



Blind or Confused: The Impact of 9/11 and Its Aftermath on Risk

September 22, 2021 | Professor Nathan Freier

STRATEGY WITHOUT RISK IS NOT STRATEGY

In a defense and military security context, the United States has at times been “risk-blind” and, at others, “risk-confused” over the last two decades.¹ These conditions likely predate the 9/11 attacks. But 9/11, the post-9/11 period, and the United States’ current struggle to adapt to post-primacy indicate defense and military leadership have yet to employ (or maybe are just now employing) risk effectively in their most important strategic decisions.² If and when leadership begins to routinize risk-informed strategy development, the United States will also likely begin to avoid the wide, unpredictable, costly, and ineffective swings in priorities that have plagued US strategy over the last 20 years.

I recall former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy saying words to the effect of “Strategy is simply the allocation of risk” in the early 2000s.³ I was always struck in a positive way by this concise description—especially, the linkage of strategy, strategic objectives, and the risk associated with pursuing them. I never liked many of the over-specified definitions of strategy—particularly, the definitions floating around the Department of Defense (DoD), the military, and military academia. The definition of strategy in the *DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, for example, is instructive in this regard. The definition states strategy is “[a] prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.”⁴

This description only accounts for the path and the destination of a particular strategy; the definition fails to account for the inevitable obstacles along the way. In this regard, Flournoy was accurate. Her description cut to the chase. In a defense (or any other) context, risk is central to strategy making. Strategy formulation involves setting goals, which have challenges associated with them—some of which are likely to be so significant that achieving objectives will be either impossible or unaffordable in the broadest sense of the word. At a minimum, acknowledging

these factors, aligning them in the decision-making process, and communicating them effectively across the defense and military enterprise inevitably leads to more thoughtful, risk-informed strategy.

WHAT IS RISK (AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO STRATEGY)?

Even before Flournoy offered her view on strategy and risk, I had thought a lot about these subjects in combination. Indeed, the US Army asked me to examine these topics for the majority of the year before 9/11. As a mid-grade Pentagon strategist in the Department of the Army's Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate, I was handed risk as a portfolio in the midst of a pre-Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Joint and interservice battle to define the term.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 required the secretary of defense to assess the “nature and magnitude of the political, strategic, and military risks associated with executing the missions called for under the national defense strategy.”⁵ The secretary was to make this assessment in conjunction with conducting the 2001 QDR.⁶ The challenge then was that risk in a defense context—whether political, strategic, or military—was strictly in the eye of the beholder.

As I recall, the Department of Defense did not have a common definition or description of defense-relevant risk at the time. If a definition existed, it was not commonly accepted and employed across all defense institutions. In addition, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000 did not fix this problem. Thus, the various Pentagon factions—the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the services—used the word “risk” frequently, but they always used it in a way that favored the protection of their parochial equities. I initially addressed the risk problem in this context and have battled its use in this way ever since.

Just before 9/11, prior to the publication of the 2001 QDR and in light of my investigation of this issue, I felt strongly that defense and military risk were best understood in the context of a strategy's purpose and objectives as well as the adopted path chosen by leadership to meet them. In the course of this work, I defined defense-relevant risk as “the likelihood of failure or prohibitive cost in pursuit of one or more of your strategic objectives.”⁷ Exploring “the likelihood of failure” acknowledges some things cannot be done, regardless of how little or how much the Department of Defense or the nation invests. Considering “the likelihood of prohibitive cost” suggests some things can be achieved at great cost, but the price of success may simply be too expensive.

Risk is described in the 2005 National Defense Strategy this way because I was one of the coauthors.⁸ But, more broadly, I have applied this construction and Flournoy's conception of how risk relates to strategy to think through innumerable problems as both a working defense and military strategist and a defense analyst over the last two decades. Along the way, I came to learn multiple salient lessons about how US defense and military leadership use risk in strategy

development and strategic decision making. One lesson stands out in particular. Corporately, the Department of Defense does not effectively allocate risk when formulating strategy, as Flournoy suggested, and this shortcoming can make senior US decisionmakers alternatively either risk-blind or risk-confused.

In combination, these two tendencies have yielded rash, wasteful, and anti-strategic US responses when confronting some hazards and inaction, paralysis, and loss favoring US rivals when confronting others. As the United States departs the post-9/11 period and enters a new era of intense great-power rivalry, achieving the optimal risk balance in strategic decision making may be the difference between withering in the face of persistent, counter-US resistance or thriving against it in a highly contested post-primacy world.

TWO FACES OF POST-9/11 RISK: RISK BLINDNESS AND RISK CONFUSION

Often since 9/11, defense and military strategy development and strategic planning have had two faces. The United States is sometimes destructively risk-blind and corrosively risk-confused. September 11's long shadow and the United States' post-9/11 wars loom large in both instances. The United States was somewhat risk-blind in the aftermath of 9/11 and through the post-9/11 wars. And now, as the nation enters post-primacy with the emergence of capable great-power rivals, the high cost of the post-9/11 period in part has at times cultivated risk confusion among senior US decisionmakers. Both risk blindness and risk confusion harbor significant potential for harm to US position, reach, and influence.

The two-decade US reaction to 9/11 betrays the significant potential within the US policy- and strategy-making communities for risk blindness: an inability to thoughtfully consider the possibility of failure or prohibitive cost and adjust objectives, resources, and methods as a consequence. The white-hot decision-making environment following the extreme provocation of 9/11 is instructive. Defense and national security decision making at the time was a clinic in risk blindness—a perfect storm of Thucydides' "[f]ear, honour, and interest" colliding at one point in time to dominate nearly two decades of US defense strategy.⁹

Certainly, the possibility of continuing acts of terrorism post-9/11 were clear and present hazards requiring a swift and effective military response. In Thucydides' terms, the United States feared the worst was to come; it believed for the sake of honor it had to deliver a proportional response; and a compelling national security imperative or interest was at stake because terrorists posed a real threat to the United States, its people, and the US homeland.

But then as now, decision making and strategy development lacked sufficient rigor—especially, rigor that differentiated the urgent from the more strategic or important. Post-9/11, the Department of Defense struggled to connect the emergence or potential emergence of specific hazards; their consequences relative to core, strategic objectives; and the deliberate (and

specific) risk mitigation initiatives associated with objectives, methods, and the likelihood of failure or prohibitive cost when pursuing them.

Without rigor, all hazards have the potential to be seen as equal. And, consequently, the first big hazard to appear—especially a spectacular one like 9/11—can become an obsession at the expense of preparing for other mid- to long-term threats that are potentially far worse. In short, if all hazards are equal and disconnected from an objective assessment of their potential for harm, the “known known,” or the most immediate, obvious, and proximate threat or hazard, dominates strategic decision making, planning, and resourcing. A “never again” attitude consumes decision and action, leaving very little room for a broad, thoughtful, risk-informed appreciation of the nation’s current and future “threatscape.”

Risk blindness inevitably leaves important questions unanswered. In the immediate post-9/11 period, for example, was terrorism significant enough, relative to the security of all core interests around the world, to warrant the near-exclusive focus—call it obsession—of the US defense and national security establishment? Did terrorism require a two-decade, large-scale, counterinsurgency campaign in a single terrorist sanctuary, even though global hyperconnectivity almost assured the next 9/11 would be planned and executed from a more decentralized e-platform of conspirators? And, finally, was there an obvious reason for preemptive invasion, regime change, and extended conflict because Saddam Hussein’s regime MIGHT transfer weapons of mass destruction to hostile, nonstate actors? More thoughtful consideration of questions like these in the context of risk may have yielded very different and far less costly responses to the 9/11 attacks.

In the end, risk is about likelihood and consequence relative to core, strategic interests. Thus, risk blindness—founded on supreme confidence in an exceptional or infallible defense and military establishment—can see prudent, appropriate, risk-informed, strategic approaches give way to sightless overreaching, prohibitive cost, and failure. It is difficult to deny that a risk-blind, post-9/11 United States lost its ability to assess risk clinically and pursue objectives that would in equal parts punish terrorists and their sponsors, deter future terrorist acts, and still maintain great-power leverage over rival states.

Post-9/11, based on more deliberate risk assessment, the Department of Defense might have recommended managing a persistent terrorist threat without exposing the United States to the high cost of interminable action worldwide to drive the likelihood of future terrorist acts to zero. And the Department of Defense might have done so while remaining on a path toward strengthening the United States’ ability to secure core interests against the inevitable rise of future great-power rivals.

By example, in its original form, the 2001 QDR saw a gathering great-power challenge in China when it argued, “The possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in” Asia.¹⁰ According to Roger Cliff in his recent US Army War College

9/11 retrospective essay, “The theme of the [2001 QDR] was the need to ‘transform’ the armed forces . . . to ensure they would continue to hold a dominant advantage over any potential, future challenger. Although never named in the report, the challenger DoD leaders had in mind was China.”¹¹

Without 9/11 or with a different response to it, the 2001 QDR likely would have triggered a much earlier military rebalancing to the Indo-Pacific region than that chartered and outlined 11 years later in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance.¹² But generalized risk blindness—a failure to see the likelihood of high cost and failure was rising—ensured that at every possible point the Department of Defense could have offered different more modest choices to US political leadership on post-9/11 responses, they instead doubled down on unachievable outcomes. There was always “light at the end of the tunnel” or US campaigns were persistently “turning a corner.” US decisionmakers were persistently blind to both the risk associated with post-9/11 overreach and the challenge posed by looming, state-based rivals on the near- to mid-term horizon.

If risk blindness is in part a symptom of the strategic shock of 9/11, risk confusion is a by-product of the 20 years of persistent conflict that followed. Risk confusion is now a persistent hazard to effective US strategy development and decision making in the contemporary, post-primacy environment. Ultimately, an outsized fear of the consequences associated with the United States not escalating against jihadists worldwide post-9/11 gave way at some point to an equally outsized fear that forceful US action to push back against counter-US resistance from rival great powers would end in unwanted escalation and undesirable or unacceptable strategic outcomes.

Thus, from a defense and military strategy perspective, risk confusion may be the Department of Defense’s most troublesome post-9/11 inheritance. Risk confusion creates a “paralyzing choice between action and inaction” where the hazards or consequences of all strategic options appear to be equally bad.¹³ Because inaction or half measures defer hazard, they can be attractive, default responses to rival provocation. Nonetheless, as adverse consequences accumulate, inaction or ineffective action also expose important US interests to persistent assault by rivals willing to exploit risk-confused defense and military leadership chastened by the high cost of the post-9/11 period.

At some point, the policy paralysis of risk confusion only drives real risk higher. Deferred action yields accumulating loss. And, ultimately, accumulating loss becomes permanent as reversing it is either impossible or unaffordable.

Whereas, in the post-9/11 period, the United States was keen to escalate and demonstrate US resolve against terrorists and their sponsors, the absolute human, material, reputational, and political cost of doing so—for a time, at least—devitalized more activist US approaches to gathering threats. This devitalization applied particularly to the somewhat unconventional threat posed by great-power rivals China and Russia.¹⁴ In the midst of the post-9/11 period,

these rivals availed themselves of the opportunities presented by the United States' obsession with its war on terrorism and began actively campaigning against US interests with transformational, gray-zone methods.¹⁵

Both rivals sought to limit or neutralize US and local power and freedom of action within their perceived spheres of influence, and both cast a long risk shadow over potential US responses with over-the-horizon military options. In response, the United States was no longer risk-blind; rather, the nation was highly risk-sensitive and risk-confused.

THE NEW FACE OF RISK: RISK-INFORMED

Although both the 2018 National Defense Strategy and the Biden-Harris administration's interim national security and defense guidance demonstrate possible emergence from the fog of risk confusion vis-à-vis rivals China and Russia, the United States will have an inevitable hangover from the risk-blind, post-9/11 period.¹⁶ Though signs indicate the United States is recovering, American defense and military leadership should be on their guard as they proceed with post-9/11 strategy development. The risk-blind hangover can perpetuate additional risk confusion, indecisive action, and accumulating and potentially irreversible loss to rivals who are willing to seize on any US hesitation.

For defense leadership charged with rebuilding American strategy in a hotly contested, post-primacy environment, job one is acknowledging the post-9/11 period as a sunk cost. The post-9/11 wars are over. A new US defense strategy needs, as Flournoy suggested, to align strategic objectives and the road map and resources for achieving them with a clinical consideration of risk.

Risk is an inescapable component of the strategic environment. Though desirable, some objectives are out of reach and some are too costly. Knowing and adapting strategy to both considerations is a recipe for success. Be warned; the United States is not likely to restore its competitive edge if defense leadership reverts to either wasteful risk blindness or paralyzing risk confusion again.

ENDNOTES

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³ “Michèle Flournoy,” Center for New American Security, n.d., <https://www.cnas.org/people/mich%C3%A8le-flournoy>.

⁴ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021), 203.

⁵ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-65, 113 Stat. 512 (1999).

⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, September 30, 2001).

⁷ Freier et al., *At Our Own Peril*.

⁸ Donald H. Rumsfeld, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, March 2005).

⁹ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, trans. and ed. R. B. Strassler (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 43.

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¹⁶ James Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018); Joseph R. Biden Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: White House, March 2021); and Lloyd Austin to all DoD employees, memorandum, March 4, 2021.

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