

Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

August 2026 Issue

DEAKIN CENTRE FOR
**FUTURE DEFENCE
& NATIONAL SECURITY**



Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth issue of Signal: Strategic Insights on Geopolitics and Defence! Signal is a monthly publication by the Deakin Centre for Future Defence and National Security. We publish short articles focused on contemporary strategic and security issues, as well as important debates in fields relevant to understanding our strategic environment and defence strategy. Our initial issues have drawn on the depth of expertise present in our Centre, but as we continue we also aim to draw on external expertise and insight where possible. If you are interested in writing for Signal please get in touch!

In this August issue we begin with a look at the future of Professional Military Education (PME) with Matthew Sussex. We then turn to Michael Clarke's analysis of Elbridge Colby's recent remarks relating to U.S. nuclear strategy. Our final piece for August is by Michael Hatherell and examines the phenomenon of Lego propaganda videos emerging from Iran and how we can apply an understanding of strategic narrative in order to assess their potential impact.

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About Signal

Signal is edited by Associate Professor Michael Clarke, Dr Claire Yorke and Associate Professor Michael Hatherell.

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The Future of Professional Military Education

Matthew Sussex

Any student of strategy knows planning for the next war has historically been a thankless and often wildly inaccurate undertaking. But doing so today is far more difficult. Unprecedented technological change has coincided with the most consequential [geopolitical upheavals](#) Australia has faced since World War II. The shifting contours of an ill-defined future world order make the question of who will be fighting, and where they will fight, far less certain. Simultaneously, the scale and pace of change in new capabilities – as well as new ways of warfighting – even makes it tricky to determine what protagonists will fight future wars with, and how they will do so.

The sea-changes we are witnessing in operational capabilities and international order also raise fundamental questions about the future of [professional military education](#) (PME). One truism to emerge from recent conflicts, especially in Ukraine and Iran, is that information and [rapid learning](#) are fundamental to success. But how can we unlock that knowledge, and ensure the next generation of Australian defence leaders are equipped with the right mix of operational, technical and cognitive skills?

Put simply, upholding Australia's tradition of [punching above our weight](#) will require us to learn how to do so in a far less benign and abiding security environment.

This paper examines these questions in more detail. It traces how the PME landscape in Australia has evolved, before sketching out the requirements of tomorrow's PME against the emerging modes and means of future conflicts. Finally, I identify an agenda for future PME focusing on resilience, innovation and adaptation. Each is fundamental to the ability of a small force like Australia's – acting either alone or in concert – to generate [asymmetric advantages](#).

The Evolution of PME in Australia

I have been fortunate to observe Australia's PME landscape for a quarter of a century, beginning in 2001 when I helped design learning modules for the (then) [brand new](#) Australian Defence College. Much has changed since then. Fortunately, academics and defence instructors now rarely spar over whether PME exists to provide education, or training. Today a more pragmatic approach recognises that defence personnel require the ability to conduct operations, but also the knowledge to think creatively and strategically, especially at senior levels.



There has also been a shift in focus away from the unhelpful dualism of 'thinking versus doing', by acknowledging both are important. A thought experiment with no practical outcomes adds little to the capabilities of contemporary warfighters. But merely being able to do something without understanding its purpose is a barrier to innovation. In other words, thinking about why we do things enables us to imagine how they might be done better, or more efficiently.

A third positive development has been to reorient towards active rather than passive learning. While conventional lectures still have a place, the use of scenarios, [tabletop exercises](#) (TTXs) and [wargames](#) help encourage students to put themselves in decision-makers' shoes, and consider broader political, economic, social and ethical implications of a particular course of action.

Such innovations encourage [strategic empathy](#), by recognising how other actors see the world and respond to it. This also avoids needlessly branding states as good or bad: like us, our adversaries see themselves as being on the right side of history. They give students more agency, helping them shape their own learning via practical applications of concepts and methodologies. And they also help smooth transitions from service-dominated cleavages to a more joint and integrated force.

This is further assisted by the insights of overseas course members (OCMs) who shed new light on strategic puzzles, and in-country study tours that provide experiential learning environments, challenging students' own preconceptions and encouraging critical thinking. At the same time, they also perform important [defence diplomacy](#) functions, helping to establish connections and break down barriers between traditionally insular military environments.



One of the core objectives of PME – to give leaders cognitive and intellectual advantages in war – has changed little since the Prussian Staff College opened in 1801. Yet the scope and speed required to achieve that knowledge certainly has.

The Purpose, Requirements and Importance of PME for Future Conflict

One of the core objectives of PME – to give leaders cognitive and intellectual advantages in war – has changed little since the [Prussian Staff College](#) opened in 1801. Yet the scope and speed required to achieve that knowledge certainly has. New domains such as cyber and space, not to mention the nebulous challenges of [non-linear](#), [hybrid](#), and [information warfare](#) are far outpacing previous upheavals in military arts, dwarfing the previous [Revolution in Military Affairs](#) (RMA).

This trend is set to accelerate. There is virtually no arena of modern technological progress, whether in AI, automation and robotics, [health science](#), biology or engineering, that cannot in some way be adapted as a dual-use capability. As the journal *Nature* reported in 2026, [civilian science with military applications](#) is cited far more often than civilian-only research. Indeed, this blurring of lines was what originally led Soviet strategists to term such developments the [Military-Technological Revolution](#).

Taken together, they reshape what we understand by warfighting, making defence a whole-of-society burden rather than an elite-driven [Clausewitzian](#) form of politics by other means. They redefine how we understand [escalation](#) across and within domains; challenge our understanding of what [deters](#) and why; broaden the analytical and capability space to include all aspects of [statecraft](#); and present new opportunities for aggressors to win quickly, sometimes [without even fighting](#).

It is foolish to believe we can simply opt out of this. Our potential adversaries have long been [exploring](#) how to exploit new methods, modes and vectors of war. Without paying them due care and attention, we not only increase our vulnerabilities, but hamper our ability to conduct viable defensive operations in the first place.

These challenges make PME even more important than before. It is imperative to nurture a cadre of leaders with the cognitive skills to think critically and innovatively, and to adapt and act decisively. These take time to develop, and since military decision-making is increasingly [decentralised](#) to the lowest possible level to avoid command logjams, the pool of those who would benefit from PME naturally deepens.

Its enhanced importance means regarding PME as low-hanging fruit during resource constraints is especially myopic, based on flawed assumptions that time spent on education could be spent on traditional military activities.

For one thing, research has [consistently demonstrated](#) that the benefits of PME far outweigh the costs, even with strained budgets. For another, cutting PME sets a lower bar for quality. When this is combined with faster throughput, the problem becomes systemic: it produces a bloated command apparatus overburdened by only partially skilled personnel.

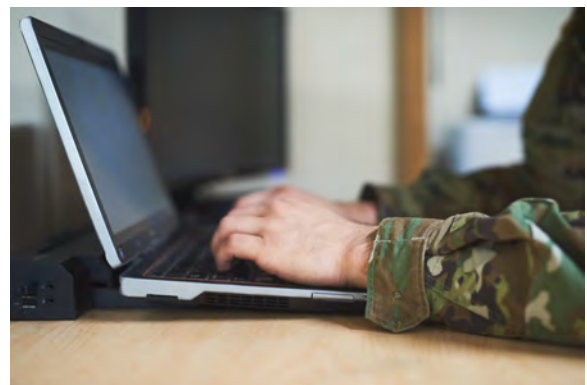
An Agenda for the Future of PME in Australia

What, then, should inform our thinking about the future nature of PME? Below I advance an agenda based on three interlocking components: resilience, integration and adaptation. Each will be crucial to generate a senior workforce that uses knowledge and intellectual capacity as its competitive advantage.

Resilience

First, a resilient PME framework relies on a clear understanding of what is to be achieved. This is not the same as what should be taught, or how it is delivered. It also goes beyond lists of generic skills and [intended learning outcomes](#) that are often relegated to box-ticking exercises.

Ultimately, this recalls the [distinction](#) between strategic planning and strategic thinking. The latter relies on a root-and-branch assessment of how we define strategy, how we foster curiosity, and how to replace cultural and developmental disincentives to challenge organisational orthodoxies.



This is why academic research on strategy, which seeks to uncover its core components and implications, will remain central to PME. Here, for instance, studying the classics and military history is [far from](#) a self-indulgent exercise. On the contrary, it builds analytical capability, conceptual thinking, critical reasoning skills, and judgment about the correct lessons to draw from past experiences.

Similarly, knowledge of [law and ethics](#) remains integral to PME's spine. They ground the study of strategy firmly within societal norms and expectations, helping to produce graduates that are not just informed, but enlightened.

A final key to resilience in PME is to champion academic rigor [alongside](#) practical attributes required for effective military leadership. Doing so enables students to grapple better with uncertainty, utilising cognitive and analytical skills rather than relying on rote learning or descriptively retelling events. It also avoids a common stove-piping problem: the promotion of individuals in a narrow structure, with no broader knowledge or experience of strategic context and oversight.

Innovation

Because it fosters the capacity to approach complex problems from different perspectives; identify trends and patterns; and propose alternatives, effective PME is a natural driver of strategic innovation. However, to reap those benefits this must be accompanied by a nuanced approach to co-design. In this respect, academics are often best placed to advise on what type of learning is likely to generate the deepest insights, while military educators are well positioned to judge what skills and capacities they are seeking to foster.

For instance, academics have extensive experience in using the right pedagogical tool for the task. The ubiquitous adoption of [technology](#) is instructive here, where instead of testing genuine analytical skills, academics often find themselves testing students' ability to summon answers via AI. Used judiciously for specific objectives, technology is a boon. But applied as a universal education salve, it can increase management burdens and produce lowest common denominator learning outcomes. These can become self-perpetuating thanks to a reluctance to abandon sunk costs, making the education experience both frustrating and sclerotic.

Skillful and honest cooperation between academics and military educators therefore helps generate curriculum complementarity, where the learning undertaken by students is less of an episodic experience, becoming instead a holistic experience that is more than the sum of its parts.

Defence's ability to innovate would also be greatly enhanced if it made better use of the flow-on effects of PME, particularly as the [Varghese Review](#) is implemented. One way to do this is to complement the work of Services by further opening up the research landscape to partnerships between recent PME graduates and academics. These could sit independently to [Defence Research Centres](#), undertaking time-critical short projects tackling a specific problem, or longer investigations into more complex strategic challenges. Doing so would help tap into existing expertise in Australian universities and their networks of trusted partners. It would also represent a logical and cost-effective solution that would frequently be achievable in an open-source context.



Adaptation will be just as important to success in tomorrow's PME classroom as on tomorrow's battlefield. This has implications for curriculum design, where flexibility will be obligatory.

Adaptation

Adaptation will be just as important to success in tomorrow's PME classroom as on tomorrow's battlefield. This has implications for curriculum design, where flexibility will be obligatory. In practice, it means adopting [modular curricula](#) that establish a baseline of strategic knowledge, but with scalable capacity facilitating deeper study to meet requirements that are likely to change rapidly.

A good example of this has been the concept of deterrence, which has taken on new centrality in Australian PME curriculum design following the [DSU](#), [DSR](#) and [NDS](#). A related challenge here is to find the right expertise to provide graduated education products swiftly across a range of fields – from automation and AI through to ethics, biosecurity and hypersonics.

Adaptation therefore entails providing more pathways for learning, not less. These will make greater use of short courses, virtual and remote education, and self-paced (although not self-directed) learning. Obtaining a deep capacity for strategic thinking will also require some students to take more specialised and prescribed study pathways. Others, seeking a more top-down view, will need to be suitably conversant with multiple fields of knowledge to make informed decisions, but not so narrowly focused that they mistake the wood for the trees.

Finally, we will need to acknowledge that Defence leadership roles require more than obtaining a one-off qualification. Rather, senior officers will require lifelong learning, and the capacity to pass that knowledge on to their junior colleagues. That will also require a change in mindset. Defence must be prepared to identify talent early, actively give students the time and space to think, and recognise that future conflicts will be as much contests of ideas as of arms. Ultimately that is the key to successfully turning a nascent intellectual edge into a genuine force multiplier.

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'Flexible Response' 2.0? Elbridge Colby, Nuclear Deterrence and the Allure of 'Calibration'

Michael Clarke

U.S. Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby recently [provided](#) a set of remarks to the annual United States Strategic Command (StratCom) Deterrence Symposium on 5 August that serve as something of a guide to the Trump administration's emergent approach to U.S. nuclear strategy and posture.

Colby's remarks reveal a central tension in the administration's emerging approach. He wants U.S. nuclear forces to be more credible and flexible while making nuclear use less likely; allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defence while remaining confident in U.S. extended deterrence; and a stronger military posture toward China that is nevertheless more stabilising. These objectives are connected by a common problem: how can Washington make its threats sufficiently credible without making escalation, including nuclear escalation, more likely?

Colby's core proposition is that deterrence is credible only when political leaders possess a broad range of military options with which to respond to aggression without being forced to choose between accepting defeat and initiating catastrophic nuclear war. In centering credibility and the calibration of military options to a spectrum of threats, he is arguably adapting the JFK-era logic of 'flexible response' to a strategic environment characterised by Chinese and Russian nuclear capabilities, conventional great-power competition, extended-deterrence commitments, and the possibility of limited war.

This effort to construct what we might term "flexible response 2.0" reproduces some of the problems that bedeviled the original. The more Washington makes nuclear options limited, 'rational' and 'usable' in order to strengthen deterrence credibility, the more it risks weakening [strategic stability](#) by lowering the perceived nuclear threshold and intensifying adversary fears of counterforce attack. The problem is therefore not simply whether the United States can build a more graduated escalation ladder, but whether Washington and its adversaries will interpret its rungs in the same way.

'Flexible Response' Then

The original 'flexible response' emerged from a crisis of credibility in U.S. strategy at the dawn of the 1960s. The Eisenhower administration's reliance on the strategy of ['massive retaliation'](#) threatened a nuclear response to deter Soviet or communist challenges to the status quo, but its credibility diminished as Moscow acquired a survivable nuclear capability and confronted Washington with limited challenges. Could the United States plausibly threaten overwhelming nuclear retaliation in response to limited aggression? The perceived inadequacy of U.S. responses to crises over [Quemoy and Matsu](#) in 1954 and 1955 and to the Soviet crushing of the [Hungarian](#) revolution in 1956 reinforced the concern that 'massive retaliation' left exploitable gaps below the threshold of general war.



The problem is therefore not simply whether the United States can build a more graduated escalation ladder, but whether Washington and its adversaries will interpret its rungs in the same way

The proposed solution was most closely associated with former U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Maxwell Taylor, who became an [influential](#) military adviser to John F. Kennedy. Taylor's 1959 book [The Uncertain Trumpet](#) argued that the existing strategy provided the President with only two bad options in a confrontation with the Soviet Union: humiliation or general nuclear war. The United States therefore [required](#) 'a capability to react across the entire spectrum of possible challenge' and a suite of forces with which to respond 'anywhere, anytime, with weapons and forces appropriate to the situation'. 'Flexible response' thus rested on three linked propositions: deterrence required credible rather than merely destructive threats; credibility required options proportionate to different forms of aggression; and those options had to allow political leaders to manage escalation without immediately choosing between defeat and general nuclear war.

Taylor's ideas [proved](#) influential in the Kennedy administration. Kennedy's Deputy National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, for example, [remarked](#) that 'massive retaliation' had meant that the United States was 'often caught in circumstances where our only available riposte is so disproportionate to the immediate provocation that its use risks unwanted escalation or serious political costs to the free community'. Such asymmetry, Rostow asserted, made it 'attractive' for adversaries to 'apply limited debilitating pressures upon us in situations where we find it difficult to impose on them an equivalent price for their intrusions'. Kennedy likewise [warned](#) that American security could be 'slowly nibbled away at the periphery' through subversion, intimidation, guerrilla warfare and limited wars despite U.S. strategic power. 'Flexible response' was intended to close this gap by [ensuring](#) that aggression across this possible spectrum of conflict could be met with a response that was 'suitable, selective, swift and effective'.

The relevant point is therefore not simply that 'flexible response' expanded military options, but that 'calibrated' options were expected to reconcile deterrence credibility with escalation control. Yet, as the record of the Kennedy and Johnson years demonstrated, the desire for 'calibration' embroiled the administration in costly [counter-insurgency](#) and covert operations in the developing world and the ultimate [commitment trap](#) of Vietnam in order to maintain conventional deterrence credibility.



'Flexible Response' Today

Colby, too, has firmly centred the problem of credibility. He [asserted](#) in his StratCom remarks that one of the most important tasks for the Department of War is 'to make sure that we have credible, rational nuclear options that a President of the United States...would actually implement'. To illustrate this, he explicitly invoked the history of the original 'flexible response', [noting](#) that 'some people in the Eisenhower administration' recognized that 'the massive retaliation policy was not going to be credible...when the Soviets got a second strike capability' and that the U.S. required a nuclear strategy that provided 'options that were different than suicide or surrender' in response to a spectrum of possible conflict scenarios.

Significantly, Colby finds a comparable situation at play for the United States today.

His emerging construct with which to respond to this can be understood as having three connected components. First, conventional deterrence by denial should prevent adversaries from achieving limited objectives. Second, credible 'limited' nuclear options should reinforce conventional denial and prevent an adversary from exploiting escalation asymmetries. Third, allies should assume greater responsibility for conventional defence, reducing the likelihood that Washington faces an early choice between defeat and nuclear escalation.

In response to a question about extended deterrence, he [suggested](#) that the U.S. needs to be clear about 'what are [the] distant stakes' at play because if the President is faced with 'something happening halfway around the world...it's got to be worth it'. Here, he appears to be alluding to the fact that U.S. will not necessarily have the same stakes at play as that of an adversary in particular scenarios. By way of example, he [noted](#) the relative Chinese and U.S. interests at stake 'along the first island chain'. He suggested that while the 'Chinese are very clear that they have very profound stakes' at play (i.e. the status of Taiwan), the U.S. too has 'been a Pacific power for 200 years' with deep strategic and economic interests to protect. While it was 'very important' for the U.S. 'to have a strategy and force posture that is rationally tied to that interest', he was [clear](#) that it was 'you know, non-existential'.

Colby's approach to resolving the enduring dilemma of the credibility of American commitments to defend such important but not 'existential' interests is to [develop](#) 'a set of options' that 'contribute to favorably managing escalation' and 'that are cost-benefit rational'.

This starts, [according](#) to Colby, with the necessity of conventional 'deterrence by denial'. Colby [argues](#) that this is particularly important in the Indo-Pacific where U.S. strategy is explicitly centred on denying China the ability to successfully project and sustain military power across the first island chain rather than threatening the destruction or conquest of China itself. Significantly, he [analogises](#) U.S. strategy here to 'winning the Battle of Britain' as the U.S. 'is not, you know, marching on Berlin in 1945' but rather seeking to 'prevent anybody from crossing a body of water and sustaining operations in the face of determined resistance'. This, then, is consistent with the logic that animated the original 'flexible response' by recognising the limited nature of the commitment at stake and attempting to align the scope of military action to it.



As alluded to by the reference to 'strategic' and 'theatre' capabilities, Colby appears to be arguing for intermediate options between conventional denial and strategic nuclear retaliation

However, conventional denial in Colby's approach becomes the first step on the escalation ladder whereby the U.S. nuclear arsenal reinforces rather than substitutes for conventional deterrence. Colby makes this link explicit with reference to Europe. The 'best thing' European allies 'can do for nuclear deterrence', Colby [asserted](#), is 'to invest in their conventional forces'. Weakness here could create 'conventional gaps that could be exploited' through a 'brinkmanship approach by the opponent to put us in a very unfavorable position'. But so long as there is a 'strong European denial defense that can rapidly deploy to the Eastern front or flank', then U.S. 'strategic' and 'theatre level' capabilities along with American 'conventional forces' will 'provide a very effective deterrent'.

As alluded to by the reference to 'strategic' and 'theatre' capabilities, Colby appears to be arguing for intermediate options between conventional denial and strategic nuclear retaliation. This is reinforced by his [emphasis](#) at several points in his remarks that the President must have choices vis-à-vis the U.S. nuclear arsenal that are both 'limited' and militarily meaningful to be credible. He notes here, for example, that this is not about increasing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy but [ensuring](#) that the Department of War is 'able to give the president and secretary credible, rational nuclear options to buttress an integrated conventional strategy' so that 'a potential opponent' will 'believe there's some sense in which we would use it'.

In this discussion of ‘credible’ options Colby explicitly [includes](#) the necessity of providing ‘counterforce’ and ‘strategic counterforce options’ designed to support ‘denial defense’ and escalation management. Again, the logic underpinning this is about enhancing credibility – i.e. an adversary must believe that the United States could rationally employ nuclear weapons under some circumstances. This, Colby [contends](#), is ‘less about the range of the weapons’ within the U.S. arsenal and ‘more about rationally employable, limited options that advantage us and stand the chance of favorably managing escalation and not getting us into an inexorable spiral’ with an adversary.

The stress on ‘limited options’ reinforces the notion that Colby is searching for intermediate options to prevent an adversary from potentially exploiting the gap between conventional defeat and an implausibly disproportionate American nuclear response. Here, nuclear weapons become part of an integrated conventional-nuclear strategy rather than an entirely separate deterrent component.

This, [according](#) to Colby, is especially important for U.S. extended deterrence (END) commitments wherein the credibility problem remains largely the same as it was in the Cold War: would the US risk retaliatory strikes on Washington to protect Tokyo? In this context, the U.S. must make its END commitments more believable by providing the President with plausible options.

Colby’s construction of ‘flexible response 2.0’ also relies – as alluded to by Colby’s comments regarding Europe – on greater allied conventional capability. If allies can provide a more robust contribution to the lower end of the escalation ladder, then the U.S. will (hopefully) face reduced probability of having to make an early choice between capitulation and nuclear escalation. This point is reinforced by Colby’s discussion of the role key Indo-Pacific allies such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Australia. In this context, Colby [emphasizes](#) that the administration wants to ensure that allies are ‘as effective as possible in generating combat-credible readiness’, explaining in part the administration’s concerted pressure on European and Indo-Pacific allies to assume greater [conventional responsibilities](#) for their defence through increased [defence spending](#) and defence-industrial capacity.



In sum, one way to conceive of Colby’s construct is as a form of geographically-distributed ‘flexible response’ in which allies contribute more of the conventional force while the United States retains critical conventional capabilities and the ultimate nuclear guarantee. This arrangement is intended to make deterrence more credible by matching capabilities more closely to the interests at stake and by preserving intermediate options for the President. But success of the strategy is arguably dependent on a demanding assumption: that Washington can calibrate escalation in ways that adversaries and allies alike will interpret broadly as intended.

Flexible Response 2.0: A Recipe for Strategic Instability?

Yet, this strategy arguably contains flaws that may contribute to the outcome which Colby ostensibly seeks to avoid - i.e. strategic instability.

First, Colby’s construct assumes that the U.S. will have significant escalation control. This assumption appears to be underpinned his interpretation of the war in Ukraine. He [argues](#) that Ukrainian conduct of strikes ‘deep in Russian territory’ that have targeted Russian ‘strategic capacities’ demonstrate that ‘things can actually get quite high up that [escalation] ladder and still be quite calibrated’.

Colby may in fact be correct in this specific example. But he appears to assume that this dynamic may operate in other contexts. This is problematic to say the least. A U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, for example, would involve not only different geography, interests and perceptions but also two sophisticated conventional and nuclear powers. The Ukraine-Russia war is arguably a demonstration of caution under nuclear asymmetry rather than an generalizable example of the manageability of limited escalation between peers.

Colby's belief in the need for [counterforce](#) options (i.e. targeting of an adversary's nuclear forces and nuclear command-and-control capabilities) appears to be especially problematic here. Making nuclear options more 'limited' and usable may increase their credibility, but it can simultaneously [increase](#) adversary fears of a disarming attack. Conventional attacks on Chinese command systems, missile forces, satellites or mainland bases, for instance, would likely be [interpreted](#) in [Beijing](#) as precursors to nuclear counterforce operations even if Washington intended them merely to support conventional denial.

Colby [contends](#) that this outcome can be avoided by a 'realistic attunement to the reactions not only of our allies and others but also to red' (i.e. adversary perceptions). But recognising the security dilemma does not resolve it. Indeed, while the U.S. has for some time portrayed counterforce, ballistic missile defence and deterrence by denial as stabilising, China has [consistently](#) perceived such measures to be fundamentally aimed at negating its retaliatory capabilities and thus to be inherently destabilising.

Second, Colby makes consistent reference to the need for the President to have options that are 'cost-benefit rational' and proportionate. This is intuitively appealing. But it risks treating crisis behaviour as more controllable than it actually is. As [numerous studies](#) have shown [nuclear](#) crises in particular are [complicated](#) by uncertainty, imperfect intelligence, organisational pressures, domestic politics and misperception. The notion that during a crisis policymakers can 'rationally' ascend and descend an [escalation ladder](#) one carefully calibrated step at a time appears hopeful at best.

Third, Colby's remarks [stressed](#) that strengthening the credibility of U.S. nuclear options will necessarily reassure allies about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. But this conflates the credibility of U.S. capabilities with the credibility of its commitments. Providing an American president with more plausible options may improve Washington's capacity to respond, but it does not automatically convince Tokyo, Seoul, Manila or Canberra that the President will choose to exercise those options when doing so exposes the United States to nuclear retaliation. Colby's emphasis on determining whether [something](#) 'happening halfway around the world' is 'worth it' for Washington arguably reinforces rather than dispels doubts about whether the United States would accept nuclear risks in defence of allies. His construct may therefore alleviate a capability problem without resolving the underlying commitment problem.

The core problem, therefore, with Colby's 'flexible response 2.0' is that it contains an inherent tension between deterrence credibility and crisis stability. Creating more plausible pathways to nuclear use may strengthen the credibility of American threats, but precisely because those pathways are more plausible they may intensify adversary fears, increase pressures for pre-emption, and blur the boundary between conventional and nuclear war. 'Flexible response 2.0' may therefore reproduce rather than resolve the dilemma that confronted its Cold War predecessor: the capabilities designed to make nuclear deterrence more credible can simultaneously make nuclear war more conceivable.

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Strategic Narrative and the Iran Lego Propaganda Videos

Michael Hatherell

One of the surprising outcomes of the ongoing Iran war has been the emergence of the viral ‘Lego’ propaganda videos produced by the Iranian company ‘Explosive Media’. While initially representatives of Explosive Media claimed to be working completely independently of the Iranian government, in later [interviews](#) they noted that the Iranian regime was a ‘customer’. Whatever the exact details of their relationship with the regime, the videos themselves are a prominent example of the use of strategic narrative in a conflict situation.

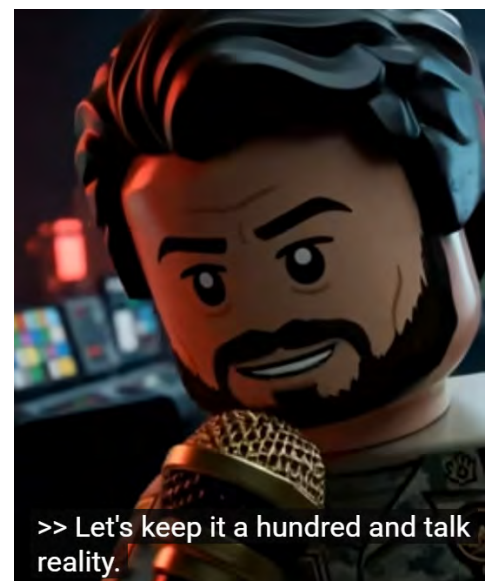
The videos use AI to produce quite sophisticated depictions of Lego characters and settings, in a style similar to Lego films such as the Lego Movie, The Lego Batman Movie and the Lego Ninjago Movie. Accompanying the Lego graphics with catchy music and lyrics, the videos do what wartime propaganda typically tries to do – demonise the motives of the adversary (the U.S. and Israel), glorify the motives of the state under attack (Iran in this case) and establish a frame for how the war, in the view of the propagandists, should be seen.

This wartime propaganda is unique though for several reasons. It uses AI to produce quite sophisticated content in a relatively short period of time. They draw on existing and familiar imagery through the use of Lego. They tie into not just the context of the war, but also U.S. domestic concerns. And they make the most of channels available to this media. Analysis varies on the reach of the videos, with one report suggesting they [reached](#) 83 million users in the first month of the conflict while another [claims](#) 145 million. Beyond their popularity on social media channels, they have also drawn attention from traditional media sources, with just about every major news site in the world writing a piece about the videos.

Given their prominence, there is value in asking what the Lego propaganda videos tell us about contemporary strategic narrative. This article draws on some of the key literature on strategic narrative to present some observations. In particular, it seeks to use the key elements of strategic narrative – setting, characterisation, plot and message – to explain some of the choices made by the video’s creators. It then draws on the idea of ‘political myths’ to unpack why the videos might resonate beyond Iran’s borders.

The Key Elements of a Strategic Narrative

Strategic narratives are, according to [Miskimmon, O’loughlin and Roselle](#), ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics’. The purpose of strategic narratives is to influence how other actors in a system think and act, whether that is political leaders, elites, companies, voters, online netizens or military forces. Strategic narratives can operate at [different levels](#), including system level narratives that seek to explain the nature and trajectory of international politics, identity narratives that seek to explain the nature of an individual actor, and issue level narratives that seek to explain what is taking place in a specific situation.



Just like fictional narratives, strategic narratives seek to [establish a setting](#). This helps to shape what is considered 'inside' the story and what is outside of it. Here we can already see some key choices in the case of the Lego propaganda videos, where the setting of the story is framed around both the security environment of the Middle East and the domestic politics of the United States. The videos have a lot to say about the promises of America First, the plight of U.S. voters, the supposed influence of Israel and Zionism in U.S. politics and other domestic concerns like the Epstein Files. This is a very deliberate choice which has implications for the type of story that can be told. But it is also notable what is left out – contention in Iranian [domestic politics](#) or Iran's own foreign policy and use of power in the region.

Strategic narratives also seek to establish key characters. These characters are often international actors like states and the leaders of states. Just like fictional stories, strategic narratives engage in characterisation, presenting a simplified form of characters that can be easily processed and recognised. Not surprisingly, in the Lego videos Iranian soldiers and leaders are presented as heroic and morale. One of Iran's military spokespeople, Brigadier General Ebrahim Zolfaghari, is sometimes used as a representative of the heroism of the Iranian military in the videos.

The videos use various techniques to characterise the supposed evil of President Trump, including depicting him as a pig, a king and frequently teaming him up with the Devil. Beyond Trump, the videos frequently reserve the most villainous role for Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The idea of a foreground bad guy serving a bigger villain in the background is a common trope in popular fiction (think Darth Vader and the Emperor in Star Wars) and is often alluded to in these videos.



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One key choice in the videos, however, is how the American public are characterised. The depiction is mostly sympathetic, with frequent references to the idea that the public thought they were getting 'America First' but were tricked and instead got 'Israel First'. The videos also sometimes seek to argue that regular Americans are on the side of those making the videos, with references in one video to the 'many DMs' that they had received from American social media users. In another, a protest is depicted at the White House with protestors arguing that the war should be ended and to 'stop killing in our name'. This is an important choice given the purpose of these videos which we will come back to shortly.

Characterisation in strategic narratives ties into their next key feature – plot. Narratives simplify a complex world by telling us two things: which events matters, and how those events are causally connected. Through particular methods of connecting plot points together, compelling plot arcs can be developed.

The [destruction](#) of the Shajereh Tayyeneh school in Minab early in the war and the killing of more than 150 mostly young girls is a frequent feature of the videos. A pink school back-pack, covered in blood, is regularly used as a symbolic device. This plot point features in many of the stories told, used to depict the U.S. and Israel as cruel and immoral and the Iranian defenders as just and sympathetic. In strategic narratives, morality and justice are key ingredients used to elicit strong emotions from an audience - and this incident demonstrates that the way a war is conducted has a direct link to the stories that can be told about it.

The plot present in the Iran Lego propaganda can be read in two ways. Each video, typically 2-3 minutes in length, presents its own sense of plot. These mini-stories often connect together an American or Israeli pre-war driver (the Epstein files, imperial greed etc) with the choice to start the war. This is usually followed by the depicted outcomes of this decision – Iran resisting, President Trump panicking, and the world realising the truth about America and Israel. Some videos depict a longer series of events, drawing in previous American and Israeli alleged atrocities, or even seeking to show the role of the West in Iran’s history over a longer period of time. Many of the videos [exaggerate](#) Iran’s military capability or operational successes as part of the present and future plot.

The videos can also be seen as part of an evolving story. They are often self-referential, drawing on story-lines from previous videos. They also follow events during the war, incorporating new plot points to help progress the story. The [downing](#) of a U.S. F-15E Eagle in early April and the subsequent rescue mission, for instance, was used as a new plot point with connections to the broader story that is being told. The Fifa World Cup also featured heavily.

Finally, through setting, characterisation and plot we arrive at the whole purpose of the videos – the message. While most fictional stories have some sort of message, strategic and political narratives are distinct because the whole purpose is to try and influence the behaviour of real-world actors. To do this, the message needs to be clear and compelling.



In the case of the Lego propaganda videos, the message can be broken up into a few elements. At an issue level, it is clear that the central purpose of the videos is to depict the Iran war as immoral and to argue that the war is doomed to fail. At a system level, the videos often move beyond the war to depict it as part of a broader story about global politics, in which the U.S., Israel and their allies lead an unjust world order that must be resisted. This unjust world is depicted as not just existing at the international level, but also present in U.S. domestic politics. In one video, for instance, Iranian missiles are launched with slogans on the side, including ‘for the stolen Blacks’, ‘for the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’ and the ‘Children of Epstein island’. This is not just a story focusing on the U.S. as an international actor, but the idea that the U.S. government is to blame for a range of international and domestic crimes over a longer period of history.

The overall message often implicitly and explicitly comes back to the idea of the need to realise the ‘reality’ of what is taking place and to resist the actions of the US and Israeli governments – either from outside or within the U.S.. To understand the ability for this message to land we need to consider how this strategic narrative connects to existing ideas.

The Importance of Existing Political Myths

It is difficult to judge exactly how effective the Lego propaganda videos have been. Clearly the videos have been viewed many times and have led to other individuals and teams seeking to create similar content. There also appear to be growing links between Explosive Media and influencers in other countries. Meanwhile the war in Iran has been unpopular in the United States from the beginning. Analysis from poll aggregation analysis such as the [Silver Bulletin](#), for instance, shows support for the war sitting below 40 percent from March through until August. The Lego propaganda videos are clearly not solely responsible for the lack of popularity of the conflict, given the poor communication effort in explaining the war and the role of fuel price rises in shaping public attitudes. But they have clearly contributed towards the way that some Americans understand the war.

In this context, there is value in applying the theoretical contribution of Olivier Schmitt from [his article](#) 'When are strategic narratives effective?'. Schmitt argues that the effectiveness of strategic narratives relies on the degree to which they 'resonate with local political myths'. Schmitt (p.2) [notes](#) that:

Political myths are present within a specific political community as a semi-permanent feature. They are subject to gradual evolutions and adjustments, their content is sedimented over time, and it is impossible to pinpoint one single actor "crafting" a political myth: They are constantly actualized through multiple sources in order to fit the needs of a political community...

Schmitt argues that there are two qualities that distinguish political myths. One is the extent to which the relevance of the myth is broadly dispersed in many localities versus only making sense in one specific locality. The other is whether the political myth tends to cohere with or contradict other political myths.

Schmitt's work is valuable in beginning to analyse the resonance of the Lego propaganda videos. In terms of the relationship to political myths, the regular references to Israel, Netanyahu and Zionism are significant. This element of the strategic narrative seeks to connect with political myths that depict Israel and/or the influence of the Jewish community as responsible in the background for U.S. foreign policy – including the war against Iran. According to Schmitt's taxonomy, this political myth could be considered as relatively dispersed, given that both anti-Israel sentiment and anti-semitism can be found in most societies around the world. They are also represented on both the [far right](#) and [far left](#) of the political spectrum in the United States. The existence of this political myth on opposing ends of the political spectrum also demonstrates the extent to which it can cohere with different political ideologies. For this reason, the strategic narratives captured in these videos can simultaneously connect with the pre-existing worldview of a range of audiences around the world - including within U.S. society.



To some extent these videos also draw on ideas of Western and U.S. imperialism. One of the most watched videos called 'Nothing but WAR' presents a longer-term narrative focusing on the history of U.S. dominance over Iran and the Middle East. The video ends with the following text:

Every nation on earth shares a common scar left by America: a dark memory of plunder, assassinations, coups, looting, and war. Yet among all these nations, we are the one that stood on its own two feet, defended its independence, and forged ahead. Today, their ultimate weapon is a label: calling anyone who defies them a 'terrorist'. But we will never back down. We are here to shatter their hollow hegemony once and for all.

The critique of U.S. imperialism in videos like this is clearly aiming to connect with feelings of U.S. mistreatment in other parts of the world, and is likely to find fertile ground in local myths based on anti-Western and anti-U.S. sentiment. Interesting, this particularly video is available via Explosive Media's social media presence with subtitles from a number of different languages.

These videos need to be careful with this message though, considering part of the aim is to influence U.S. citizens. In the 'Nothing but WAR' video, the protagonist who is sharing the story of U.S. imperialism is engaging with a classroom of children from a U.S. school, and explains to them why their textbooks are wrong. He ends the video by saying 'class dismissed: now go rewrite your textbooks'. This appears to be a deliberate inclusive gesture to American audiences.

Given the nature of the U.S. information environment after the War on Terror, this critique of historic U.S. foreign policy can find a home in several locations of the ideological spectrum. This can be seen, for instance, in a Candace Owens video reposted by Explosive Media on X. [Candace Owens](#) is a well-known far right influencer and conspiracy theorist in the U.S. with 6 million followers on Instagram alone. In the video, her guest starts by praising the Lego videos:

...And the one they put out recently, where they are speaking directly to the American people and telling us, like, we actually love you guys, we have no problem with you guys, we know its your government and that they're not representing what you want...[she stops speaking and holds her hands over her heart]

Candace Owens jumps in, stating:

It was a sigh of relief, because I'm like please do not grow up and think that we support this geriatric, pedophile defending, like, Epstein class of psychopaths...we don't want this, we do not want this war, we want to go about our day, have low gas prices, be able to afford groceries, and when they put that out, that message, it was like they are plugged in...they're plugged in to how the American people feel.

The right and the far right in the United States operate in an increasingly contested ideational space that is starting to position itself for a post-Trump world. But this one example from a popular influencer is representative of the type of fertile ground videos like this can find within the U.S. political system.

Conclusion

The content of ideas is not the only reason for the prominence of the Lego propaganda videos. Strategic narratives also require the practical ability to reach intended audiences. For this reason the methods used to design and share the Lego videos deserve attention. Drawing on the popular imagery of Lego immediately breaks barriers that might exist between the content creators and audiences around the world. It is easy to sympathise with characters depicted with Lego who we might otherwise feel little connection to. It is also easier to include ridiculous imagery, like Trump being advised by the Devil, when the Devil is depicted as a Lego character.



As Nesrin Alrefaai has [argued](#), 'The videos' aesthetic is not incidental. Lego-style figures function as a global visual shorthand: instantly recognisable, non-threatening, and culturally decoupled from any single political tradition...Regional geopolitical narratives are presented in highly stylised and culturally familiar formats, drawing heavily on American cultural references to make accessible commentary on unfolding global events'. It should be noted that the Lego company itself [does not want](#) its products associated with contemporary conflicts.

Added to this, the use of popular music styles and humour adds to the attractiveness of the videos. Some of the music is seriously catchy. The use of AI also means that a high quantity of video content can be generated and shared. This is useful in a media ecosystem that favours content production and [virality](#). The videos have reached audiences partly because they are widely re-shared, and there have already been a number of copy-cat accounts engaging in a similar approach.

While these factors are important, assessing the nature and potential success of strategic narrative requires us to go beyond the practical ability to reach audiences. Content matters, and truly compelling content requires an ability to not just use narrative devices like setting, characterisation, plot and messaging, but also to understand the target audience. The creators of the Iran Lego propaganda videos seem to have an intuitive understanding of the local political myths in other countries and how to connect with them. If these videos were just focused on Iranian nationalism and locally relevant symbols and ideas they would have much less international appeal. Their success appears to come from their ability to connect with political myths that have deep resonance in many countries around the world – including within the United States.

The true impact of this effort is impossible to quantify in precise terms. The videos appears to have landed with an audience in many countries. They have likely played some role in shaping ongoing domestic dissatisfaction with the war in the U.S. and sentiments in other societies too. Beyond the current war, the longer term impacts of narrative in ‘shaping the ground’ are also important – how does the influence of a strategic narrative like this shape the ideational environment facing decision-makers when the next round of foreign policy decisions need to be made?

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