavily on Clausewitz, Machiavelli, and other long-dead philosophers, quoting single sentences out of context as if they were gospel; the only living "strategist" from whom the authors quote repeatedly is Colin S. Gray, to whom the book is dedicated, and the quotes are equally random. This is a book on contemporary strategy remember, but only the last 3 of 13 chapters are grouped under "contemporary strategic challenges" and one of them is on "Nuclear Strategy"! These chapters are so short and superficial as to read like a high-schooler's cut-and-paste collection from diverse blogs and wikis.

For instance, the chapter on terrorism begins with a review of what al-qaeda did on 9/11, then quotes from Clausewitz and Machiavelli and classics from the 1970s about the urban guerilla. A random collection of facts about mostly Cold War terrorist groups follows, then we get some platitudes of wisdom about counter-terrorism, such as (page 230): "Much of the time, no one counterterrorist organisation will be in a position to disrupt more than a small part of the terrorists' operations." Great. What might be the solution? None given. So what should be our "strategy"? Surprisingly, the authors don't have one anywhere, although on page 232 they did summarize the four "Ds" of US anti-terrorist strategy. D1: "Defeat terrorists and their organisations..." And the authors' reaction is? "Other analysts may prefer other lists." Wow. The conclusion to the chapter is entitled "everything new is old." This is where they introduce the concept of "new terrorism" - which was identified first in the 1990s and heralded the rise of extreme religious terrorists like Osama bin Laden, but the authors don't tell you this, and they really should have discussed it at the start of the chapter and focused on it. Instead, they allocate just 2 paragraphs to "new terrorism" and misrepresent it as the "dwindling of left-wing groups." The authors don't mention Osama bin Laden or analyze the complexities of new terrorism, instead they conclude that terrorism hasn't changed that much. The chapter on terrorism probably betrays better than any other the authors' ignorance of contemporary security.

Now you might be wondering if the rest of the book is nonetheless a good reference on the history of war. Sure, if you're 5 years old. For instance, take the chapter on "Land Warfare", page 124: "Tanks. Advantages: fast, armour protection...Disadvantages: limited mobility in rough terrain, poor visibility..." The authors' bad assumptions about military technology and doctrine is more noticeable in the chapters on air power (a history that ends in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, before the profound disputes about the uses of air power in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency) and naval power (almost all of it about British experiences with German threats, plus more quotes from Clausewitz of course). The chapter on "The human dimension of strategy" is most disappointing - it's mostly about "strategic culture", quoting the "pioneers" of that concept without the critics, as if it's universally accepted. Then the chapter devotes one page on morale, quoting Clausewitz repeatedly as if he is some sort of military psychologist, then 2 pages on cohesion, most of which summarizes S.L.A. Marshall's book from 1947. These chapters just betray the authors' dated and limited reading on their topics and their conservative attitudes and knowledge.

The final chapter is "Conclusion: patterns in grand strategy today" - it runs for 3 pages and tells us that geography still matters, so do resources. And your final inspiration is "For both western powers and their potential opponents, the strategic challenge of the next decade may be that of securing the resources they may need to address sharper challenges later in the century." What will be those challenges and resources? Don't expect to find out from this book.

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