

Utility of Force - a Response to Yuval Noah Harari

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NEIL SNYDER, JUL 7 2017

News of North Korean ballistic missiles, the Syrian civil war, and our Afghanistan strategy dominate the news. Yet, Yuval Noah Harari recently implied that war is in decline as a political instrument, going so far as arguing that no country can win war and that we should simply hope for the best. He notes a decline in violent deaths due to interstate war and offers several seemingly plausible reasons for war's diminishing political utility: statesmen have no recent models of decisive victory, states have limited prospects for war profits (post-conflict extraction from the defeated), and that contemporary war could bear significant blowback from the use of newer weapons like offensive cyber operations.

Are today's conflicts really unwinnable? Is hope really all that stands between the U.S. today's looming conflicts?

What Harari seems to miss is that war is a human phenomenon, a complex and ongoing competition that (at times) peaks with violent competition of military means. The United States pursues its interests, exercises power, and develops strategy to deal with the complexities of contemporary conflict. Of all of those factors, it may be the sheer difficulty of forming coherent strategies that creates a false veneer of unwinnable war or declining utility of force.

In other words, hope alone does not create stability among states: coherent national strategy does. Regardless of his easily debatable logic, Harari does provide a kernel of truth: the world's problems are genuinely complex. Some would argue that contemporary problems (the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, ISIS, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and more) are indeed wicked (link to complexity articles), so intractable that comprehensive solutions and strategy are futile. Complex problems require strategic patience and acceptance of long time horizons, conditions rarely palatable for domestic political appetites. This logic, and the perception that the use of force to serve policy has diminished utility, is further aided by internal organizational bureaucratic barriers to the policy process.

Scholars have argued that the US has significant organizational barriers to producing effective strategy. This scholarly skepticism of our ability to craft strategy goes beyond an acknowledgement of our democracies checks and balances, but identifies real institutional barriers to the alignment of policy, resources, and national means. If indeed the US is to pursue a grand strategy that continues to secure our democracy for future generations, then our national security leaders need to work together towards effective formulation of policy and strategy. Today's complex problems may well require significant effort for years in order to diminish the risks. We need strategy and effective, collaborative national security institutions, rather than self-defeating pessimism in the face of contemporary conflict.

About the author:

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