

Strategic Stories: Weaponized or Worldmaking?

Global Media and China
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–21
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DOI: 10.1177/20594364231153200
journals.sagepub.com/home/gch


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Abstract

The deployment of strategic stories, that is, stories designed to prevail over adversaries, is at work in domestic politics as well as in diplomacy. In both cases, the strategy has two aims: to create a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and at the same time to ascribe moral supremacy to ‘our side’ while posing ‘their side’ as an existential threat. Strategic storytelling specialises in discrimination and foe creation, but the nature of the actors involved has changed in the digital era. Now, ‘we’ and ‘they’ are organised into decentralised and mediated classes based on common identities, enabling collective action at planetary scale (e.g. climate activism, gender and ethnic justice, far-right extremism). At the same time, media platforms and news organisations are part of the apparatus by which strategic narratives are weaponised for warfare. Thus, I argue, digital media analysis needs to understand the ‘strategic turn’ in storytelling, and its deployment by states and ‘non-state actors’ alike, in this case, news media. Alternative models of worldmaking, in which popular culture acts as a pedagogic platform for class formation and activism, enter an ecology in which narrative is already a weapon of war – where it’s aircraft carriers, all the way down.

Keywords

strategic stories, China, Australia, weaponised news, aircraft carriers

Whose story wins?

In April 2022, the (then) Defence Minister of Australia, Peter Dutton, used ANZAC Day – a public holiday to commemorate the lives of war casualties – to put Australia on a war footing. Dutton made

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his comments not to Parliament but on commercial TV, using popular entertainment to promote a newly adversarial strategic policy:

“The only way that you can preserve peace is to prepare for war and to be strong as a country, not to cower, not to be on bended knee and be weak, that’s the reality,” he told Channel Nine’s Today Show. (Sky News, 25 April 2022).¹

Dutton’s statement was part of a campaign to characterise China as a strategic threat. However, that story did not originate in the Cabinet or Parliament, nor was it unique to Australia. Political leaders began to differentiate between ‘the autocracies’ and ‘the democracies’, bringing China and other countries into the same adversarial frame as Russia, which had just invaded its neighbour Ukraine (Rudd, 2022).

Western news media pivoted like synchronised swimmers towards stories that recast China from friend and trading partner to foe and strategic threat. This narrative realignment did not originate in a government directive, state agency, political party, or editorial boardroom. Each of these systems acted in their own sphere of communication. But if they were all moving in step, who choreographed the performance?

The multipolar policy of weaponizing non-state discursive agencies for the strategic advantage of one country – the USA – does have an origin: a policy thinktank located in Santa Monica, California. The RAND Corporation is the same outfit that invented the internet as a defence system against nuclear attack.² Since the 1990s, using a similar model of decentralised communication, RAND Corp strategists have sought to update strategic thinking in the USA for the digital age. They argue that the ‘Kissinger’ era of command-and-control ‘realpolitik’ is giving way to the ‘Foucault’ era of what they call ‘noopolitik’. They urge the incorporation of the ‘information revolution’ into military statecraft.³ But they don’t confine ‘information’ to cybertechnology and the internet. Rather, they expand it to include the entire ‘noosphere’, which they call a ‘globe-girdling realm of the mind’ (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 4).⁴ Here, states cannot exercise direct command and control, but must use ‘soft power’ and cooperate with agencies and systems they can’t control. In turn, that means expanding the agencies involved in ‘statecraft’ well beyond the confines of the state, to ‘nonstate actors’ (Wijninga et al., 2014), ‘civil society’, corporate entities and the market.

Outsourcing statecraft to unreliable actors risks diffusing the message, but it also expands who ‘we’ might refer to, all the way out from ‘we’ (the US military-industrial establishment) to allies such as ‘Australia’ (here meaning ‘the government’), ‘the West’ (here meaning military allies including NATO, ANZUS, and AUKUS),⁵ and thence to ‘we’ the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2016) of the self-styled free world.

Sliding without friction from the Pentagon to pop culture is a structural feature of mainstream journalistic discourse, not only in Australia but across the Anglosphere. Abstracting who ‘we’ might refer to serves the interests of those who would weaponize news for a new Cold War offensive. Australia’s long-term strategic interests are not coterminous with those of the USA (given that China is now Australia’s biggest trading partner),⁶ but longstanding discursive habits have left Australian journalism open to manipulation by official, government-funded, and partisan organisations, from ASPI (the Australian Strategic Policy Institute) to the Murdoch media.

The same tendencies can be observed across other geostrategic theatres. Indeed, Peter Dutton’s sabre-rattling comments were aimed at China but occasioned by Russia, after its invasion of Ukraine early in 2022. The strategy was to connect what the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison called an ‘arc of authoritarianism’ across the world, linking stories about East Asia (China, North Korea), the

Middle East (Iran) and Europe (Russia) to a single threat for multiple ‘Western’ allies, including Australia.

The theoretical basis for that globalising discursive manipulation was laid out over several decades at RAND Corp. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt are the chief architects of the ‘noosphere’ policy initiative. Back in 1999, they wrote:

It may become clear that there is a lot more to noopolitik than merely asserting, sharing, and instituting the particular values, norms, ethics, laws, and other ingredients of soft power that an actor wants to uphold. What may especially matter for all parties—the advocates and their audiences—is the “story” that is being told, implicitly or explicitly. Realpolitik is typically about whose military or economy wins. Noopolitik may ultimately be about whose story wins. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 52–3)

They explicitly recommend that strategic policymakers should consult ‘postmodern’ writers on ‘story’:

Further analytical elaboration of noopolitik may benefit from inquiring into the “postmodernist” literature about the importance of narrative and discourse in the exercise of power, as exemplified by the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 53, n. 27)

Theories of narrative and discourse have become crucial to strategic statecraft. But the global noosphere is a wild territory, already occupied by ‘nonstate actors’, as they put it: from ‘such leaders as Rupert Murdoch’ to ‘expatriate dissidents’, who want to: ‘project their presence into distant locations where they may infringe on local traditions and priorities’. The forecast? ‘This augurs for mighty struggles to dominate the Internet’ (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 25).

They presume that such struggles will need an umpire; and who better for the part than the incumbent global empire?

A benevolent hegemon may be needed ... If so, we should ... shift to an equally classic, but positive, metaphor along the lines of a “Manifest Destiny” for the information age. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 74–5)

This is where the aircraft carriers come in. They are the crucial link between the internet and *manifest destiny*. And yet, they are strangely absent from media analysis, although they have been hiding there, in plain sight, ever since World War 2. Now, with ‘noopolitik’ ruling the waves and ‘mighty struggles’ ruling the internet, media studies needs to think more carefully about aircraft carriers and the stories they tell.

Comparative Lethality

A ‘New Cold War’ conflict is being fomented on two ‘sides’. Both China and Australia have seen themselves as being ‘encircled’ by threats harking back to the ‘old’ Cold War. That stance produces its own mirror image: China’s attempt to assert its position in the balance of geopolitical power is read in the West as warmongering. Equally, Australia as a cheerleader for ‘the West’ is read in China as warmongering (Wirth, 2019). The Australian, US and UK governments announced in September 2021 that a new alliance called AUKUS would assist Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. The then Defence Minister, Peter Dutton (now leader of the opposition), dismissed Chinese concerns with contempt: ‘I think their comments are counter-productive and immature and frankly

embarrassing’. But Australia’s return to old-fashioned ‘realpolitik’ was read in the region as a ‘brainless’ return to Cold War antagonism.⁷

‘While the US and its allies cloak many of these moves in euphemisms about “freedom”, “liberty” and “democracy”, the battle lines are being drawn and pieces positioned for what increasingly seems like an inevitable new Cold War conflict to come.’ Asia Times (September 20, 2021)

‘If Canberra really wants to make its China policy in line with “Australia’s national interests,” it must take a long-term view, truly abandon the Cold War mentality, and conform to the spirit of world peace, co-development, and win-win.’ (Yu Lei, Global Times, August 31, 2020)

The consequences were clear to all – except the Australian government – but the narrative continued to drive policy. ‘Encirclement’ by China became an election issue in 2022. As then Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce put it, ‘Australia has a maritime vulnerability. We are surrounded by sea. If you can stop imports and exports into Australia, you can stop Australia’.

“It is quite obvious through their desire to have military bases, they are starting a process of encircling Australia and there is a wish, at the very least, to intimidate, or worse, to supplicate Australia. This [election] really determines not only your future, but the future of our children and grandchildren and whether they will live in a nation with the same liberties and freedoms that we took as a birthright from the incredible luck of the lottery of life when you were born in this exceptional nation called Australia.”⁸

The dictionary tells us that ‘to supplicate’ is to ‘ask or beg for something earnestly or humbly’. Joyce saw this as a threat to the ‘liberties and freedoms we took as a birthright’ of ‘our children and grandchildren’.

The incoming Labor government did not counter this narrative. The new administration certainly dialled down the bellicose rhetoric, and began to mend diplomatic fences with China, but it still pursued a policy of opposing and containing China in the Indo-Pacific region: ‘it’s not Australia that has changed, China has changed’, said incoming PM Anthony Albanese.⁹

Comparative lethality is not often mentioned in storytelling circles, although some scholars have seen it as a crucial force in cultural evolution (Bowles and Gintis, 2011; Gintis, et al., 2015; 2019; Bingham and Souza, 2009). What’s new is that it has now extended from military hardware into ‘soft-power’ storytelling; that is to say, strategic stories about how ‘our’ big sticks are a match for ‘theirs’ (Hartley, 2020). Although Australia has been preoccupied with submarines, the main instrument of ‘supplication’ available to any contemporary power is the aircraft carrier. Loren Thompson, a Pentagon and industry consultant who writes extensively for *Forbes* magazine, claims that ‘America’s 11 large-deck, nuclear-powered aircraft carriers’:

are so lethal—capable of precisely destroying hundreds of targets every day for months if necessary—that they probably have done more to deter aggression than any other military system in U.S. history.¹⁰

The aircraft carrier – blue whale of lethal weaponry – is now fully integrated into the noosphere. As *Forbes* put it: ‘The presence of a U.S. carrier nearby tends to focus the thinking of potential enemies in a way that few other weapons could.’ Carriers work by means of rhetoric – the main purpose being to ‘send a signal’. The message they send is one of imperial supremacy.

It's a game the British invented, with imperial 'gunboat diplomacy' (Cable, 1994). Australia should know: as a post-imperial state, it was once a player in this game, right up until the 1980s. Here's a story that's rarely told in the national media: that China's carrier capability – its entry ticket into the imperial club – is founded on an Australian platform. Not only did we 'send a signal' to China, we sent our last carrier. Like a zombie, it has returned from the undead a generation later, to send 'us' a message.

Zombie Carrier

In April 1943, at the height of World War 2, construction commenced on a new class of British aircraft carrier. These were intended as stop-gap, quick-build 'disposable warships', designed to be scrapped after three years or at the end of the war. But by that time the navy had no further use for them, and Britain sold all six of this 'Majestic class' to its former imperial Dominions.¹¹ Two carriers were sold to Australia. *HMS Terrible* became *HMAS Sydney*. It was used to transport Australian troops to Vietnam, serving the cause of the successor global empire. The eponymous *HMS Majestic* was launched in February 1945. After incorporating various upgrades, it was not completed until 1955. Two days later it was renamed *HMAS Melbourne*, the second of that name.

After sea trials, it arrived in Fremantle in April 1956 to a 'warm and colourful reception', reaching its namesake city of Melbourne just in time for the 1956 Olympic Games:

*The Flagship band was part of the RAN massed bands that gave an extremely polished display in the main stadium as a prelude to the official opening ceremony. Every day Melbourne provided some 200 personnel to act as marshals in various stadia, additionally, signalmen, carpenters and sick berth attendants were utilised to perform special duties.*¹²

The record states that '*Melbourne* never fired a shot in anger during its service career, having only peripheral, non-combat roles'.¹³ Nevertheless, it gained notoriety and a reputation as a 'jinxed' vessel. Among numerous mishaps, in 1964, it cut the Australian destroyer *HMAS Voyager* in half, with the loss of 82 lives. In 1969, it cut the American destroyer *USS Frank E. Evans* in half, with the loss of 74 lives. Exonerated from blame for both accidents, *HMAS Melbourne* remained in service until 1982. A proposal to replace it with another British carrier, *HMS Invincible*, fell through when Britain decided to keep that ship for the Falklands/Malvinas war. The Hawke government opted not to replace it. A proposal to convert it into a floating casino having fallen through, *Melbourne* was sold for scrap.

This is where the official story – and the life of *HMAS Melbourne* – ends. But the vessel lived on. It was decommissioned and towed to China, where – after numerous further mishaps *en route* – it arrived in June 1985, to another warm reception, confirmed by a Telex message from China to the Australian government:

*Pls b advised that HMAS Melbourne arrived at Port Huangpu, intact n safely afloat, proud n majestic. She has bn innocent, never once bowed to the natural or human force, in spite of the heavy storm n the talked abt jinx. (Wikipedia)*¹⁴

The *Melbourne* had finally beaten its jinx, only to become a zombie. By some accounts, its long afterlife as an undead hulk lasted until 2002. In the interim, it gave up all its secrets to the People's

Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N). The process of ‘scrapping’ entailed dismantling the ship and its fixtures, item by item:

Reports have circulated that either a replica of the flight deck, or the deck itself, was used for clandestine training of People’s Liberation Army Navy pilots in carrier flight operations. Chinese engineers reverse-engineered a land-based replica of the steam catapult and landing system. (iNews)¹⁵

After the collapse of the USSR, China also bought several aircraft carriers from Russia and Ukraine, to use as theme parks. *Minsk* became ‘Shenzhen Minsk Aircraft Carrier World’.¹⁶ *Kyiv* became ‘Tianjin Binhai Aircraft Carrier Theme Park’, which is still open for business.¹⁷ But what exactly is a theme park?

These two theme parks are actually large-scale military theme parks transformed from aircraft carriers, integrating aircraft carrier sightseeing, armament display, theme performances, conferences and exhibitions, outreach training, national defense education, entertainment and leisure, and film and television shooting. (iNews)¹⁸

It turns out that this is one way to teach a newly nationalist population – as well as the PLA – the connection between propaganda and propagation. It’s a platform on which you can dance on deck to ‘Psytrance and Drum and Bass’, but you can also deliver ‘national defense education’. Even as you strip the know-how from your adversaries’ armaments, you clear the decks for the younger generation get in the mood.¹⁹

Meanwhile, another uncompleted Soviet carrier, the *Varyag*, was purchased from post-Soviet Ukraine by a Chinese tycoon, ostensibly for use as a tourist attraction in Macau. On arrival in Dalian, however, it was handed over to the PLA-N.²⁰ They already had the know-how for a flight deck, reverse-engineered from the *Melbourne*, with trained naval personnel and pilots; now they had a platform to put it on. Enter the *Liaoning*, China’s first battle-ready aircraft carrier. It has been joined by China’s first ‘home-made’ carrier, the *Shandong*. Thus does a ‘disposable’ British-Australian vessel live on for 60 years, while terms like ‘scrap’ and ‘theme park’ take on new meaning – as ‘research resources’.

I don’t know if racism and supremacism played a conscious role in selling the *Melbourne* to a country that at the time had no blue-water fleet, but the ironic ghost of a jinxed zombie has surely come back to haunt hapless Australia. Well might we say, ‘It’s the return of the repressed!’ (Hall, 1982). With its genesis in both Anglo-Australian and Soviet military know-how – in both imperial-colonial and Cold War armed force – the formidable *Shandong* stands directly against those who so carelessly discarded their waste hulks in the belief that China was too backward, rural and poor to make anything out of them. RAND Corp’s ‘benevolent hegemon’ has a rival. Thus do ‘we’ turn into our own opposite: a strategic (albeit postmodern) and instructive story, once the critical lens is turned inwards.

‘100,000 Tons of Diplomacy’

It is likely that most people in Australia have never seen an aircraft carrier. However, living in the port city of Fremantle, I’ve seen a few. After moving there as an ‘economic migrant’ in 1985 – just in time *not* to see the *Melbourne* disappear over the Far Eastern horizon – I was startled instead by the unexpected arrival in my new hometown of the nuclear-powered, Nimitz-class ‘supercarrier’, *USS Carl Vinson* (CVN-70). At the time, this was the largest single piece of military ordnance in the

world, a world it sought to command as the latest incarnation of what Henry Kissinger, architect of 'realpolitik', dubbed '100,000 tons of diplomacy'.²¹

I was so amazed to see the treatment of this event in the local media that I had to write about it (Hartley, 1987; 1992a). Its 'news value' was never in doubt, but it had nothing to do with military strategy. Not a word on the potential damage this ship could do, nothing on the strategic risks of letting a foreign power treat Australian waters as its own home, and no mention of the dangers of nuclear accidents, let alone warfare. Nor was mention made of any adversary, although parking such a weapon in Fremantle surely made the port city a nuclear target. Did the *Carl Vinson* sliding into a place that prided itself on being 'the most isolated capital city on earth' provide a tempting demonstration target to the untested new leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev? The local media remained uncannily silent on that score.

I did not know at the time that this was not the *Carl Vinson's* first visit. That had occurred two years earlier, on its 'maiden voyage' around the world. The citizens of Perth, concerned about becoming a nuclear target, had staged a demonstration of their own. Nine thousand protestors, estimated to have been 'the biggest anti-nuclear demonstration ever seen' in the city, turned out to oppose the visit (*The Age*, 4 July 1983).

By 1985, such protests were marginalised. That was not the story the media wanted to tell. Instead, each time what we may now call the giant phallus has eased into another welcoming port, the coverage has focused on sex. Lusty sailors looking out for wives and sweethearts. 'Indoor sports' were arranged in Fremantle in 1985, via the US Navy's 'Dial-a-Sailor' service. In turn – according to the papers and TV news – this caused a crisis of truancy among girls at John Curtin High School. I checked the Australian press coverage of its earlier, 'maiden deployment' in 1983. Despite the opposition, it had been the same story then. I checked the American papers when the *Carl Vinson* returned to its home port later in 1985. Same story there too. Subsequent visits to Australia by US warships were covered in the same way, even though the *Carl Vinson* itself now had to anchor offshore, following a suicide attack on the *USS Cole* in Aden (2000).²² Spoilsport terrorists meant that the Australian public could no longer roam the 4½-acre flight deck as tourists.

Propaganda and Propagation

Given the stability of the story across time, media, countries and circumstances, it's pretty clear that what was being reported was not an event, much less the truth. It was a genre of propaganda, 'freely' reported by every organ of a free press, public or commercial, print and broadcast. Of course, I should have known. I had experienced the same media treatment in the UK, after the Falklands-Malvinas war of 1982, when the British naval Task Force returned to Portsmouth. The BBC devoted two of its top reporters and most of the day to it. It unfolded as a story of family and community togetherness and procreation, interrupted only by the noisy arrival of a triumphalist Margaret Thatcher, who was helicoptered aboard to announce her version of 'mission accomplished'.

Nearly four decades later, despite so many changes in the world and a digital revolution in journalism, it's still the same old story. The (now ageing) *Carl Vinson* returned to its home port in the USA after another long 'cruise' on Valentine's day, February 14, 2022. The captain told waiting reporters: 'Did someone forget to get flowers or some kind of gift? I figured we were enough of a Valentine's present ourselves'.²³

As always, the top of this story is devoted to joyous reunion with hints of propagation, achieved or to come. However, the last paragraphs, lowest news value in the journalistic 'inverted pyramid', are devoted to strategic matters, where US supremacy is presented as an international

alliance – devolved and reticulated among ‘partners’, Australia among them – to ‘uphold’ regional security, to which it was itself the biggest threat:

“Alongside our partners and allies, we have aggressively pursued every opportunity to elevate our combat readiness in a drive to continue upholding regional stability,” said Rear Adm. Dan Martin, commander of Carrier Strike Group 1. (Times of San Diego)²⁴

After the outbreak of the first Gulf War of 1991, in which Australia was a combatant, I wrote a follow-up study, ‘Journalism in a Post-Truth Society’ (1992b) – one of the first analyses of ‘post-truth’ journalism. The Australian government had sent three of its own warships, *HMAS Sydney*, *Brisbane* and *Westralia*, to the Gulf, in support of ‘Operation Desert Storm’. The local news media, especially the ironically named *Truth*, treated it as a pretext for jokey innuendo and a topless picture of ‘*Truth* Gulf Girl’ Christine Peake, alongside the announcement of their ‘Hello Sailor’ message service (Hartley, 1992b: 219).

Journalism routinely reserves truth for ‘our’ stories, and denies it to ‘theirs’. The repetitive, off-the-shelf nature of these stories, delivered as ‘news’ at every encounter with US supremacy, turns ‘propagation’ (sexual) into ‘propaganda’ (strategic). I argue more generally that truth is a product of adversarial struggle, violence and war. This is a general theory of journalism in modernity, not a critique of isolated bad practice, because the journalistic test for truth is violence. The ‘ideal type’ of the journalist is the war correspondent, the more risk-taking and battered the better. Treatment of the ‘home front’ is confined to expressions of patriotism and displays of sexual and family desire for ‘our boys’.

This is what makes aircraft carriers so potent. They can populate our future. The *Carl Vinson* is still out there. According to a 2021 report in the Indian media, it is not only nuclear-powered, but also nuclear-armed (something the Australian media never mentioned):

This time the nuclear-armed American aircraft carrier Carl Vinson will also participate (NewsCrab, India, October 11, 2021).²⁵

In May 2022, the *Carl Vinson* was underway in the Eastern Pacific, keeping watch by night. It was accompanied by the new British carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, fresh from its first ‘combat’ mission against ISIS, now dispatched to the South China Sea as a ‘physical embodiment of Global Britain’, according to the UK Defence Secretary. That claim, however, was immediately condemned by his own former defence chief, Nick Houghton:

Lord Houghton of Richmond, who was chief of defence staff between 2014 and 2016, said it would be “foolish to turn China into an enemy” and described it as a “beast you’ve got to accommodate, not declare war on” (Independent, June 22, 2021).²⁶

These carriers became part of the global US and NATO strike-group deployment in response to the crisis in Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced in March 2022:

NATO Allies have responded to this crisis with strong support for Ukraine. ... All backed by major air and naval power. Including five carrier strike groups in the High North and in the Mediterranean.²⁷

In response, China has lost no time in deploying the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* where they will be noticed. The *Liaoning* was spotted in the Miyako Strait, between Taiwan and Japan (May 1–8,

2022). The *Shandong* was reported by Reuters to have sailed through the Taiwan Strait in March, just hours before a phone call between Presidents Biden and Xi.²⁸ And in May, as a third carrier neared completion in Shanghai, reports circulated of a fourth carrier – this time with both catapult launch and nuclear power.²⁹ *Asia Times* reported ‘China’s intention to defend its critical sea lanes of communication and overseas interests in the Western Pacific and beyond’. Noting that they could be used in the event of ‘a potential invasion of Taiwan’, *Asia Times* spelled out the rhetorical value of aircraft carriers:

*China is clearly cognizant of the diplomatic value of its carriers. Aircraft carriers are highly visible and flexible instruments of naval and national power capable of conveying reassurance to allies and threat of force to adversaries. They are also symbols of great power, status and national prestige. (Asia Times, May 9, 2022)*³⁰

Thus, China joins the ‘100,000 tons of diplomacy’ club. It is inviting the US and its allies to choose between ‘reassurance’ or ‘threat’. But the choice was made, decades ago. A lesson of this legacy is to recognise that the stories we tell are as old as the material signifiers we use to tell them. Not only do aircraft carriers reach back from current geostrategic ‘diplomacy’ to WW2, but also, adversarial ‘news’ narratives reach forward from the Reformation to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, to reaffirm that news stories have a long history of retelling themselves, despite changes in technology, society and global conflict.

Truth as a Product of War

Like recipes, news formulae are familiar but ever anew. In more contemporary parlance, this is simply to say that they are generated by *algorithms* that have autonomous existence in newsrooms, overriding any ‘original’ source in external reality or any particular journalist’s ‘nose for news’. In other words, and with due respect to Philip Knightley’s (1975/2004) classic argument that truth is the ‘first casualty’ – and see also Ben Elton (2006), Peter Greste (2017), and Tom Harnden (2021) on that trope – it is simply not the case that truth is a *casualty* of war. Truth is a *product* of war.

Very little has changed in newsroom algorithms since the *Carl Vinson* first dropped anchor in Fremantle 40 years ago. During that period, a previous ‘world information order’ has become disordered and reordered around new technologies and geostrategic realities (Carlsson, 2017; Wirth, 2019), not to mention global climate change, environmental degradation and pandemics. But these have had only limited impact on strategic thinking. As veteran diplomatic editor Patrick Wintour put it in 2020: ‘The discussion in global thinktanks rages, not about cooperation, but whether the Chinese or the US will emerge as leaders of the post-coronavirus world’.³¹

The 2022 Ukraine crisis, although clearly a ‘turning point in history’ or *Zeitenwende*,³² has only hardened the East-West schism, or, as Wintour put it, the West ‘finally woke up to Putin’.³³ Now, ‘truth wars’ are government policy. Stories are deployed as strategic weapons, and the ‘Cold War’ is a struggle not of ideologies but of narratives (Lo, 2020).

War as Evolutionary Progress

As geopolitical blocs drift towards total war, or risk total surrender, strategic narratives turn from the romance of propagation to the tragedy of destruction. However, this is not understood as an avoidable choice. On the contrary, it is explained as a natural, evolutionary process. Writing in 1996, RAND Corp’s David Ronfeldt sought to classify the ‘basic forms underlying the organization of all

societies' (1996: 3). He claims that 'there appears to be a natural progression to their emergence and combination', from tribes, hierarchies, and markets to networks.³⁴ Unfortunately, this is just an updated version of social Darwinism, where societies 'advance' from 'primordial' to 'developed' and 'complex' forms of organisation, a doctrine that Ronfeldt fully endorses, pointing to what he describes as 'the ability of each form to respond ... to a key problem (or function) that societies must face and resolve as they advance' (Ronfeldt, 1996: 20). This is not an evolutionary theory but a fantasy of US exceptionalism and supremacy.³⁵ Nevertheless, through RAND Corp, the task of 'advancing' 'natural' 'evolution' is installed at the heart of the policy machinery of the US government and military. Now, stories may be regarded as more important (more determinant) than realities, because 'evolution' has confronted 'Earth' (a.k.a. the US defence industry) with a new challenge:

First, Earth developed a geosphere, or a geological mantle; second, a biosphere, consisting of plant and animal life. Third to develop will be Earth's noosphere, a global "thinking circuit" and "realm of the mind" upheld by the digital information revolution. ... Thus, the decisive factor in today's and tomorrow's wars of ideas is bound to be "whose story wins" – the essence of noopolitik (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020: iii).³⁶

To counter the threat of aggression from 'adversaries', it is an apparently natural necessity to weaponize the noosphere. Adversaries are in fact named (albeit in euphemised form) as 'Moscow', 'Beijing', 'Teheran' and 'WikiLeaks' (2020: 42). For RAND Corp, these citadels represent earlier evolutionary stages of society, such that the US is quite naturally – evolutionarily – destined to 'lead' the world. While admitting that US global leadership is 'contested', and that that seeking 'command' of the global commons is 'provocative', Ronfeldt and Arquilla take comfort by finding a critical consensus to back up their natural evolutionary law, albeit with new weapons, including soft as well as hard power:

Most analysts would prefer that these efforts reflect U.S. leadership.... But the United States is not in a position to impose such regimes.... Showing leadership has become a matter of having to share responsibility and work with allies and partners, in diplomatic soft-power ways akin to noopolitik—not an easy undertaking in the current environment. (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020: iii).

Leadership is 'not an easy undertaking', because non-state actors are already 'using dark new modes of political, social, cultural, and psychological warfare against the United States' (2020: ix):

'What are these darker forms? They go by many names: information warfare, information operations, cognitive warfare, political warfare, memetic warfare, epistemic warfare, neocortical warfare, perception management, and strategic deception, along with such older terms as the war of ideas and the battle for hearts and minds and newer terms about weaponized social networks and weaponized narratives.' (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020: 42–3)

'Theatres' of War

One of the most effective of the USA's non-state allies across all 'theatres of war' has been Hollywood (Media Education Foundation, 2022). The depth of Pentagon-Hollywood collaboration was most recently demonstrated in the undead zombie movie *Top Gun – Maverick*:

*“Top Gun: Maverick” received support from the Department of Defense (DOD) in the form of equipment — including jets and aircraft carriers — personnel and technical expertise. This was authorized by the DOD Entertainment Media Office, which assists filmmakers telling military stories.*³⁷

As one critic noted, at the movie’s launch in Cannes:

*I’ve been reflecting on the film’s conservative nature since seeing it—not in the sense of the implicit, imperialist fascism extolling the virtues of the American military complex, which is of course endemic, but in the sense that the whole film is trying desperately to hold onto something that’s slipping away. (Jason Gorber at Cannes, May 22, 2022)*³⁸

In response, the calculus seems to be that anything Hollywood does, China can now do better:

Battle at Lake Changjin, commissioned by China’s propaganda department, depicts a battle from the Korean War, where Chinese soldiers fought against the United States in what China calls the “War to Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea”. (The Diplomat, October 14, 2021)³⁹

That film soon became the biggest box-office hit of all time in China.⁴⁰ It has already been followed by *Battle at Lake Changjin II*.⁴¹

China is determined to beat the US at its own game, both strategically and semiotically. Strategic stories are cultural and semiotic, not entirely at the beck and call of command-and-control agencies. The semiosphere and its load of languages, subsystems and genres are what bind groups, keeping their identity coherent and actions purposeful, despite individual difference. It is also the system of systems that governs the interactions of groups, which are conducted by means of ‘staged conflict’ across low-trust border zones, by means of which new ideas may be imported or exported from any one group or among many. Interaction with external groups by means of cross-border translation is fundamental to the semiosphere, being the process that exposes cultural groups to risk and ensures their resilience and adaptive capabilities, all at once (Hartley and Potts, 2014; Hartley, 2020; Hartley, Ibrus and Ojamaa, 2021).

Transgressive and Transformative Tales

Because stories may be translated and transmitted through time, group-defining stories can escape their makers’ control and their own cultural milieu, finding new meanings and applications in places and times that their creators could not have imagined (Jockers, 2013). Some stories maintain a persistent afterlife, where the most successful may also be the most ancient – in the Western tradition, think *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, *Beowulf* – where historical tales become bardic myth, while contemporary cultures invent ancient origins for their own ‘we’ group.

One long-lasting type of story concerns the process of gaining knowledge that is transgressive (ie dangerous) in itself. It requires a hero to attempt it. New ideas are ‘discovered’ by risk-taking individual action, but they’re not worth remembering unless they are also transformative of the group (city, tribe or ‘deme’) as a whole. The hero may die but their city survives, having taken heed of the knowledge brought back from unknown parts. Such stories are as old as *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*, as modern as Samuel Johnson’s 1759 proto-novel *Rasselas*, and as contemporary as Mia Wasikowska’s posthuman film *Tracks* (2013). Narrative is a mnemonic codification of the process by which new knowledge and its adoption entails a readjustment of collective values. In each case the hero crosses a border (breaks the rules), sometimes physical (they travel strange lands),

sometimes mental or moral (they learn from non-human interlocutors). Signification of the successful adoption of their novel ideas by society as a whole is signalled by marriage and kingship if they ‘live happily thereafter’; or by bardic immortality if they perish while saving the city. The ‘hero’s journey’ is among the oldest such tales (Campbell, 1949), but it remains contemporary even in the era of electronic mass communication.⁴²

Another transgressive story is known as ‘The Smith and the Devil’. It concerns the discovery of smelting, harbinger of the transition from the Stone Age to successive metal ages: the Chalcolithic (copper), Bronze and Iron Ages. Smelting does indeed produce valuable metal from a stone (like the alchemists’ philosopher’s stone). To account for how the secret of smelting was ‘stolen’ from natural forces (personified as a diabolical supernatural agent), the very human device of the story of a Promethean Trickster evolved in the form of a smith, alchemist, and magician (as in the Harry Potter universe). It has been traced back through archaeo-linguistics to the Bronze Age, when the process of smelting metals spread widely across different cultures (da Silva and Tehrani, 2016).⁴³

Another Trickster who plays with fire is Faust, or Dr. Faustus. The best-known versions are plays by Christopher Marlowe (1592) and J.W. von Goethe (1829).⁴⁴ This early modern Faust is no artisan smelter but an overreaching individualist. He wants knowledge to be his own secret road to power, not over metals, but over other people – alive or dead. The character may owe some genetic material to the entrepreneur Johann Fust, who took over Johann Gutenberg’s invention of printing with moveable type, transforming a technological breakthrough into a successful (and international) company, Fust and Schöffer (Ikeda, 2010). Herr Fust’s name became synonymous with gaining illicit knowledge from books. There are innumerable retellings of this story, about the ways in which arcane scientific knowledge may grant uncanny powers to an individual, whose premodern soul is forfeited in the process. This is the ‘Faustian bargain’ that has sustained successive artforms, including opera (Berlioz, Gounod, Wagner), the novel (Valéry, Bulgakov, Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*), cinema (Alexandr Sokurov),⁴⁵ all the way through paintings, comics, animé, pop music and games (Deats, 2019).⁴⁶

While the scale of the audience for such tales may grow, the arc of a narrative plot may remain stable. An oral culture’s epic verse can persist into electronic and digital forms (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 3). It’s quite at home in movies, TV shows and games. But there are differences. The main one is that although the plot is much the same, the resolution is very different. In ancient times, ‘the end’ signalled the restitution of order; but in modern times it may end in *Götterdämmerung*-style self-immolation. The tale mutates from a leadership test (for individual suitability to rule a culture) into a Schopenhauerian struggle between individual will and implacable world – expressing ‘the polarity ... between our being governed by the will and our escaping it’, which ends, not in ‘reconciliation with our existence’ (Janaway, 2002: 28), but in the destruction of the self and with it the whole social order.

In short, in ancient times the hero was a king; in modernity the hero is ‘a man of the people’. That shift came as modern industrial culture got into its stride, in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s (1835) novel *Rienzi, Last of the Roman Tribunes*. Richard Wagner turned it into an opera, said to be Hitler’s favourite, although it seems that he didn’t like the immolation bit at the end (Ross, 2020: 427–8). An outsider poses as the ‘tribune of the people’. The hero fights for ‘us’ against incumbent interests, educated elites, and ‘deep state’ conspiracies. In *Rienzi*, the upstart tribune starts in struggle (for the people), survives by suppression (of the people), and ends in mutiny, betrayal and immolation (by the people).⁴⁷

Tribunes of the People

Thus, despite the monsters and heroics, this is not an epic in the heroic tradition of *Beowulf*. It is more like Berthold Brecht's 'epic theatre' – farce repeated as tragedy. Populist-authoritarian politics unfold like a re-run of Brecht's *Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941).⁴⁸ The Sydney Theatre Company revived that play in 2018, starring Hugo Weaving. They promoted it thus:

*Arturo Ui is a small-time gangster with a lust for power. ...When he gets there, he won't be breaking the law, he'll be making it. ... Bertolt Brecht's play ... has the wit, murder and musicality of a gangster movie while asking a very political question – how do we let a man like that come to power?*⁴⁹

Authoritarian populists may learn from Brecht that they must use rhetorical ploys and theatrical tricks to win popular support. But – like Wagner – Brecht is not teaching the perpetrator, he's warning the people: that they are complicit in the outcome, and they need – as a class, not as individual rebels – to resist. As one reviewer of the Sydney production concluded:

*Arturo Ui is a reminder that the ascension of indecorous figures to power is not inevitable, but given the tenuousness of the democratic freedoms we enjoy, our timely and decisive intervention is essential.*⁵⁰

So little has that lesson been learned that *Arturo Ui* might play now as documentary, not satire. As the drama's epilogue warns:

*If we could learn to look instead of gawking,
We'd see the horror in the heart of farce,
If only we could act instead of talking,
We wouldn't always end up on our arse.
This was the thing that nearly had us mastered;
Don't yet rejoice in his defeat, you men!
Although the world stood up and stopped the bastard,
The bitch that bore him is in heat again. (Brecht, 1941)*

Internationally, strategic storytelling has entered the arena of armed conflict in several different theatres, most obviously in the conduct of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. However, the narrators haven't been attending to their Wagner and Brecht. They are still narrating to win. First, the foe is easily (even gratefully) named as the USA's familiar Cold War opponent. Russia's attempt to control its own 'sphere of influence' has conveniently justified the revival and expansion of previously moribund NATO. Next, as soon Putin was identified as the villain, a hero was needed, and was indeed waiting in the wings. When Volodymyr Zelenskyy abandoned his business suit for olive-drab fatigues, the stage was set. 'We' forgot that he came to power as a TV star – playing a populist outsider (Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko) in a 51-episode TV comedy called *Servant of the People* (2015–19).⁵¹ Zelenskyy adopted the same name for his political party, winning the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election in a landslide. *The Washington Post* was delighted: 'The underlying message of "Servant of the People" is that Ukraine has been a dysfunctional democracy but it could be a great democracy'.⁵²

According to some local observers, however, Zelenskyy's 'progressive' narrative masked a divisive, neoliberal, winner-takes-all administration, which brooked no opposition. As media scholar Olga Baysha has put it:

Only after Zelensky had consolidated his presidential power by establishing full control over the legislative and executive branches of power did he make it clear that the “normalization” and “civilization” of Ukraine meant the privatization of land and state/public property, the deregulation of labor relations, a reduction of power for trade unions, an increase in utility tariffs, and so on. (Baysha, 2021: 2)

All this was forgotten in 2022, when Mr Zelenskyy was called to perform on the world stage. He continued to excel in the outsider-hero role, now supported by his own political opponents as well as rightist militias.⁵³ His propaganda value spilled well beyond Ukraine, as he made speech after speech to the ‘world community’ (countries not aligned with Russia and China), which fell in line, even though many may previously have sought different kinds of dialogue with Russia (eg Germany). Around the digital semiosphere, ‘fervid netizens’ were encouraged to:

‘Steal his look: Zelenskyy’s signature attire is out on sale, netizens call it ‘Iron man suit’. The viral post has grabbed eyeballs on Twitter and netizens are fervid in comment section (The Tribune, India, June 9, 2022).⁵⁴

This trend was reported in India’s largest English-language paper, *The Tribune* (motto: ‘Voice of the people’). At the same time, President Zelenskyy appeared in representative halls around the world, where petty local squabbles were forgotten, as parliamentarians fell silent at the feet of the hero; for example, in Canberra:

Parliamentarians who a few hours earlier had been bickering in what was probably the final question time before the election, were wordless as they leant forward to listen to Mr Zelensky warn that no country was safe from Russia’s “nuclear blackmail” ... When Mr Zelensky appeared on the screen the chamber rose to give him a standing ovation. (West Australian, March 31, 2022)⁵⁵

A ‘global’ anti-Russian alliance was assembled to reinforce and extend the USA’s ‘sphere of influence’, while denying Russia’s claim to its own. International strategy copied domestic populism and mythic race fantasy alike, invoking a narrative of progress and historical inevitability. It was history as first-person shooter game called ‘Manifest Destiny’ (e.g. *Marvel X-Men* and *Warhammer*):

The God Emperor of Mankind: Eleven thousand two hundred years later, this life-support system sustains the Emperor’s ruined body, while his psychic might guides the Imperium even as it shudders closer to collapse (Warhammer).⁵⁶

The alliance may have involved multiple countries, but the narrative belonged only to one. Here was an opportunity for the US to apply to the entire noosphere its ‘positive metaphor’ of ‘a “Manifest Destiny” for the information age’ (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999: 74–5). Mixing real-life conflict with comic-book tropes in the name of an outsourced staged conflict was widely ‘reported’ in just these terms by supposedly independent media. The need for dialogue with opponents – at home and abroad – became unthinkable. Strategic interests in conflict with the USA’s self-imposed ‘manifest destiny’ were not negotiable. This imperial tradition is still at work in several different ‘theatres’ of conflict, beyond the Ukraine–Russian war.

Most notable is China’s relationship with the US (Jiang, 2020).⁵⁷ More in hope than in fact, Australia’s former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2022: 243–44) traces the process by which NATO,

the EU, and allies (including Australia) have added China to their lists of ‘adversaries’ and ‘challenges’. Rudd seeks to head off what he calls an ‘avoidable war’. He recommends ‘managed strategic competition’, to reduce (or delay) ‘the growing risk of crisis, conflict, or war’ (2022: 390–95). This pragmatic but unglamorous policy has not cut through, however, because ‘competing narratives lie at the centre of the ideological debate between China and the US-led liberal-democratic world’ (Rudd: 391). Those narratives are amplified by state-sponsored disinformation campaigns (Unver and Ertan, 2022), and widely disseminated via non-state actors in mainstream journalism and digital media.

Such campaigns contest China’s own repeated view of international relations, which is to foster common interests and to contribute to global governance through a balance of power (asserted by a diplomacy of signals: Zhang, 2019) – not to interfere in other sovereign states’ internal affairs.⁵⁸ Appealing for peace in Ukraine, while lending political support to Russia and sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine, President Xi told a BRICS forum of Brazil, Russia, India China, and South Africa:

... that states would be in trouble “if they put blind faith in their strength, expand military alliances and seek their own security at the expense of others. History has shown that hegemony, group politics and confrontations between blocs bring neither peace nor stability, but war and conflict”. ... The international community, he said, must work together to resist hegemony and power politics. (New Daily, June 23, 2022).⁵⁹

Worldmaking

As ‘platform capitalism’ proliferates globally – where it’s aircraft carriers, all the way down – the formation of classes and class consciousness is organised now around the *means of mediation*. Digital media literacy is not a psychological aptitude or an individual skill: it is a group responsibility (Hartley, 2020). If alternative ‘strategic stories’ are to be imagined and collective action organised, then popular culture becomes a ‘platform’ for the coordination of new kinds of ‘worldmaking’. This is a job for intersectional teams and collaborations, across platforms, countries and demographics. It is also a job for universities, working with popular culture forms and groups, to utilise the pedagogy of imagining alternative strategic stories.

Of course, RAND Corp theorists turn not to ‘shared responsibility’ but to better training for ‘grand strategy’.

Noopolitik is ultimately about whose story wins. ... Thus, the kinds of stories, or narratives, that matter in noopolitik must be carefully constructed ... Indeed, graduate-level courses to teach grand strategy might have to be thoroughly revised—to be effective, noopolitik strategists might need to be steeped in theoretical matters that today receive little systematic attention. (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020: 76)

As strategic experts know, there’s such a thing as ‘asymmetrical’ conflict.⁶⁰ When the empire’s adversary is organised as a coherent and purposeful class, it only takes one counternarrative to cut through (as *Star Wars* has taught), and there’s every sign that among younger citizens around the world, it has – with the call for global climate justice (*Nature Climate Change*, 2022). ‘Grand strategy’ is one thing, but mediated group formation, class action and activism within the bounds of popular culture and digital media are all equally in need of ‘graduate level courses’, ‘steeped in theoretical matters’ that can assist populations to understand not only the ‘grand strategies’ of states but also the strengths of ‘non-state actors’ in strategic storytelling and collective action for a different kind of worldmaking. That’s a job for global media scholars.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. For the ANZAC Day story, see, e.g. *Sky News*: <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/defence-and-foreign-affairs/prepare-for-war-peter-dutton-issues-ominous-warning-as-he-says-china-is-on-a-very-deliberate-course-at-the-moment/news-story/6807bf2105118d8a31da4a663292ee38>; the *Sydney Morning Herald* <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/reality-of-our-time-dutton-warns-australians-to-prepare-for-war-20220425-p5afuy.html>; the ABC: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-25/peter-dutton-anzac-day-china-russia-nazi-germany/101013116>.
2. See: <https://www.rand.org/about/history/baran.html>
3. See e.g. RAND Army Research Division's survey of RAND's research on the 'information environment': <https://www.rand.org/ard/topics/information-environment.html>.
4. They source this term from the French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. They don't mention the Ukrainian–Russian Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky, who (also) originated the concept.
5. For NATO, see: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_209493.htm?selectedLocale=en. For ANZUS, see: <https://au.usembassy.gov/anzus-celebrating-70-years-of-the-u-s-australia-alliance/>; For AUKUS, see: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/05/fact-sheet-implementation-of-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-partnership-aukus/>.
6. In 2021, 'Australia's largest export markets are China (32 percent of total exports), Japan (16 percent), South Korea (7 percent), the US (5 percent), India (4 percent), New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan (3 percent each)' <https://tradingeconomics.com/australia/exports>. 29 percent of Australian imports were from China, while 11 percent came from the US: <https://tradingeconomics.com/australia/imports-by-country>. Despite this asymmetry, the US Embassy announced in September 2021 that 'The United States remains Australia's most important economic partner' (<https://au.usembassy.gov/anzus-celebrating-70-years-of-the-u-s-australia-alliance/>).
7. Victor Gao, interviewed by Australian journalist Stan Grant on ABC *China Tonight*: <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/CHTO202113550288>; story picked up by News Ltd: (September 21, 2021): <https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/brainless-australia-a-target-for-nuclear-war-warns-top-china-expert/news-story/4652ab802a01b677c6df6de51479bd8d>.
8. Full text here: <https://nationals.org.au/address-deputy-prime-minister-national-press-club/>, (May 11, 2022).
9. See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-25/china-australia-relations-foreign-policy-labor-win/101091996>.
10. Source: *Forbes* (September 14, 2021): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2021/09/14/why-nothing-can-replace-large-deck-nuclear-powered-aircraft-carriers-in-us-strategy/?sh=26b63e3124cc>.
11. Two to Australia (*Majestic* and *Terrible*), two to Canada (*Magnificent* and *Powerful*), one to India (*Hercules*), and one for parts and scrap (*Leviathan*). Information from: <https://www.seaforces.org/marint/>

- Royal-Navy/Aircraft-Carrier/Majestic-class.htm; and: https://web.archive.org/web/20090830235056/http://members.optusnet.com.au/hmas.melbourne/hmas_melbourneNew.htm (*HMAS Melbourne 2*).
12. Source: RAN: <https://www.navy.gov.au/hmas-melbourne-ii>.
 13. Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Melbourne_\(R21\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMAS_Melbourne_(R21)).
 14. Wikipedia is quoting Lind, L. (1986) [1982]. *The Royal Australian Navy – Historic Naval Events Year by Year* (2nd ed.). Frenchs Forest, NSW: Reed Books (p. 304).
 15. Source: *iNews* (Hong Kong) May 10, 2022: ‘Why were Minsk and Kyiv not refitted for service like the Varyag?’ <https://inf.news/en/military/8dd38222f6ff37f3ace0821cdb1fe387.html>. The J-811G is a reconnaissance fighter plane ‘modified with tail hook and other improvements for developmental work on ship-borne aircraft for carrier operations, such as in April 1987, evaluating & testing the Chinese reverse-engineered steam catapult from that of HMAS Melbourne (R21), which was finally confirmed 27 years later in April 2014 by CCTV-13’. ([https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/mediawiki/index.php/J-8-II/J-8B_\(Finback-B\)_Chinese_Interceptor_Fighter_Aircraft](https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/mediawiki/index.php/J-8-II/J-8B_(Finback-B)_Chinese_Interceptor_Fighter_Aircraft))
 16. In 2016 the *Minsk* was moved from Shenzhen to Nantong, planning to resume its afterlife as a theme park: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0506/c90000-9054055.html>.
 17. An online review concludes: ‘Although the ship is designed for fighting, the theme park goes some way to offering a harmonious message. The carrier has a string of international flags stretching from one side to the other, and one rather gets the sense that the whole park is a reminder of the immense waste and trauma of war, rather than glorifying its heroics. As impressive as the aircraft carrier is, it’s more like a monument than an active threat. As was said of the Charge of the Light Brigade – “it’s magnificent, but it’s not war”’: <https://www.echinacities.com/tianjin/city-guide/The-Highs-and-Lows-of-Binhai-Aircraft-Carrier-Theme-Park>.
 18. Source: *iNews* (Hong Kong) May 10, 2022: Why were Minsk and Kyiv not refitted for service like the Varyag? <https://inf.news/en/military/8dd38222f6ff37f3ace0821cdb1fe387.html>.
 19. Poster blurb for the ‘Great Aircraft Carrier Party’: <https://ra.co/events/171146>.
 20. Source: <https://medium.com/indrastra/analysis-plan-s-liaoning-aircraft-carrier-by-david-xia-sinodefence-f5f65856f55d>
 21. Quotation attributed to Henry Kissinger, and regularly deployed since then, right up to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict. See: <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/-%22100-000-tons-of-diplomacy%22-the-us-ambassador-threatened-russia-with-aircraft-carriers-in-the-mediterranean-.B1EV7co65N.html> (*Teller Report*, 24 April 2019, sourced from Russia RT). See also: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2021/09/14/why-nothing-can-replace-large-deck-nuclear-powered-aircraft-carriers-in-us-strategy/?sh=1265abf624cc>, where it is claimed that the supercarriers ‘are so lethal—capable of precisely destroying hundreds of targets every day for months if necessary—that they probably have done more to deter aggression than any other military system in U.S. history.’
 22. See: <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing>.
 23. Returning to its new home base of San Diego on St Valentine’s Day 2022 was too much for that city’s media to resist. See, for instance: <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/military/uss-carl-vinson-set-to-return-to-san-diego/2870107/>; <https://timesofsandiego.com/military/2022/02/14/valentines-day-makes-it-a-little-sweeter-as-uss-carl-vinson-returns-to-san-diego/>; <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/military/story/2022-02-14/aircraft-carrier-carl-vinson-san-diego>.
 24. Source: <https://timesofsandiego.com/military/2022/02/14/valentines-day-makes-it-a-little-sweeter-as-uss-carl-vinson-returns-to-san-diego/>. The quotation is copied directly from a US Navy handout: <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/News/Article/2934730/carl-vinson-carrier-strike-group-returns-home-from-deployment/>. ‘Partners and allies’ are named as Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Netherlands, New Zealand United Kingdom, Japan.

25. 'US ship Carl Vinson equipped with nuclear weapons will come to India, four countries will take part in the exercise: *NewsCrab.com*, October 11, 2021: <https://www.newscrab.com/india/us-ship-carl-vinson-equipped-with-nuclear-weapons-will-come/cid5444243.htm>. Australia sent the frigate *Warramunga* (a regular visitor to Fremantle: <https://www.shipspotting.com/photos/3075231>): <https://news.defence.gov.au/media/media-releases/australia-back-indo-pacific-maritime-exercise-malabar>.
26. Source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210627155507/https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-aircraft-hms-queen-elizabeth-b1870378.html> (and see: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-aircraft-hms-queen-elizabeth-b1870378.html>).
27. NATO news briefing, 23 March 2022, by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_193610.htm.
28. Reuters: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/exclusive-china-sails-carrier-through-taiwan-strait-hours-before-biden-xi-call-2022-03-18/>.
29. Source: <https://asiatimes.com/2022/05/chinas-next-generation-nuclear-carrier-floating-into-view/>
30. Source: <https://asiatimes.com/2022/05/chinas-next-generation-nuclear-carrier-floating-into-view/>
31. Patrick Wintour, 'Coronavirus: Who will be winners and losers in new world order?' *The Guardian* April 11, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/coronavirus-who-will-be-winners-and-losers-in-new-world-order>.
32. The German word for an 'epochal turning point' is *Zeitenwende*. Chancellor Olaf Scholz wrote for *Foreign Affairs* magazine (Jan/Feb 2023): 'The world is facing a *Zeitenwende*: an epochal tectonic shift. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has put an end to an era. New powers have emerged or reemerged, including an economically strong and politically assertive China. In this new multipolar world, different countries and models of government are competing for power and influence': <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/germany/olaf-scholz-global-zeitenwende-how-avoid-new-cold-war>.
33. Patrick Wintour, 'The week where decades happened: how the west finally woke up to Putin'. *The Guardian* March 5, 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/04/russia-ukraine-how-the-west-woke-up-to-vladimir-putin>.
34. Ronfeldt's typology of societal forms is characterised as follows:
 - Type 1: tribes (e.g. Somalia, Chechnya, and 'modern big-city gangs');
 - Type 2: tribe + institutions (e.g. the Soviet Union and Castro's Cuba);
 - Type 3: tribes + institutions + markets (e.g. UK, US, Chile, China, and Mexico);
 - Type 4: tribes + institutions + markets + networks (e.g. North America and Western Europe)' (Ronfeldt, 1996: 20–21).
35. Ronfeldt names Francis Fukuyama in the acknowledgements (1996: v), rather than evolutionary biologists or anthropologists.
36. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1999: 24 n. 15) argue that Ronfeldt (1996) provides 'instructive insights for working out a theory of societal evolution that is consistent with the emergence of a noosphere'.
37. "'Top Gun,' brought to you by the U.S. military'. *Washington Post* (May 27, 2022): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/05/27/top-gun-maverick-us-military/>.
38. <https://www.rogerebert.com/festivals/cannes-2022-fest-launches-with-zombies-art-movies-and-maverick>.
39. *Diplomat*: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/the-battle-at-lake-changjin-and-chinas-new-view-of-war/>.
40. Source: *Variety*: <https://variety.com/2021/global/news/china-all-time-box-office-record-battle-at-lake-changjin-1235119687/>.
41. It opened to similarly impressive box-office takings: <https://variety.com/2022/film/asia/china-box-office-the-battle-at-lake-changjin-1235191464/>.
42. See: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10284342>. For a contrary voice, see: Gabriel Hart (May 20, 2021): <https://litreactor.com/columns/the-obsolence-of-the-heros-journey>.

43. And see: <https://www.tor.com/2016/02/22/fairy-tales-older-linguistic-analysis/>.
44. See: <https://genius.com/Christopher-marlowe-the-tragical-history-of-doctor-faustus-full-text-annotated>; <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm>; and: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/faust-legend/F045255FDF54C67577CC4477FBC7FC81>.
45. For Sokurov's 2011 film, see: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1437357/>. For other versions of the story, see: <https://www.faust.com/>.
46. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Works_based_on_Faust.
47. Following a 2018–19 exhibition on 'Hitler. Power. Opera', Deutsche Welle reported that 'Adolf Hitler liked to inspire the Nazi leadership with his favourite Wagner opera, *Rienzi*, a proto-fascist story of an Italian nationalist who rises up against Rome's corrupt elites' (DW: <https://www.dw.com/en/hitler-and-the-opera-staging-epic-works-to-showcase-power/a-44221673>); and see Bier et al. (2020).
48. See the memorable version starring Leonard Rossiter, 1969: <http://www.leonardrossiter.com/ArturoUi.html>.
49. Source: <https://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/whats-on/productions/2018/the-resistible-rise-of-arturo-ui>.
50. Tim Garratt, reviewing the STC production (*Theatrepeople.com* (April 8, 2018): <https://www.theatrepeople.com.au/the-resistible-rise-of-arturo-ui-2/>).
51. Accessible at SBS On Demand: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/servant-of-the-people>.
52. Source: *Washington Post* (April 22, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/04/14/what-i-learned-servant-people/>.
53. Tymoshenko: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/08/yulia-tymoshenko-on-war-in-ukraine-russia-putin>; Azov brigade: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/03/18/inside-azov-neo-nazi-brigade-killing-russian-generals-playing/>.
54. *The Tribune* (Chandigarh, India): <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/trending/steal-his-look-zelenskyys-signature-attire-is-out-on-sale-netizens-call-it-iron-man-suit-385216>.
55. *West Australian* (31 March, 2022): <https://thewest.com.au/politics/australian-parliamentarians-fall-silent-to-listen-to-ukrainian-president-volodymyr-zelenskys-speech-c-6278508>.
56. *Warhammer*: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Characters/Warhammer40000ImperialFounders>; *Marvel X-Men*: https://www.marvel.com/comics/issue/22048/x-men_manifest_destiny_2008_1.
57. In an item on recent reading, including Jiang (2020), Claire Berlinski of *The Cosmopolitan Globalist* observes: 'The asymmetry in the United States' relationship with the world is striking. We can't quite imagine a long-form essay in a popular mainstream newspaper—*USA Today*, say—where the author discusses significant currents in Chinese thought as fluently as these writers discuss trends in American political and intellectual life. Everyone understands American culture better than Americans do theirs'. (Feb 20, 2021): <https://claireberlinski.substack.com/p/the-cosmopolitan-globalists-have>.
58. A policy forcefully reasserted in 2022: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/202208/t20220812_10742613.html
59. Sources: 'US fears' over China support for Russia (*Guardian*): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/15/china-has-already-decided-to-send-economic-aid-to-russia-in-ukraine-conflict-us-officials-fear>; China sends aid to Ukraine (*Global Times*): <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254171.shtml>; Xi addresses the BRICS (*New Daily*): <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/2022/06/23/chinese-president-xi-jinping-ukraine/>.
60. RAND Corp is all over this one: <https://www.rand.org/topics/asymmetric-warfare.html>.

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