
A Conversation with General Richard Clarke

THE FLETCHER FORUM: *What lessons should the international community have in mind as it continues to respond to the crisis in Ukraine? What lessons should it be learning at this time?*

GENERAL RICHARD CLARKE: The events in Ukraine are still unfolding, so take this as a mid-crisis assessment. But I'm seeing two important lessons, even at this early stage.

First, allies and partners are critical. We've seen incredible unity in NATO's response over the past weeks and months. But it's not only NATO. And it's not only European nations. When you have common interests coupled with shared values and a real threat, it provides the foundation for deep cooperation. That cooperation among trusted allies and partners provides options for our leaders. In crisis, having a range of credible options available is a true strategic advantage.

The second lesson is more of an observation. We've seen the rapid release of intelligence being used. The United States and other nations rapidly declassified key intelligence assessments. While that's not necessarily a new approach, we've never seen it used on this scale, and we've never seen it amplified with such reach and so quickly. I believe the impact has been quite effective, especially in fostering that unity among allies that I mentioned earlier.

FORUM: *At Fletcher, we learn about many laws, rules, norms, principles, theories, and arguments to shape and guide how we approach, analyze, and*

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appreciate the world. Professor Abigail Linnington regularly encourages her students to “play” with different methods to stimulate critical and creative thinking because the “one-size-fits-all” approach simply does not exist. Can you take us inside your head as you think about today’s geopolitical environment? What frameworks and processes do you find particularly helpful as you work to understand the meaning, methods, and means of armed conflict?

CLARKE: I’ve had the good fortune to visit Fletcher a number of times. But one of my all-time favorite visits included speaking in Professor Linnington’s course. I learned a great deal, and I fielded some tough questions. I’m not surprised she’s challenging students to continuously assess and reassess.

While I will grant that today’s environment is dynamic, I’d still argue that geopolitics is remarkably consistent. We still see states and non-state actors compete for influence and advantage while pursuing their interests. That’s not changing. How they compete and the tools they employ will however continually evolve.

For those who want to be conversant in national security issues, I do think that one foundational framework is deterrence theory, but I’d broadly define that. Much of deterrence theory in the past focused on strategic deterrence with nuclear capabilities and conventional deterrence. Those concepts still very much apply, especially with regard to a two-dimensional nuclear peer in China. But we have seen very capable nation-states compete more frequently and more assertively below the threshold of credible military responses—in the so-called “gray zone.” I believe that trend will continue.

Those are all important deterrence concepts because our military—particularly our special operations community—has capabilities to bolster deterrence. We know nations can deter through denial. Building resilience contributes to that denial. As just one example, our special operations forces have been involved with supporting efforts by a number of our allies to enhance their own resilience posture. Any would-be aggressor should think of these allies as “indigestible porcupines”—a great visual that one of my predecessors coined. Often, those are long-term investments, with our forces partnering side-by-side over decades. But it all contributes to deterrence.

FORUM: *As contemporary conflicts become more technologically sophisticated, what are trends that you find particularly concerning from a threat perspective?*

CLARKE: I'll give you three. In some ways, they are related. The first is that we have seen dramatic advances in UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) over the past several years—both with non-state actors and at the nation-state level. And the trend is only accelerating with huge technological leaps in size, weight, and power. UAS are smaller, they can fly farther, they can carry heavier loads, they can move, and they can sense. All of this makes them far more lethal over time. Our military has dealt with significant threats from IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) over the past twenty years. UAS have the potential to be the IEDs of the future, but more lethal.

The second trend has to do with long-range missiles. The technology is rapidly advancing there too. They are improving in accuracy, and they are enhancing the ability to surprise an opponent, making them increasingly more lethal.

The third trend I'll offer has to do with autonomy, but I'll broaden that a bit. It's really all the advances possible with data-driven technologies, like AI (Artificial Intelligence). When UAS become autonomous, it can be a game changer on the battlefield. We will start to see swarming technologies—or the ability of UAS to autonomously attack a single target with little or no operator involvement. This is concerning from a threat perspective.

However, don't forget, there's also a flipside. It is important that we use those same technologies to counter threats that emerge. We need to innovate. Yes, we need to keep pace, but that is not sufficient. Our military needs to lead.

FORUM: *How will big data, AI, machine learning, and other modern technological developments continue to shape contemporary warfare and the military's strategic approaches? You and Professor Shultz have written about these topics in "Big Data at War," published more than a year ago. If you and he wrote a follow-up, what would you say?*

CLARKE: Thanks for planting that seed.

Your question is important because "Big Data at War" was really meant as a starting point. It captured our initial efforts to harness the possibilities of data to improve one aspect of our operations, namely sifting through mountains of full-motion video. That was the original aim of Project Maven. It was an incredibly time-intensive process that we realized could benefit from some degree of automation.

Our first big takeaway was how learning in this area evolved through experimentation. We needed to iterate, try new approaches, and keep

getting better. We adopted a buy-try-decide approach—or a more flexible, rapid acquisition approach as opposed to a conventional military acquisition process. Dr. Shultz continues to lead the conversation in this arena.

Frankly, I think it's easy to see the possibilities of data-driven technologies, but it takes a great deal of focus to make progress. First, in terms of possibilities, we see great promise in the ability to streamline our processing, exploitation, and dissemination of intelligence. We can do better than a single human analyst watching full-motion video or examining a single satellite image. Technologies are promising in this area.

There's an equally great opportunity to accelerate and improve decision-making for our tactical commanders. However, we see huge opportunities in many of our support functions too. For example, we're already improving predictive maintenance for our helicopter fleet with these same data-driven technologies. There are also a number of other opportunities for robotic process automation to enhance a whole host of resource-intensive and error-prone processes.

The bigger learning point is how to make progress. AI and all data-driven technologies require the right data inputs, so you must have an accompanying data strategy. Our Chief Data Officer at USSOCOM (U.S. Special Operations Command) has made great strides in focusing our data strategy. It's not flashy work, but it's the foundation. You can't leverage advances like deep learning and neural networks without reliable data. They go hand in hand.

FORUM: *What are issues that you work on that cause you to lose sleep? Why are they important in your view?*

CLARKE: I sleep pretty well. But I am focused on how quickly we're modernizing. We have incredible partnerships with academia, national labs, and industry. But are we leveraging those partnerships to the fullest? Are we modernizing fast enough? There's always room to improve.

Part of my concern stems from the immense promise we see. The spirit of innovation in this country is exceptional. It's unmatched. USSOCOM and the rest of our military needs to be more nimble and more creative in tapping into the resources we have. We've made strides but need to keep improving in this area. *f*