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

By David Kilcullen
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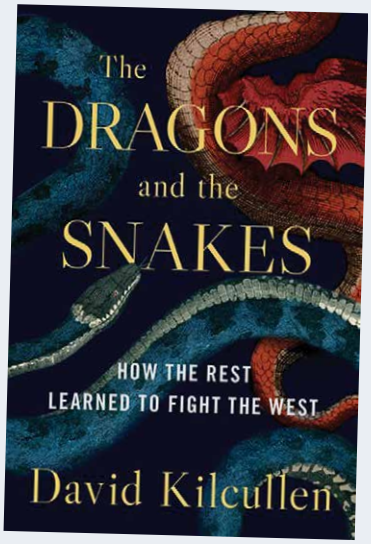

Every few years David Kilcullen publishes an insightful book that inspires new thinking in the U.S. armed forces and becomes a standard reference for all manner of strategies, operational plans, and concepts. The Australian anthropologist, former army officer, and conflict zone observer has a unique talent for capturing global dynamics in warfare and explaining them to a wide audience. In 2009, it was *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. In 2013, it was *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. His newest, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, repeats the feat in a timely book for the re-emerging multipolar world.

The Dragons and the Snakes is about how Russia and China ("dragons") have developed new methods and technologies for fighting the United States and its allies while terrorist adversaries and rogue states ("snakes") have evolved since 2001. Kilcullen is highly conversant in new technologies and able to show convincingly how GPS, smartphones, autonomous systems, and the internet have been exploited by adversaries to great lethality. His main takeaway is that, "the high-tech, high-precision, high-cost suite of networked systems that won the Gulf War so quickly and brought Western powers such unprecedented battlefield dominance in the quarter century since then—is no longer working," and that we must adapt or face decline.

Kilcullen devotes significant space to exploring what has become known as the "gray zone"—the variety of subversive, hybrid, and clandestine techniques, both military and non-military, that have been used to defeat or undermine Western partners and allies without going to war. He contends that the United States and the West have an extraordinarily narrow notion of war as a conventional, force-on-force contest of arms among combat units on the battlefield. Conflict in the gray zone between peace and open war is often also described as "competition short of armed conflict" and is often paired with Russia's "little green men" (Russian contractors or special forces posing as a third party) or China's maritime militia (which pose as fishermen to exert Chinese claims in the South China Sea). The gray zone also has conceptual links to hybrid warfare—the use of conventional and unconventional tactics by an adversary, exemplified by the tactics of Hezbollah.

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The great contribution of *The Dragons and the Snakes* lies in Kilcullen's rich yet succinct chapters on Russia and China. On Russia, Kilcullen describes how paramilitary forces, contractors, cyber operations, political subversion, and information campaigns surf "the threshold of detectability, sometimes subliminal…at other times breaking fully into the open to seize an advantage or consolidate gains before an adversary can react." Borrowing a term from anthropology for people on undefined thresholds in society or culture, Kilcullen dubs this "liminal warfare." Kilcullen walks the reader through Russian military operations since 1991 (highlighted by an informative description of the 2008 war in Georgia), the ideas of geopolitical theorist Aleksander Dugin, and General Valeriy Gerasimov's influential writings (the famous "Gerasimov Doctrine") on "indirect and asymmetric methods" and undeclared war for "achieving political-military goals." The danger from the Russians is "a sudden strike so ambiguous that we may still not be sure it is really happening, even in the moment."

On China, Kilcullen describes how the Chinese employ a broad range of armed and non-armed tools to coerce an adversary during what the West views as peacetime. The Chinese, Kilcullen argues, do not distinguish between states of war and peace. They seek to dismantle Western influence as if they are at war. Foreign assistance, financial disruption, currency manipulation, cyber operations, information operations, criminal activities, and stealing technology substitute for armed conflict. There are no geographical limits. Kilcullen describes this Chinese form of gray zone activity as "conceptual envelopment." Again, Kilcullen is at his best walking the reader through the details of post-1991 events, reforms, and thinking, such as the Chinese perception of U.S. technological superiority demonstrated in the Gulf War, the Taiwan Strait Crisis, and Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui's book on unrestricted warfare. Whereas the key danger from Russia is the sudden ambiguous strike, the key danger from China is the gradual expansion of non-kinetic operations against warlike goals such that we do not realize what is happening until it is too late.

To cope with these strategies and declining economic power, Kilcullen advises that the United States and the West should adopt a Byzantine approach—the Byzantine Empire having been the rearguard of Western civilization as the West may now be the rearguard of democracy. He recommends that we develop new military models while copying those of adversaries; expand use of non-conventional and non-kinetic techniques; maintain an edge in critical technologies; turn adversaries against each other; use soft power to create internal challenges for them at home; and above all strengthen our own economies and polities. Kilcullen sees a Byzantine approach as drawn out over decades. In short, we would develop gray zone methods of our own—both offensive and defensive.

Kilcullen's most profound observation by far is that these new methods of warfare raise the chances for misunderstanding, security dilemmas, and open war. The U.S. and Chinese perceptions of each other, Kilcullen notes, are fundamentally flawed. Both sides misread the intent and exaggerate the threats coming from the other. Neither are unitary actors; incidental and uncoordinated actions by parts of the whole can be misconstrued as an aggressive grand strategy. Each can perceive threat when there is none: "An illusion—an apparent pattern, existing only in the eyes of Western observers, that Chinese strategists would not recognize in themselves, just as we would not recognize their perception of us." Conceptual envelopment magnifies the problem. Each side knows the other is conducting operations toward warlike aims. In turn, both are inclined to view all actions, even innocent ones, as part of a larger plot, breeding "the danger of miscalculation, of

talking ourselves into war with adversaries—or of strategists misinterpreting each other's actions and thereby provoking an escalatory security dilemma that ends in the war of the century." Kilcullen excludes Russia from this penetrating observation but I have to think it applies to Russia and liminal warfare as well.

I have spent a good bit of time working on gray zone matters over the past five years. To my mind, *The Dragons and the Snakes* is the best single piece out there—concise, well-written, and nuanced. It is both a timely introduction to the topic for the unfamiliar and a source of new discoveries and insights for the expert; an important book during changing times.