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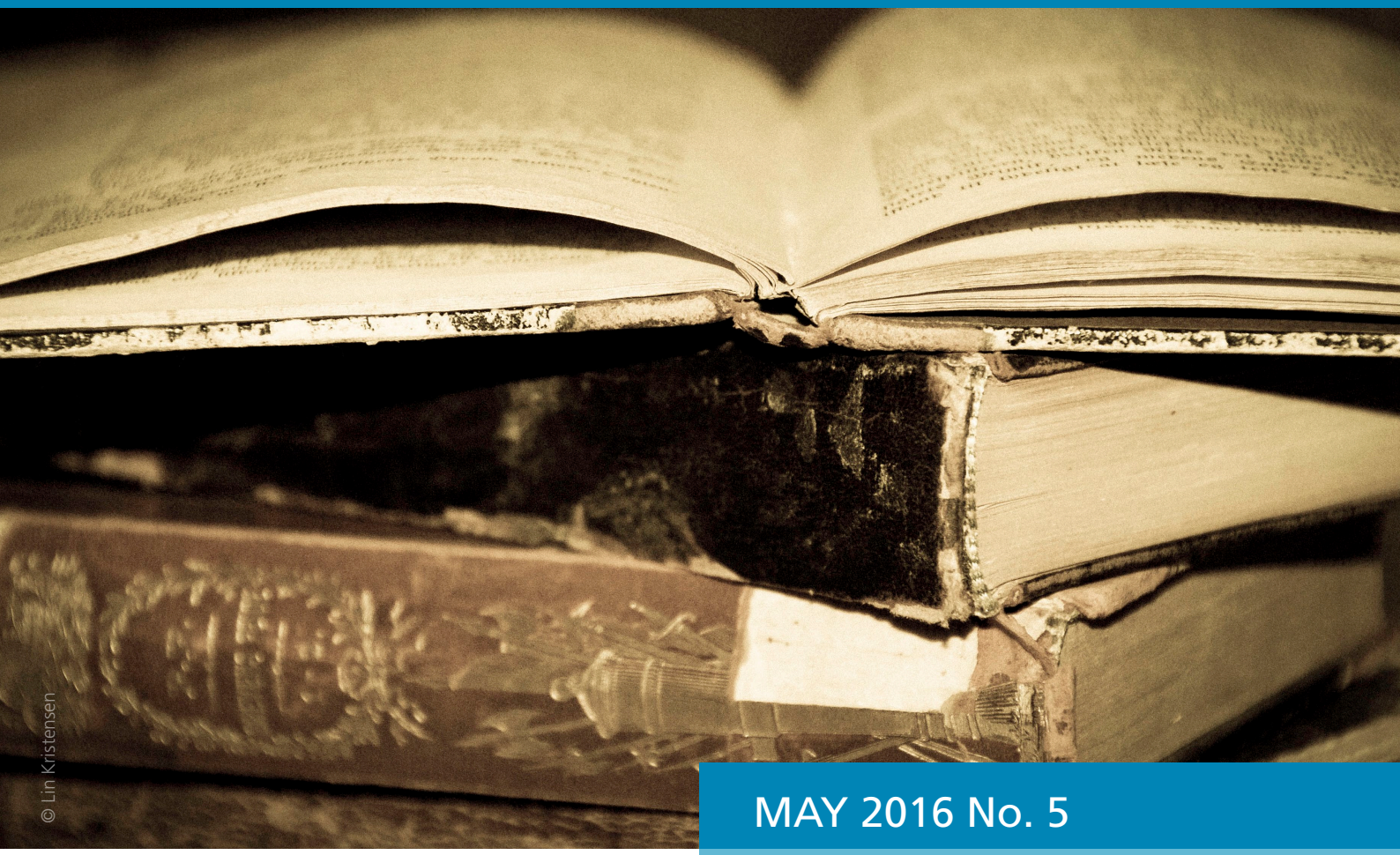

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STRATEGIC SECURITY ANALYSIS

When History Meets Policy: Understanding the Past to Shape the Future

by Dr Petri Hakkarainen

When History Meets Policy

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"The policymaker undertakes multiple tasks, many of them shaped by his society's history and culture. He must first of all make an analysis of where his society finds itself. This is inherently where the past meets the future; therefore such a judgment cannot be made without an instinct for both of these elements", wrote Henry Kissinger in his latest book, *World Order.*[1]

The former US secretary of state is a controversial character. Yet regardless of how one rates his actions in office or the kind of *realpolitik* he has practiced and preached more generally, his merits as a strategic thinker are hard to dispute. Kissinger concludes his new work with a stern warning about the quality of contemporary decision-making. In the midst of an ever-increasing overflow of information, he argues, the higher levels of understanding required of great leaders – knowledge and wisdom – are in dangerously short supply.

Instead of dismissing Kissinger's view as a Luddite admonition by a nonagenarian ill at ease in the digital age, we should take heed. In shaping the future, leaders of the present could indeed profit greatly from a more profound understanding of the past. This is also the credo of the Geneva-based History and Policy-Making Initiative (HPMI), launched jointly by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and the Graduate Institute in 2015.[2] If harnessed cleverly, historical awareness can provide policymakers with invaluable perspectives, patterns and wisdom, thus helping them make more informed decisions.

Unfortunately this resource is so far to a large extent untapped and neglected. Although the omnipresence of history around us may appear obvious to a keen observer, we seem to be living in increasingly ahistorical times, dominated by myopic presentism. The tendency to see arising policy challenges as one-off events, detached from the past, not only misleads us in the present but also blurs our vision ahead. Focusing excessively on the immediate, without fully acknowledging its historical roots, simultaneously undermines the foundations of fruitful foresight.

KEY POINTS

- The demand for historical perspectives in policymaking is becoming increasingly profound due to the rapidly expanding range of new challenges, the deepening interconnectedness of issues and geographical locations, and the ever-accelerating rapidity itself.
- A fruitful use of history requires both realism and humility: understanding the abuses and distortions of the past by others is as important as acknowledging own biases and the limitations of history's potential.
- A more systematic interaction between historians and policymakers improves the understanding of complexity in the present and enables better foresight to map the uncertainties of the future.

1 H. A. Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, London, Allen Lane, 2014, pp. 348-349.

2 www.gcsp.ch/Topics-Initiatives/History-and-Policy-Making and http://graduateinstitute.ch/home/study/academicdepartments/international-history/history-and-politics.html.

The aim of the HPMI with all its activities is to contribute to remedying this state of affairs. If bridging the gap between history and policymaking succeeds, it will improve the ability of decision-makers to set the present in its temporal context. Linking the past, the present and the future more seamlessly together in a long-term continuum is a goal which Jo Guldi and David Armitage have formulated elegantly in their *History Manifesto*: "Renewing the connection between past and future, and using the past to think critically about what is to come, are the tools that we need now."[3]

This paper concentrates on three basic questions: (i) Why do we need more historical awareness in policymaking just now? (ii) What are the pitfalls we should be aware of when using history? (iii) How should we concretely proceed in improving the history-policymaking nexus?

1 Thinking in Time in the 21st Century

On the face of it, the important added value that historical perspectives can give to policymakers seems self-evident. It is difficult to find anyone opposing the proposition in principle. Yet the track record of that relationship has never been very convincing. Although policymakers are constantly influenced by beliefs about history, they tend to use history badly, the Harvard historian Ernest May observed already in the early 1970s. As a response in the mid-1980s, May and his colleague Richard Neustadt went on to publish *Thinking in Time*, the influential book that has ever since been a standard work for anyone interested in the uses of history for decision-making in the present.[4]

The Neustadt-May volume, fully deserving its status as the classic on the topic, has aged well, providing also contemporary policymakers with plenty of valid guidance for a more nuanced approach to history. The importance of positioning events in time-streams and the need to explicitly distinguish between known, unclear and presumed qualities of the issues at hand still hold true today, as does the call for a critical treatment of own presumptions as well as instinctive historical analogies.

It is precisely in their observations on the use of analogies that the authors of *Thinking in Time* were particularly perceptive. Rather than allowing easy historical analogies to take charge of their thinking, policymakers should use analogies more consciously and more systematically. Comparing several historical cases in parallel is more likely to produce creative solutions than a search for direct "lessons" from an individual analogy. Moreover, more important than any analogy can ever be, is a thorough understanding of what Neustadt and May call "issue history" – the story and timeline behind the very target of decision-making.

While all of this continues to be valuable, there are several reasons for the growing need to build further 21st-century layers on the solid foundation Neustadt and May laid three decades ago. Many of the challenges policymakers face today have brought in characteristics unimaginable in the final years of the Cold War.

First, in terms of the subject matter, decision-makers now need to deal with a plethora of fully new issues that have arisen since – climate change, cybersecurity, contested visions of the global order, and the empowerment of non-state actors with evil intentions as well as more benevolent ones, to name just a few examples. Such an influx of completely new topics, in conjunction with all the pre-existing challenges, understandably creates a degree of anxiety for policymakers suddenly having to tackle them simultaneously. Here a broader perspective can be useful. Opening vistas at the 'history of the present' and tracking the roots of the new phenomena can help deconstruct at least some of the novelty and unfamiliarity in them, making it more visible that none of these issues has emerged from a vacuum.[5]

A second new characteristic of the present is the level of global interconnectedness. There have of course been previous waves of globalisation, but what sets the contemporary situation apart from the past is the considerably thicker and more complex web linking together not only geographical locations but also different issues.

3 J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 13, http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org/files/9814/2788/1923/historymanifesto_5Feb2015.pdf.

4 R.E. Neustadt and E.R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, New York, The Free Press, 1986. See also E.R. May, *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy,* New York, Oxford University Press, 1973.

5 For a particularly valuable example of this approach, see A. Rödder, 21.0: *Eine kurze Geschichte der Gegenwart*, München, C.H. Beck, 2015.

The ways in which pulling a particular lever in one particular capital can result in dramatic repercussions in a variety of ostensibly unrelated areas across the world are unprecedented. This, if anything, calls for a more holistic approach to policymaking. Once more, a wider historical awareness can for its part help untangle these myriad connections and shed light into the apparent unpredictability.

A third and perhaps most obvious novel feature of the policymaking environment today is the breath-taking acceleration of pace, largely induced by technological development. In a world dominated by perpetual social media feeds and hastened news cycles, also the political attention span is driven towards hours, minutes and seconds. Sometimes rapidity is indispensable, but on the whole the level of policymaking would often benefit from operating in larger time units. As the world seems to be running on overdrive, setting events in their larger context and seeing the forest for the trees is perhaps more important than ever. The ability to rise above the daily noise, to create order from chaos and to make prudent decisions at the correct time is a goal that "historical sensibility", a key concept in a recent volume edited by Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, can help achieve.[6] Deceleration in the midst of a hectic situation may seem like a high price to pay, but the return on that investment will usually be very rewarding.

All of these new elements already familiar to contemporary decision-makers – the range of emerging challenges, the unprecedented interconnectedness between issues and geographic locations, and the increasing tempo of the operating environment – should speak for updating and strengthening the link between history and policymaking. The relationship needs to be built carefully and wisely, however, since there are also a number of limitations that have to be taken into account.

2 Handling History with Care

The transformative power of history has always tempted also those with more ill-willed intentions. The past is full of examples of deliberate abuses of history for nationalistic purposes. A list of motives for which intentional falsification of past events has been used would be endless – history can be exploited to help keep incumbent dictators in power, to fuel new conflicts as well as to escalate and prolong ongoing ones, and to incite oppression of minorities. And we are nowhere near to being immune against that disease in the present. Dictatorships have a particular tendency to instrumentalise history, but liberal democracies are not completely innocent of those practices either. National histories are a major component of national identities, and therefore never very far from national interests and their pursuit.

In addition to outright falsifications and abuses of history, there is an even larger pool of borderline cases where history is constantly used selectively, either deliberately or unintentionally. Centenaries and other anniversaries of important historical events can act as catalysts for a politicised use of history. Reverting to cherry-picking, seeking superficially suitable analogies from history to lend support to decisions already taken, is a temptation very few politicians can resist. And outgoing leaders thinking about their legacies may base their actions on projecting themselves in future history books – particularly when they do not intend to write them themselves as Winston Churchill famously did after the Second World War.

Whenever there is a conflict, hot or cold, sooner or later narratives of the past also play a role in it. Current examples of this can be found on all continents, stretching from the post-Cold War reinterpretations between Russia and the West brought to light in the context of the Ukraine conflict, through the decades and centuries involved in the Middle East imbroglio, all the way to the China-Japan-South Korea triangle marred by the shadows of the Second World War, and so on and so forth. Over time, whether they were originally developed in good faith or purely for propaganda purposes, narratives can perpetuate themselves and convert into something more permanent and real, in their turn prolonging the conflict.[7] Perceptions and misperceptions of each

6 See H. Brands and J. Suri, "Introduction: Thinking about History and Foreign Policy", in H. Brands and J. Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2016, pp. 1-24.

7 For a contemporary case in point in the Euro-

other's narratives can become a vicious cycle.

An acute awareness of all these negative applications and repercussions in the history-policy interface out there is a healthy basis for anyone interested in intensifying the dialogue between historians and policymakers. Even assuming nothing but good intentions on one's own behalf, an inoculation against a naive approach to history in the service of policymaking is to be recommended. This precaution helps also with another essential prerequisite of a genuine search for knowledge and wisdom from history: keeping an open mind.

As noted, a thorough understanding of the immediate "issue history" is one of the key contributions of history to policymakers. Yet this should not be allowed to prevent a broader perspective. Leaning towards temporal and geographical proximity is easy, but not always the most fruitful approach. Full disclosure: this paper is itself an illustrative example of this, strongly predisposed on Western views of the most recent past. Acknowledging biases is an important first step, actually getting rid of them is a far more difficult trick. Yet maintaining a sincerely global view and being able to draw policy-relevant approaches also from a more distant past might make the contribution of history to policymakers much richer. Real creativity can often be found when going beyond the obvious.

A further important starting point is a mixture of humility and realism. History is not a panacea to all policymaking challenges – this should be borne in mind by even the most enthusiastic proponents of historical awareness. The power of historical knowledge must not be exaggerated. The Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan has wisely noted that if history does nothing more than teach us humility, scepticism and awareness of ourselves, it has already done something useful.[8] Expectations of policymakers will also need to be managed. They should not be led to anticipate straight-forward answers to present problems from history. Instead, historical knowledge can be extremely helpful in posing the right questions. As MacMillan's Cambridge colleague Brendan Simms has put it: "We shall have to make our own story, using history not as a manual, but as a guide to how these questions were approached in the past."[9]

Humility is an extremely important lesson also in the long-term foresight into the future. Revisiting past assumptions of futures, rarely providing completely accurate predictions of what later unfolded, is often a sobering reminder of this. There is not a linear no-alternatives path of future development that could serve as a certain foundation for political choices. Dots need to be connected, but the lines between them are often not straight. Understanding the complex web of causalities and consequences of historical events helps to understand that the future is not predetermined, either. Being used to charting continuities and changes in the past tense certainly makes one more attentive to foresee them in the future tense as well.[10]

3 Unpacking Complexity Together

At the end of the day, the most important lesson from history for contemporary policy may well be the uncertainty of the future. Although there is a lot of historical wisdom in understanding unpredictability, acting as a messenger of uncertainty does not necessarily make the task of reaching out to the policymakers any easier. If the main perspective historians have to offer is unveiled to be a boundless uncertainty about what lies ahead, the response of practitioners may be frustrated and lukewarm at best.

It is completely natural for decision-makers to desire firm advice and unequivocal policy recommendations – uncertainty is unpleasant. It is, however, important to note that living in false certainty can be a lot more dangerous. Therefore professional historians and other history connoisseurs have a critical task in society: instead of allowing simple solutions providing apparent security to gain the upper hand, they need to keep on reminding policymakers of the inbuilt complexity and volatility of international relations.

If we want these messengers to succeed in their

Atlantic context, see *Back to Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project*, 2015 www.osce.org/networks/205846?download=true.

8 M. MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, London, Profile Books, 2009, p. 169.

9 B. Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy 1453 to the Present,* New York, Basic Books, 2013, p. xxviii.

10 See also P. Tetlock and D. Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, London, Random House, 2015.

important mission, the history-policy relationship cannot only be left on the theoretical level or relying on written pieces alone. Improving the history literacy of decision-makers and their entourages will not hurt, but even the wisest of thoughts put on paper will not help without an open, continuous and systematic dialogue between historians and policymakers. Building practices that ensure an enduring exchange between these constituencies would enable the use of historical sensibility and awareness when it is most urgently needed.

Building bridges in this way is not simple, of course.[11] In order to find a common language historians and policymakers need to meet each other halfway. As things are, the way in which politicians and officials use history seldom satisfies researchers. On the other hand, the way in which historians present their results is not always directly applicable for the politicians' needs. There is room for improvement on both sides. A regular exposure to historical thinking, moving back and forth between *longue durée* approaches and more contemporary history, would benefit even the less historically-minded decision-makers. It would probably be the best way to have them understand how historical knowledge in all its forms – be it as "lessons", analogies or narratives – is in any case constantly used in policymaking, deliberately or unintentionally, better or worse.

It might also be worth a thought to consider embedding historians a bit more permanently in strategic policy planning functions, having them act as internal dissidents and question conventional wisdoms with the help of their historical perspectives. In addition to probably improving the quality of decision-making, such an exchange would give historians much-needed opportunities to learn more about the realities framing it. For it is worth noting that some of those who are most inclined to blame policymakers for their lacking sense of history are often unaware of the almost inhuman circumstances dictating the realities of contemporary politics. The amount and variety of problems to be tackled simultaneously and the resulting time pressure are enormous. External factors can lead to situations requiring rapid decisions so suddenly that there simply is no time for historical reflection – not even when there would be a will.

Fortunately there are some encouraging attempts to facilitate the dialogue between historians and policymakers. In London and Cambridge, *History & Policy* has already for over a decade done valuable work in promoting better public policy through a greater understanding of history. More recently in Helsinki, the former foreign minister of Finland set up a network called *Historians without Borders*, with an emphasis on the use of historical knowledge in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.[12] We need much more of this, nationally and internationally. It is also important to push the relationship beyond one-way advisory approaches. Whether it is called interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, bringing experts from different backgrounds together can be messy at first. But nudging them to co-create new approaches to unpacking complexity with the help of history can lead to very productive cross-fertilization.

In fostering human interaction the use of modern technology should not be forgotten, either. Although technology is to a certain extent part of the problem in its impact on the acceleration of the policymaking environment, it can also be turned into a part of the solution. With all the data-mining tools available these days, there must be ways to employ them that are conducive to a more constructive history-policymaking relationship. If we only know which questions to ask, technology should be able to help us visualise long-term causalities, uncover otherwise hidden interlinkages and ultimately create more dynamic and policy-relevant narratives.

4 Conclusions

This paper has argued for the need to intensify the use of historical knowledge in policymaking. Looking at the contemporary factors increasing demand for such an interaction, the limitations to be considered in facilitating it, and some possible avenues for supplying it in the near future, the paper has sketched a framework in which the HPMI initiative seeks to operate.

First, on the demand side, the rapidly expanding range of new challenges, the deepening interconnectedness of issues and the ever-accelerating rapidity itself all underscore the need for more historical support for decision-makers. Second, in terms of limitations, even those users of history with the purest of intentions need to be aware of the abounding malign abuses

11 See F. J. Gavin and J. B. Steinberg, "Mind the Gap: Why Policymakers and Scholars Ignore Each Other, and What Should be Done about It", *Carnegie Reporter*, 6 4, 2012, pp. 10-17.

12 www.historyandpolicy.org; http://www.historianswithoutborders.fi/en/.

and inadvertent distortions of the past, as well as of other potential pitfalls standing in their way. Third, on the supply side, equipped with a realistic awareness of what is possible and what needs to be avoided, a proliferation and systematisation of the personal interaction between historians and policymakers deserves to be encouraged.

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About the author

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