

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Jonathan Klug and Mick Ryan *On White Sun War: The Campaign for Taiwan*

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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Today, I'm talking with retired Major General Mick Ryan of the Australian Army, and author of the fictional work, *White Sun War: The Campaign for Taiwan*. Joining us is Colonel Jon Klug, who reviewed Ryan's book for the US Army War College quarterly, *Parameters*. Klug is an instructor in the Department of Military Strategy, Planning, and Operations at the US Army War College. Welcome to Conversations on Strategy.

Mick Ryan

Thanks. It's great to be back at the War College, albeit virtually.

Jonathan Klug

Thanks so much, Stephanie. Glad to be here.

Host

Mick, give us a brief overview of your book, please.

Ryan

Yeah. It is, I guess, a future historian looking back on a war over Taiwan, which I put in 2028 for a range of different reasons. First and foremost is because it's a presidential election year, and the Chinese make some assumptions about American patience and its ability to deal with things outside national elections. But it's about how Taiwan rethinks its defense, rethinks its relationship with the US, and about how the Chinese leverage different technologies and different ideas to do what they believe is taking back a renegade province, whilst most of the world believes they're invading a sovereign nation.

Host

What inspired you to write this book?

Ryan

I published *War Transformed [The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict]* in 2022, and, you know, that was an aggregation of lots of different ideas that I've been pondering for many years. And it explored how war was changing due to technology and the need for new ideas and new organizations to really leverage that, but, also, how war wasn't changing because it's a huge number of continuities in war. And as students at the War College will know very well, we talk about changing character and the enduring nature of war, and my book really was about exploring that.

So I use that as a foundation. I thought, "Well, how would this apply in certain scenarios?" And the one certainly most relevant, I think, for many people—not just in the military profession but in the national security community

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more broadly—is some kind of conflict in the western Pacific, potentially over Taiwan. So I decided to apply my ideas on future war to that potential conflict. And . . . and the book emerged over time. And I was able to write it reasonably quickly. But it was a really good thought exercise for me, as well.

Klug

Great. Mick, given your extensive military experience, including commanding the Australian Defence College, could you please share your thoughts on how *White Sun War* could be useful for professional military education?

Ryan

I'm a big believer that if you're a member of the profession of arms, you need to study its history—that's really important—and do it in breadth, depth, and context, as Sir Michael Howard recommended in his famous essay. You should study current affairs, whether it's politics, development of technologies, new doctrines, and stuff. And finally, you should study potential futures. And the only way you can do that, really, is, I think, through narratives.

This isn't a new idea. The development of potential future military narratives started back in the 1870s with a British royal engineer writing a story called, "The Battle of Dorking." And for generations since, military officers and others have written military narratives for a variety of reasons: to entertain, to shape public opinion, to inform government decisionmakers.

And for me, *White Sun War* is a bit of all three. It's about informing people about the kind of perils that you go into in these kind of conflicts, but, also, shaping strategic decision making around what we need to invest in deterring these. Not only is it cheaper in lives and in treasure; it would avoid a catastrophe that would have global impacts.

Klug

Building on that, what did you want *White Sun War* to convey about the centrality of the human dimension in war?

Ryan

It's very easy to write these books and call it a techno thriller. For me, this is more a human thriller. Technology is an important part of the story, but it's never the core part. The core part of stories, ever since we were cavemen and women, has been about people and groups of people and what people do. And I really wanted this to be a story about, first and foremost, the stress, the horror that people go through in these kind of situations.

And indeed, our generation didn't experience this level of conflict in Afghanistan or Iraq or other places we serve, but we have some notion of it. But, also, about the importance of leadership. I mean, I wrote this before Ukraine, which has kind of reinvigorated leadership studies—I think, rightfully.

I think, importantly, I also wanted the characters in the story to represent what a contemporary military institution looks like. When I was a brigade commander, the best tank troop leader in the brigade was a young female officer. In my combat engineer regiment, the best combat engineer troop leader was a young female officer. And in a contemporary army organization—I know that's true in the US Army (it is in the Australian Army)—you have a very different-looking army than the one I joined. And that's a very good thing because the army I joined was nowhere near as good as the one we have now.

Klug

If we could circle back to something that you said earlier, how do we prevent fiction from becoming reality with respect to armed conflict over Taiwan?

Ryan

One of the beauties of fiction is that you can explore some of the most awful potential futures and then do things to prevent it. You can do it for climate studies. You can do it for warfare. You can do it for a range of different policy

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endeavors. And when it comes to these kind of scenarios, you can, uh . . . you can imagine, “What’s the worst that can happen?” And if you have a vision of what that worst thing is, that helps you do things that can prevent it. You can paint a picture, importantly, for politicians who don’t understand our profession like we do, but, also, for the public more broadly, which probably has very little military experience compared to, say, previous generations. So, I think it’s important to paint that picture for people and say, “Well, we need to work towards making sure this doesn’t happen.”

Host

Jon, you’re not going to get off that easy. What thoughts do you have on this topic?

Klug

One of the things I very much enjoyed about is it tied into something I’ve been studying a lot lately in some detail, and that’s logistics and making incorporated logistics effects upon strategy in a way that is not an afterthought. That’s unusual. He reinforced the almost symbiotic relationship between strategy and logistics.

One of my favorite parts was where he had a prewar (United States Indo-Pacific Command or) INDOPACOM intelligence briefing where they talked about logistics shaping possible ways the Chinese could take Taiwan. And I thought that was very insightful about how he went through that analysis, and that determined where they could potentially land and so forth . . . about defending the sea lines of communication and so forth.

The other thing that I thought was interesting is he looked at the other side of the equation, so the Allied side. And I thought it was important when he talked about how the Alliance had established several strategic bastions working on, really, the history of World War II in the Pacific—obvious correlations between the two.

Ryan

For me, writing the story, this was a really important part. For those of us who’ve done those second-year campaign courses in places like (School of Advanced Military Studies or) SAMS or at Montgomery, logistics is such a massive part of campaign planning. It’s not discretionary. It’s not something you do afterwards. It’s got to be integrated. In many respects, it’s a leading part of planning. So it just had to be part of this story.

Klug

So, for professional military education, what do you see as potential tie-ins for wargaming?

Ryan

There’s a lot in here where we can explore why wargaming is useful. The front of the book: We see them doing rehearsals and a bit of wargaming on different outcomes. We see the marine characters doing this in the war and before the war itself. I mean, wargaming is clearly a part of the planning process, so it’s formalized. But there’s a range of areas you can use war games for exploring different outcomes for proposed actions, exploring different force mixes for different mission sets. So, you can use a well-beyond part of the military planning process.

And I think with the strategic level, for looking at different force mixes and levels of investment in different technologies, I think it’s really important. And there’s lots of new technologies beyond just the old tabletop wargaming, which also matters. But there’s a lot of different technologies, including (artificial intelligence or) AI, that can help us with the simulations that support wargaming.

Klug

And of course, the aspect of fighting a living human opponent that is going to have their own plans. The real learning, I think, comes in with that part of wargaming.

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Ryan

The enemy always gets a vote.

Klug

You mentioned the centrality of the human dimension of war. But one of the things that we talked a lot about is the emergence of AI and the ever-increasing number of autonomous systems. How do they affect that human dimension of war?

Ryan

AI clearly has many traits that mimic human cognition. I think for soldiers, this is about leveraging that approach to support how we apply our cognition, whether it's in attention and search; whether it is thinking through different scenarios; whether it's helping us make decisions when we're tired, hungry, wet, under pressure, and being shot at. Very few army decisions are made in very comfortable cubicles. Most of them are made in pretty awful circumstances. And if you can have a decision support tool using AI to help you, that's not a bad thing. It's not about replacing human decision making. It's about making human decision making better to generate advantage.

Uh, when it comes to autonomous systems, we've had these things and remote-controlled systems for decades, right? The US had remote-controlled B-17 bombers out of Europe in the Second World War. The Germans used remote-control moving mines, the Goliath mini-tanks, in the Second World War, and they've developed since then. The Iraq War, I guess, saw a bit of an acceleration in ground-based autonomy and air-based autonomous systems. But the war in Ukraine, I think, has seen, you know, a Cambrian explosion where we're seeing thousands of these things airborne across multiple mission sets, lethal and nonlethal.

And what I think we're seeing is a changing ratio of autonomous systems to humans in the battlespace. We're seeing fewer humans and more of these things. And that ratio, I think, will continue to change. And it's going to have to drive changes in training. It's going to change doctrine. It's going to change tactics. It's going to change logistics. It's going to change a whole range of different endeavors. And at some point, it will get to the point where we're not just using these things as tools, we're really partnering with them. And that will require a significant transformation in our mindset and our relationship with machines.

Klug

So, the other corollary to armed conflict over Taiwan—and we often hear about specific domains, but there are challenges inherent to that—I was wondering if you could talk about Landpower's role in a potential conflict of this nature.

Ryan

Well, one of the drivers for me writing this book is I'd seen a vast array of different think-tank products about a future conflict in the western Pacific, and they all seem to be about the Navy and Air Force and Space Command. And that doesn't mean these reports aren't true, but I kept asking, "And what next?" You know, what comes after this maritime fight? What comes after this air fight? Do we think it will just be over? I think historical evidence points to the fact we're actually pretty bad at the "what next" thing. It was like, "Go take Iraq." And when you ask, "What next," there's a bit of umming and ahing.

I wanted to explore what comes next and also point out that in the Pacific, it's not just all blue stuff. There's a lot of green stuff. Once again, the US has deep historical experience in understanding that that green stuff matters. You have to fight for it, you need to own it, because that is an important part of strike, of logistics, of command and control. So I wanted to explore the ground fight and the importance of Landpower in future conflict.

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Klug

Great points there because we obviously fight in a joint and multinational way. And focusing on what often is one nation's efforts in one domain is obviously dangerous. There be dragons. I also think it points back to (Aleksandr) Svechin's point about tactical steps then lead to operational leaps—I'm paraphrasing there—but we have to be able to do that in a joint and multinational way.

Ryan

Absolutely.

Host

Do you have any final thoughts? We covered a lot in a very short time.

Ryan

Well, I think narratives are an important tool in (professional military education or) PME and . . . and just broader thinking about our profession. As I said at the start, you've got to have a look at our past, you've got to look at our present, but you've got to think about the future, and narratives help that. As Peter Singer often says, you know, "This kind of fiction is like blending up vegetables in your kid's milkshake. You enjoy it, but you also learn from it at the same time." And I hope people are able to read , enjoy it, but also learn something from it as well.

Host

Listeners, you can read the review at press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters. Look for volume 53, issue 3. Mick and Jon, thank you for making time to speak with me today.

Ryan

Thank you. It's great to be here with you.

Klug

Thanks so much. Enjoyed it.

Host

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