



A reflection named strategy

Tanguy Struye de Swielande

Professor of International Relations, UCLouvain

For several years now, one challenge has followed another: Covid-19, Ukraine, cyber, cognitive warfare, the refugee crisis, or more recently, Taiwan. Far from being unpredictable, these crises are not black swans. However, a combination of lack of preparation, wishful thinking and short-termism has led to disorganised, inefficient and inappropriate management. At both Belgian and European level, the absence of strategy is blatant; navigation is done blindly, without compass. Did not the Roman philosopher Seneca say that "there is no favourable wind for him who does not know where he wants to go"?

Going beyond crisis management

The word "crisis" is a real refuge for the political world. Crisis management, presentism and immediacy go hand in hand. Crisis management has thus become a very comfortable alibi for not taking long-term strategic decisions, and any error in the decision-making process and the execution of decisions can be blamed on the crisis and the "unpredictable".

Ukraine is a perfect example of this: it became a major strategic issue overnight even though it was not considered a vital interest for the Western countries, was not the subject of any strategy until February 24, 2022. Since the Russian invasion, the situation has

been managed on a day-to-day basis. The reason? The EU, including Belgium, had refused to consider war as a possible or even probable scenario, despite the many signals of the last few years - not to mention the Crimean crisis of 2014, a real prelude to the war of 2022. As a result, our actions are hasty and rash, without considering the consequences (the energy and food situations, to name but a few). Mrs von der Leyen's words in the last few days speak for themselves: "We must prepare for the worst". Yet, as early as 2008 and the Georgian crisis, the "worst" should have been placed at the forefront of our strategic thinking instead of being relegated to the back burner of Western politics. So far, we have failed to take the initiative, our position being reactive rather than proactive. Ukraine is far from being the last crisis we will face. Taiwan is the latest reminder of this.

We can continue to believe that crisis management is the solution, and therefore suffer the various jolts of the international scene; or we can change our approach and learn to anticipate. This implies a mastery of the stakes and the game of international relations, and the subsequent establishment of strategies based on our interests, our capacities and our means of action in relation to the international environment, the four variables being inseparable for a coherent and adapted strategy. In other words,

we must have the courage to take the long view and to go beyond electoral cycles. It is essential to relearn to think like a strategist, to manage complexity, to abandon Cartesian logic and to see the whole rather than the individual parts, in order to adopt a holistic approach that establishes the links between the elements.

Revisiting our approach to the world

Our vision of the world must be rethought, our foreign policy reinvented to adapt it to the realities of today's world and even more so to those of tomorrow's world, which will be characterized by challenges that we do not seem to be taking the (right) measure of. Too many mistakes are made because of a lack of understanding of the changing balance of power in the international system, in relation to disruptive technologies or the consequences of climate change, to name but two examples.

Any systemic change leads to a change in objectives, rules and power relations, and affects all actors, state and non-state. We seem to have forgotten that states or international organisations can disappear; those that survive and emerge at least stabilised, at best strengthened, are those that manage to adapt to the new situation. The others will suffer, be weakened or even disappear. In this systemic recomposition, the West has two choices: to oppose it, by clinging to an outdated and unsuitable system, or to take the initiative of change and shape the new order to its advantage, thus avoiding leaving the initiative to the Russians or the Chinese. The West's current logic of resistance to change can only be a loser in the medium and long term.

It is true that the war in Ukraine has strengthened NATO, the transatlantic relationship and the EU internally. But in our ethnocentric view, we do not take into consideration that this war has also strengthened the anti-Western front. Contrary to what our hubris would have us believe, the liberal order has not emerged stronger from this crisis. On the contrary, our divisions and vulnerabilities have been exposed. Strengthening the ties between democracies will not be enough to guarantee any liberal order;

rethinking our relations with the (rest of) the world is fundamental. In this sense, it is the G20 and not the G7 that is representative of the new distribution of power in the world. Our approach will have to be different if the Western countries wish to see some of these countries join them. Furthermore, and whether we like it or not, a dialogue must be established with our rivals and adversaries, in particular to establish new formal and informal rules to manage the major challenges mentioned above. The establishment of new rules of the game and of behaviour would help to reintroduce a certain degree of trust, in order to better anticipate and manage each other's expectations. A return to more political pragmatism is needed: going back to the basics of classical diplomacy, focusing more on traditional sovereign issues and common challenges rather than on values, which we are no longer able to export or even respect ourselves anyway. We need to rethink how we defend our values, as our business model in this area is obsolete. Finally, we need to reinvest in our relations with developing countries. Many of these countries have taken a position on the Ukrainian issue that should have worried us.

Time is not on our side. The era of an omnipresent and dominant West is over: where we could afford largesse and mistakes, we must now be precise and effective, and bear in mind that our margin for error, as well as our room for manoeuvre, is almost zero. Politics does not like a vacuum, including at the international level: the end of the liberal order means the establishment of a new order. New rules of the game will have to be defined. Either we become one of the locomotives of change, proactive and determined to defend ourselves, or we suffer this recomposition in a second-class wagon. The necessary management of current realities, which have been observable and foreseeable at least since 2008, is met with immobility. It would seem that wishful thinking and emotion, although poor advisors in foreign policy, have been the analytical grids of our political decision-makers.

Putting our house in order

But let's face it: a better understanding of the world

is not enough if we do not strengthen ourselves from within. Maintaining our standing and influence in this new game will require investment in many areas, including 3D (investment and coordination between defence, diplomacy and development), the economy of the future (disruptive technologies and the green economy), value chains and resilience. In addition, societal polarisation, reflected in communitarianism, racial issues, socio-economic disparities, woke culture, cancel culture or populism, weakens our democracies, eating away at them from within. It is also the external image of democracies and democracy as a socio-political model that is being undermined, as Russia, China and other dictatorships do not hesitate to take advantage of this to successfully promote their authoritarian systems. Intra-Western polarisation is weakening, even undermining, our institutions, our media and our political parties: goodbye to nuance, critical thinking and expertise. Compromise, which is fundamental in politics, is now perceived as a betrayal, so that any compromise reached is only illusory and a façade. This completes a perfect vicious circle, feeding and strengthening populism and weakening democracy. (In)consciously, we prepare the ground for our opponents.

Ultimately, political courage means daring to take risks, adopting a long-term vision, playing collectively, going beyond personal ambitions and behaving like a statesman or woman. We must go beyond homeostasis and become a "learning actor" by accompanying change rather than undergoing it.