

Complex Warfare, Adaptive Enemies & Unrestricted Tools

A book review of *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* by David Kilcullen

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It is said that although the nature of war does not change, the character of warfare undergoes many changes. Technology, economic prowess, and the quest for power or even survival makes state and non-state actors adopt methods of warfare to suit their ends. Events such as the end of the Cold War, the hi-tech wars in Iraq and Kosovo unquestionably placed the US-led West as the numero-uno and unchallenged military power. This veneer of invincibility and the long-drawn US-led ‘war on terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in hubris. This distraction of the US was effectively exploited by both nation-states, such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and non-state actors, such as Daesh, Hezbollah and the many variants of Al-Qaeda. How did this happen and what did the opponents of the US learn over the past 25 years to eventually challenge the US-led world order and degrade its power and influence?

In ‘The Dragon and the Snakes’, soldier-scholar David Kilcullen explores the means, methods, and manner in which the strategic landscape changed after the Cold War and how adversaries of America/the West adapted to pose serious challenges to them. The title of the book is inspired from the testimony of James Woolsey (later CIA Director) before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in February 1993 where he said, “In many ways, today’s threats are harder to observe and understand than the one that was once presented by the USSR. Yes, we have slain a large dragon (USSR), but we live now in a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes. And in many ways the dragon was easier to keep track of”. Woolsey defined ‘dragons’ as state adversaries like China, Russia, Iran, and North-Korea, while the ‘snakes’ were non-state actors like transnational terrorist groups.

In the opening chapter, the author writes that the basic flaw in US strategy was that it conceptualized the geopolitical environment as a binary construct of conflict between ‘civilization’ and ‘terrorism’. In his analysis of the US national security strategy starting with the 2002 strategy document, Kilcullen infers that the flaw lay in its inability to comprehend the more diffused, agile, adaptable morphing of threats from snakes while simultaneously failing to appreciate that the dragons had adopted a suite of ‘offset strategies’ to sidestep western conventional power.

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Chapter 2, titled ‘Adaptive Enemies’ delves into ‘how’ enemies, non-state actors, or ‘snakes’, adapt to pose a potent threat. Kilcullen emphasizes the importance of understanding the process by which adversaries evolve so that the ‘good guys’ can shape the environment in such a manner that it forces the enemy to adapt along a different pathway, thereby reducing the threat. To understand the mechanism of evolution in irregular warfare that snakes resort to, the author discusses four key dynamics namely, social learning, natural selection, artificial selection, and institutional adaptation. The author explains each of them lucidly with examples. The key take-away from this chapter is that states must be conscious of the fact that the ‘snakes’ will continuously try to evolve and adapt.

Moving from the ‘how’ of the previous chapter, Kilcullen examines the ‘what’ in Chapter 3 titled ‘Woolsey’s Snakes’. The author chooses the example of US air superiority as an example of ‘what’ the snakes learnt. He argues that while American air power shocked and awed its opponents, the non-state actors who could combine dispersion, mobility, modularity, and autonomy in their operations, tended to manage to survive when faced with air attacks. The author rightly identifies thinly spreading air power and restrictive legal and political constraints as the key reasons for the reduced effectiveness of western kinetic air power between 1991 and 2017. Both lessons, especially the former, are very relevant in the Indian context where the demand for theaterisation will surely reduce the effectiveness and potency of Indian air power. The author then details the weaknesses and rudimentary capabilities that the snakes exploited, such as the lack of analysts in the West despite its omnipresent surveillance network, consumer products such as i-Pads and smartphones for precision targeting, drone technology and social media. In identifying the adaptation trends, this chapter studies the methods of Al Qaeda, Daesh and Hezbollah.

Beginning Chapter 4, the book tends to pick up pace. Titled ‘Liminal Warfare’, the chapter cogently brings out the masterful manner in which Russia has successfully used liminal warfare against the West. ‘Liminal’ comes from the Latin word for a threshold. Defined as a style of warfare that rides the edge of observability and surfs the threshold of detectability, liminal warfare involves threshold manipulation. The author opines that the Russians in particular have perfected this so a lot of their activity is literally sub-liminal (“below the threshold” of perception of the West). Chapter 5 titled ‘Conceptual Envelopment’ focuses on the other dragon, i.e., China. Quite akin to Russia but with a much broader form of warfare, the author posits that the Chinese approach of horizontal escalation (expanding the geography, categories, and scope of actions with or without increasing intensity in any one location) poses a bandwidth challenge for a rival by expanding the spectrum of competition beyond the rival’s capacity to cope by hampering the rival’s ability to respond effectively to any one action or even conceptualize the overall situation. The author studies the PLA including the use of unrestricted warfare as practiced by China. A combination of facts and logic leaves the reader in no doubt about the threat the two dragons (Russia and China) pose to the liberal, democratic, rules-based order.

‘Ebb Tide of West’, the last chapter, analyses the courses of action for the West in countering the dragons and snakes. Outlining these as ‘Doubling Down’, ‘Embracing the Suck’, ‘Going Byzantine’ and ‘A New Model’, Kilcullen effectively presents/details the benefits and challenges of each

approach. Making the case for better societal resilience and societal adaptation, the author convincingly elucidates why excessive focus on only military modernization is likely to yield sub-optimal results. Cautioning against a military victory becoming an end in itself, he argues that the West has repeatedly failed to convert military victories into strategic success or into a better peace. Criticizing the existing military model as ineffective, maladaptive, and ill-suited for an environment with dragons and snakes, Kilcullen argues for suitable course-correction, as not doing so would harm preserving the interests of the West.

Running into 255 pages, the book unfolds the challenges facing the West through the prism of evolutionary theory and field observations by the author. The author generously credits James Woolsey for his insights and far-sightedness in identifying and forecasting the strategic landscape. The book is a well-researched analysis of how the dragons learned from the snakes, how the snakes copied the dragons, how the rest learned to fight the West, and importantly what the West must learn to succeed in the new environment. Kilcullen has woven his experience as a former soldier, diplomat, and academician with solid research in producing a book that is a treasure trove of knowledge. The book forces the reader to rethink national security. It logically argues for military and non-military institutions to adjust and adapt to the new realities. The book is contemporary, relevant and has many lessons for India, which too is confronted by both snakes and dragons. From an Indian perspective, natural convergences with the West on principles such as liberty, equality, fraternity, pluralism and civilisational values lend clear direction to what its choices should be. The book is helpful in discarding a myopic perspective on strategic threats and issues. It is thus highly recommended for military professionals, diplomats, strategic affairs experts, and the academic community.