

# Security Myths and Paradigm Traps: Strategic Thinking for the 21st Century

Text of an address presented by  
**David N. Griffiths**

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Imagine that scientists from a distant star system have been conducting a galaxy-wide survey on the evolution of intelligent life. Each time they discover a species showing potential for evolving intelligence they begin visiting that planet every ten-thousandth orbit around its sun. Imagine that they have just completed their eleventh visit to a small planet designated S42-P3 and recorded these observations about the dominant species.

- Uncontrolled population growth.
- Destroying the planet's life support system.
- Remaining structured socially around primitive tribal concepts.
- Engaging in, and even encouraging, inter-tribe hostility, despite having developed weapons capable of destroying all but the most primitive life on the planet.
- Obsessed with cancerous ideologies of continuous economic growth.
- Fixated on illogical strategic thinking.

In short, our visiting scientists have concluded that, although this species is indeed clever, it remains to be seen whether it will survive long enough to achieve genuine intelligence.

S42-P3 is, of course, our own planet, and the species is us. And if you think our visitors are judging us harshly, let's look at the evidence. Consider a graph of population growth over the past 100,000 years (Figure 1).

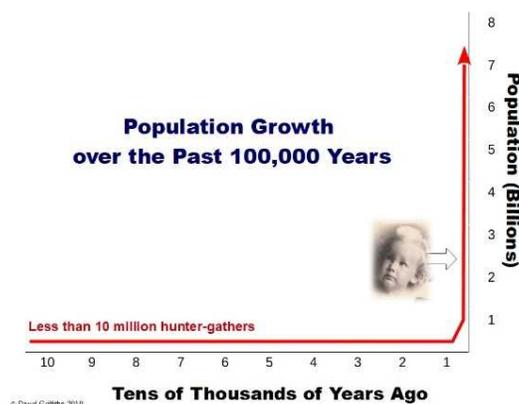
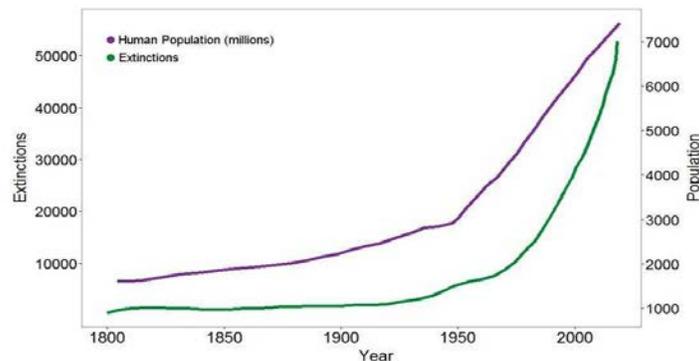


Figure 1. Human Population Growth

Over the past ten visits spanning 90,000 years, our scientific friends would have observed a stable population of about ten million hunter-gatherers scattered over the entire planet – that’s only about three-quarters of today’s population of Karachi. And then, suddenly, on this most recent visit, they have found it has burgeoned to seven and a half *billion*, with more than half clustered in cities and the majority close to the ocean. Consider the picture of a baby on the right of the graph where the population was still only two and a half billion. That beautiful little baby is me – in one lifetime the population of our planet has almost tripled and is still growing exponentially.

## Security in the Anthropocene

There is growing consensus in the scientific community that we have made such permanent changes to the Earth’s surface, oceans and biosphere that our influence will be forever imprinted on the geological record. We have entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Sixty-six million years ago, for the fifth time, our planet experienced a mass extinction when an asteroid strike eliminated three quarters of all species, including dinosaurs. Today we are witnessing a sixth extinction, but this time the cause is not natural – it’s us. Figure 2 shows the growth of human population since 1800 in the purple line above, and extinction of species during the same time in green below. Note the correlation. It’s not just that we are hunting them to extinction for food or for pleasure. We are destroying the atmosphere they breathe and the planetary ecosystem on which they – and we – depend.



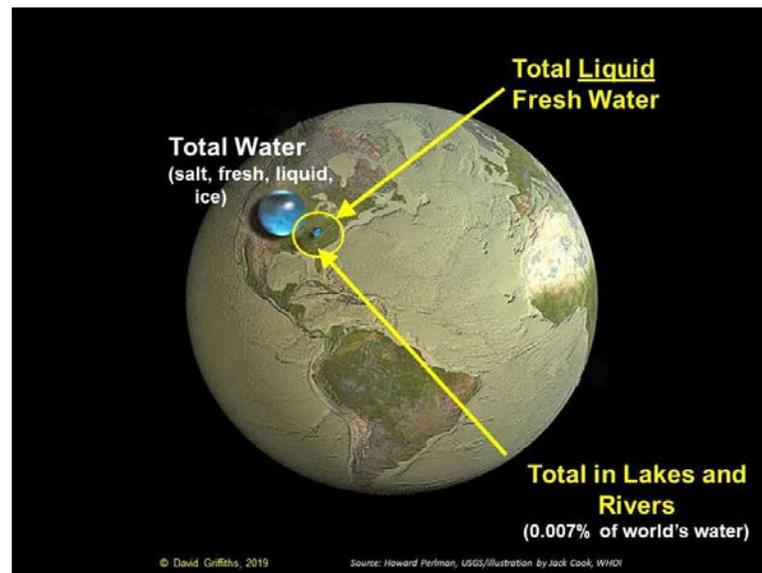
Data source: Scott, J.M. 2008. *Threats to Biological Diversity: Global, Continental, Local*. U.S. Geological Survey, Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife, Research Unit, University Of Idaho.

Figure 2: Population Growth and Extinction of Species

## Evidence of Intelligence (or not)

Those of us who speak about maritime issues like to remind audiences that over 70% of the surface of our planet is covered by water. We often forget that 96.5% of that is salty – we can't drink it and we can't use it to irrigate the crops upon which we depend. The remaining 3.5% is fresh water, but more than two-thirds of that is locked in icecaps and glaciers, although that precious resource is melting into the salty ocean and being wasted because of what we are doing to the atmosphere. As for ground water, we are pumping that faster than it can be replenished. Which leaves lakes and rivers – a mere 0.007% of the water on this planet – which we are also polluting and wasting through mismanagement.

To put this into perspective, imagine that we were to gather together all the water on the planet, salt and fresh. It would look like the largest blue bubble in Figure 3. If we were to illustrate only the total *liquid* fresh water, it would be represented by the smaller bubble beside it. All the water in lakes and rivers would fit in the barely visible third bubble at the bottom of the yellow circle. <sup>(1)</sup>



Logical visitors would naturally expect an intelligent species facing such an existential challenge to be cooperating to resolve the problem, but what are humans actually doing? We are predicting “water wars” and even planning seriously for fighting over it. How intelligent is that?

If our scientific friends could understand our media they would see decision makers, scholars and business leaders emphasizing the importance of economic growth for prosperity. Surely an intelligent species would recognize the obvious, that no growth can continue indefinitely. After all, “growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell”.<sup>(2)</sup> It might be worth reflecting on an observation attributed (incorrectly) to Einstein; that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Perhaps we should take a critical look at what we are doing and question whether if it is, in fact, sane. And to put our importance in perspective, we might also want to reflect on an observation by Canadian scientist David Suzuki. We may step on a tiny, insignificant ant without even noticing it, but if ants were to disappear today the ecosystem would start collapsing. On the other hand, if we humans disappeared today, the ecosystem could begin to recover.

## Security Myths and Paradigm Traps

As every military planner knows, an assumption is treated as a fact until it proves to be invalid, then it must be discarded and the entire plan revised. Sometimes invalid assumptions result from being trapped in paradigms that are inappropriate or obsolete for explaining the world. So let us consider just four that are relevant to this discussion:

1. tribalism;
2. the nature of security;
3. blindness to change; and
4. the illusion of control.

## ***Tribalism***

The tendency to divide people into “us” versus “them” is a very human way of looking at the world, and it’s natural. When we were very few social individuals scattered over the planet, groups of us competed for precious resources or for dominance. Nonetheless, we had had to cooperate within our own small groups in order to survive. That competitive model may have worked well for hunter gatherers on scarcely populated continents, but not now. Unfortunately, our instincts have not had time enough to evolve and adapt to the novel, crowded and primarily urban conditions of today. How, then, can we interpret “us” versus “them” in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

I would suggest a new paradigm: no longer a stark, binary model of “us” versus “them” but rather as a series of expanding circles of “us”. First there is family – as the old saying goes, it’s me against my brother, my brother and me against my cousin, and so forth. Beyond family are our communities, and then the wider circles of province or district, and beyond that our country with all the nationalism that goes with it. I would suggest that to achieve sustainable security today, an intelligent species would add one more level – global – and nurture a sense of global citizenship. That doesn’t mean we are always going to agree with each other. It doesn’t mean we need to like each other – after all, there can be quarrels within even the closest of families. Nonetheless, if we are going to survive as a species we must cultivate the understanding that at some level, we are all “us”.

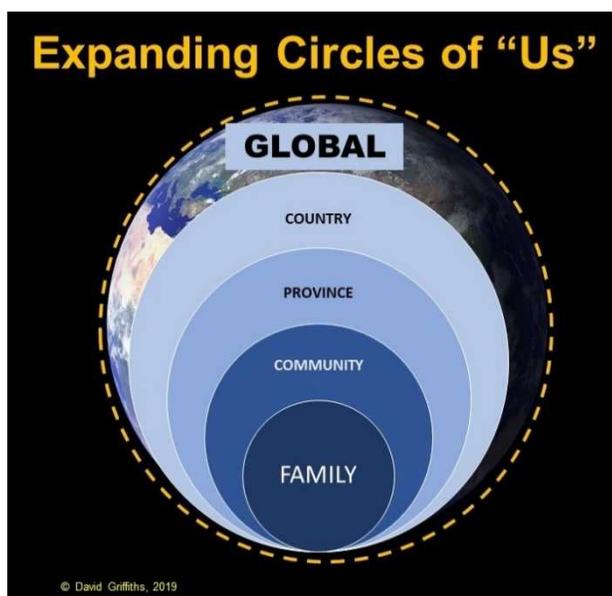


Figure 4: Circles of “Us”

## ***The Nature of Security***

One would think that if your country had spent 36% of the entire world’s military budget, in the previous year you would be fairly safe from guided missile attacks on your national capital, your national defense headquarters and the economic center of your country. But of course, as we learned on 11th September 2001, you would be wrong.

Who were the enemy forces that all this spending failed to defend against? Nineteen young men, fourteen of whom were citizens of one of the closest Middle Eastern allies of the United States. And what was the devastating “weapon system” they used? While most people might reply “commercial airplanes” I would suggest it was even simpler – cheap plastic box-cutter knives that could be bought in any hardware or grocery shop for about a dollar, wielded by ideologically driven murderers to cut the throats of crew and hijack the aircraft.

I am certainly not arguing that we don't need to spend money on military defence. Of course we do. But we need to be realistic about the threats and the limits of expensive high technology. In 2001, cheap dollar knives killed over 3,000 people. In 1994, the “weapons of mass destruction” slaughtering some 800,000 Rwandans had been cheap agricultural machetes. To put that in perspective, that's ten times the number killed by the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. And as appalling as it should be to all civilized people, even children are being used as weapons systems. Why? Because they are cheap, they are expendable, and they do what they are told. So when we direct our limited funds toward increasingly expensive and complex technology it's worth thinking critically about our risk assessments and reminding ourselves that “nations don't distrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they distrust each other.”<sup>(3)</sup> Military planners take great pains to identify strategic “centres of gravity”. Trust and distrust should be among them, studied in the context of dispassionate threat analysis.

In thinking about the nature of security it is instructive to reflect on what happened in Sarajevo, Bosnia in 1914. A 19 year old anarchist assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, which promptly triggered a world war; the bloodiest, costliest conflict in history up to that time. Before 1914 there hadn't been a “glorious” battle in Europe since the defeat of Napoleon more than a 100 years earlier, and at first it was assumed that this would be a traditional conflict. Young men flocked to recruiting offices because they wanted to be part of great battles like Waterloo or Trafalgar. Soldiers marched enthusiastically off to war, only to find that the machine gun made infantry or cavalry advances over open ground impossible; that war had become a matter of attrition in muddy, bloody trenches, poison gas adding to the horror. At sea there was no great, decisive fleet action like Trafalgar, only the inconclusive Battle of Jutland. Why? Because in the second month of the war, a single German submarine sank three British battleships, making all others obsolete in a single stroke. By 1917 Britain was dangerously close to starvation as submarines were cutting off the sea lines of communication. In the air, airplanes over the battlefield were changing the face of warfare forever. While political and military leaders struggled to deal with unprecedented and bewildering change, some 20 million people were dying.

By 1918, entire nations were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, hoping that this disaster would become the “war to end all wars”. In 1928, at least some agreed on a “General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy” (the Paris Peace Pact) making war illegal.<sup>(4)</sup> But by the 1930s, armies were marching again, fleets rebuilding and air forces developing, leading to another world war, dawn of the atomic age at Hiroshima, and so-called Cold War strategies based on mutually assured destruction (with its appropriate acronym – MAD). All that left another perhaps 80 million dead, not counting the millions who died from disastrous social policies in the Soviet Union and China.

Author Ronald Wright has observed that “the first lesson of 1914 is the risk of overreacting to terrorism” so let's think about that a bit.<sup>(5)</sup> I had been in the Pakistan not long before the “9/11” attacks of September 2001 and soon thereafter began receiving emails from students in Islamabad asking my opinion. My reaction then, as I remain convinced now, was that the United States and the rest of the world should not declare this as an act of “war”, which would only confer a perverse form of prestige on perpetrators steeped in a culture that craves “honour”. On the contrary, it should have been treated as a criminal act by a misguided gang of non-state actors, hijacking the name of Islam to perpetrate pre-Islamic ideology. But “War Against Terrorism” it became. And how well is that working out, eighteen years later, still engaged in the fight and still no end in sight?

Terrorism is not warfare and violates every norm of international law. Terrorism is a law-enforcement issue; admittedly sometimes on a scale at which armies, navies, and air forces have significant roles to play. In fact, I would suggest that it might equally well be approached as

a public health issue. After all, “terrorism is not an activity that attracts the well-adjusted.”<sup>(6)</sup> Terrorism, like disease, can be contagious like a virus and metastasize like cancer: it cannot be managed by focusing on symptoms while ignoring causes. As the preamble to the UNESCO Constitution says: “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” (although in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we might want to update that to include women). Human minds are yet another strategic centre of gravity.

### ***Blindness to Change***

The world that marched to war in 1914 was a world of Great Powers, spheres of influence and colonialism. War was a legitimate tool of statecraft, and an accepted and honourable means of dispute resolution. But in the wake of the resulting disaster, the Paris Peace Pact aimed for consensus in outlawing war. After World War Two we finally seemed to have come to our senses with creation of the United Nations; aspiring to be a civilized community of nations sharing the same planet, governed by the rule of law and respecting basic human rights. We agreed that use of force is only legitimate and lawful in the limited case of self-defence against armed attack. We agreed that disputes should be resolved peacefully.

Sadly, we now appear to be marching backward into those 19<sup>th</sup> Century paradigms. Personally, I get angry when I hear someone in power advocating war who has never heard a shot fired in anger; experienced the feel and smells of battle or its aftermath; whose own sons and daughters are not likely to be serving on the front line. It is vital for all of us to recognize that there is nothing glorious about modern warfare. It is vital for policy makers to recognize that initiating a military “solution” is policy failure. Matters should never reach that point. If they do, leaders must understand that winning battles will never be sufficient in itself, and starting a conflict will almost inevitably lead to unintended consequences. The face of war is no longer colourful uniforms and scenes of glory. The face of war is the face of traumatized children, mangled bodies, wounded minds and social misery. Defence is a legitimate use of force. Starting a fight is not.

### ***The Illusion of Control***

At the height of the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962, the commanding officer of a Soviet submarine was unaware that the United States had issued a Notice to Mariners warning that explosive charges would be used to signal a detected submarine to surface and identify itself. With batteries and oxygen almost depleted and heat becoming intolerable in a submarine designed for northern operations, he assessed that he was under threat of attack and within his rules of engagement to launch a nuclear-tipped torpedo at the American warships above. Fortunately, the embarked flotilla commander disagreed with Captain and political officer and refused to insert his third firing key. Many years later, some who had been around decision making tables in Moscow and Washington agreed that if he had acted differently, a general nuclear exchange would have followed.<sup>(7)</sup>

Let us think about this carefully for a moment. On the brink of potentially disastrous crisis, powerful political and military leaders were sitting in their national capitals believing that they were managing events. But if one relatively junior officer, a naval Commander, had acted differently, we would all likely be living on a post-nuclear planet today, if we were here at all. It would have been an outcome that no rational, responsible authority would have intended or wanted. But we came within a few heartbeats of it happening.

The US Secretary of Defense at the time was Robert McNamara. Writing about discussing this with Soviet and Cuban counterparts in an academic setting many years later he wrote: “None of the three nations intended to create such risks” and “the decisions of all three nations .... had

been distorted by misinformation, misjudgement and miscalculation”.<sup>(8)</sup> Misinformation, misjudgement and miscalculation. Those, I would suggest, are among our most dangerous enemies today.

## Alternate Paradigms

If some of our long-held security assumptions are no longer valid, what might work better for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Let me suggest two possible alternatives.

### ***Spaceship Earth.***

I keep a small blue marble to remind myself how small, beautiful and fragile our planet is. Standing in Karachi and imagining that it represents Earth, then the Sun would be an exercise ball, one metre in diameter, located about the length of a frigate away. The next nearest star would be a big ball somewhere off the coast of Lebanon or Thailand. The centre of our Milky Way galaxy would be two-and-a-half times as far away as the real Sun, and the next nearest galaxy beyond the real orbit of Pluto. Yet there are more galaxies than there are grains of sand on Earth. Surely that should deflate our human arrogance and remind us that we are infinitesimal custodians of a microscopic, fragile little spaceship voyaging through an unimaginably vast universe. Marshall McLuhan once said, “there are no passengers on Spaceship Earth. We are all crew.” If there were a submarine in which different departments or cliques of the crew were squabbling and systematically weakening the hull and vital systems, and even worse, irreversibly damaging life support systems, we would be court-martialing everyone for incompetence or sabotage or, perhaps more appropriately, institutionalizing them for insanity. Surely it’s time for the crew of Spaceship Earth to get its act together and begin behaving like an intelligent species.

### ***The DNA of Security***

In the early 1950s researchers proved that deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) which carries the genetic instructions for our functioning and reproduction is a double helix, rather like a ladder with two spiralling uprights of molecules joined by rungs of chemical base pairs. That’s not a bad way to imagine contemporary security. On one side is sustainable development, maintaining the life support system upon which we all depend, whether we like or agree with each other or not. On the other is pragmatic engagement, working together whether we like or agree with each other or not. Binding this double helix of security together are the links of common humanity; a far more appropriate paradigm for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than the simplistic hunter-gatherer “us” versus “them” instincts from our recent, primitive past.

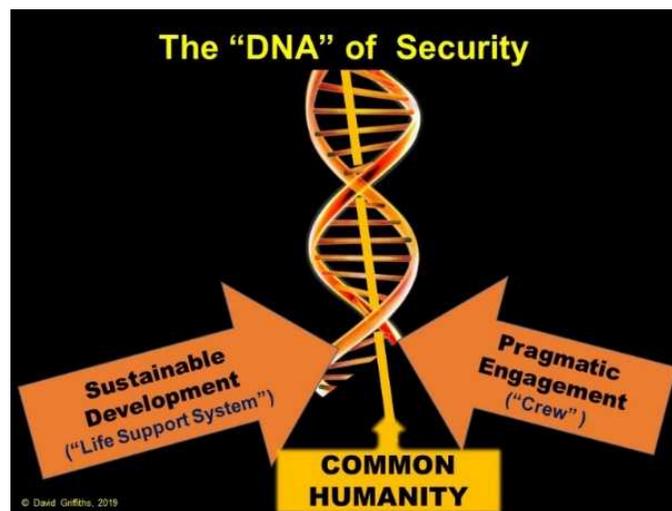


Fig. 5: The DNA of Security

## Implications for Maritime Security

Nicholas Monsarrat once said “Sailors, with their built in sense of order, service and discipline, should really be running the world.” While that is highly unlikely, sailors certainly have a contribution to make. We constitute an epistemic community, sharing a common professional culture that transcends national differences. Any naval officer knows to pay the courtesy of saluting when crossing the brow of a foreign warship, even that of a hostile nation. Naval sailors share a common code of honourable conduct, fighting platforms and not individuals. If we sink an adversary’s vessel we don’t shoot survivors – after all, they are just professionals doing their job like us and who, like us, know what it is to be seasick, endure weary middle watches and miss loved ones during long deployments. Finally, navies are well-practiced in rules-based norms of interaction. Armoured divisions do not cross paths routinely but warships do, all the time. Maritime customs of courtesy and behaviour date back centuries, and since the 19th century we have shared international Rules of the Road and Code of Signals. More recently we even have an internationally recognized “constitution for the ocean”, the UN Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) with which we all comply.

Navies have a rich heritage of common professional culture, codes of honourable conduct and rules-based interaction which, I suggest, can serve as examples for the wider world. Pakistan’s Exercise AMAN with which this conference is associated, and in which more than forty nations are participating, is itself a perfect example.

So what might intelligent security for the 21st century look like? At the risk of over-simplification I would suggest four principles that might make a good starting point.

1. Security is rooted in ideas, not hardware.
2. We are all members of the same species, with shared responsibilities as custodians of an endangered planet.
3. Global citizenship is a concept essential to survival, not just a nice idea.
4. Maritime professionals have a great deal of experience to share and offer as examples.

As I enjoy reminding my army and air force friends, futuristic visions always refer to space *ships* and star *fleets*, not to space planes or tanks! Sailors may not end up running the world, but they certainly have a great deal to contribute in crafting intelligent strategies for sustainable prosperity and security for us and our descendants.

## Notes

1. *Where is Earth’s Water*, US Geological Survey, [https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/where-earths-water?qt-science\\_center\\_objects=0#qt-science\\_center\\_objects](https://www.usgs.gov/special-topic/water-science-school/science/where-earths-water?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects). Figure 3 is from Howard Perlman, US Geological Survey, with globe illustration by Jack Cook, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, <https://water.usgs.gov/edu/gallery/global-water-volume.html>
2. Edward Abbey, “The Second Rape of the West” in *Journey Home*. Harmondsworth: Plume, 1977. p. 183
3. Salvador de Madariaga in *Morning Without Noon*, Saxon House, 1974, pp. 48-49.
4. For an excellent recent analysis of long-term impact of the Paris Peace Pact see Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.
5. Ronald Wright, *What is America? A Short History of the New World Order*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, p.180

6. B.M. Jenkins, quoted in D. Saunders, "When Troubled Young Men Turn to Terror, Is It Ideology or Pathology?," *The Globe and Mail*, 24 October 2014.
7. For more detail and further references see David Griffiths, "Oceans of Opportunity: Maritime Dimensions of Security in the Arab World". In *Order from Ashes: New Foundations for Security in the Middle East*, edited by Michael Wahid Hanna and Thanassis Cambanis, 233-259 (especially end-notes 11 to 15), New York: The Century Foundation, 2018. Available online at <https://tcf.org/content/report/oceans-of-opportunity/?agreed=1>
8. The quote is from Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, pp.338-339. For detail of the meetings 25 years later see James Blight & Janet M. Lang, *The Armageddon Letters: Kennedy / Khrushchev / Castro in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Lanham, MD: Bowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012.