

"Strategic surprise is to be expected". Telling words from Dr John Chipman launching the 2015 Strategic Survey in London, reports Nick Watts. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) produces the Survey annually. The main message at this year's launch is: "Strategic unease is the defining feature of the international security climate. The rules based order to which the west clings is increasingly being challenged. 'Rule breaking' is not being effectively deterred. Facts on the ground...are being created that confront, rather than reinforce, established norms."

It is a measure of the inter-connectedness of the modern world that the refugee crisis in Europe derives from a multiplicity of causes, in Africa and the Middle East. The response of the European institutions has been weak, because the institutions are weak. Loyalty in Europe, ultimately, resides with the Nation State, not 'the community'. A further challenge for Europe is how it responds to Russian action in Ukraine and Putin's opportunistic behaviour in the Baltic and the Balkans.

The big challenge for the West is how to deal with ISIS / ISIL – or Daesh - in Syria / Iraq. The Sunni fighters have exploited the security vacuum in Iraq and Syria, to the extent that the border created by the Sykes-Picot agreement and enforced by the Versailles Treaty no longer exists - something for British parliamentarians to consider when they come to vote on a possible bombing campaign in Syria in October. Both the political and military strategies seem to be failing to achieve any impact.

The apparent settlement of the long running dispute between Iran and the West over its nuclear programme, has triggered a renewal of the Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which further complicates efforts to bring stability to an already fragile Middle East.

China too seems to be flexing its muscles, with the recent victory day parade showing off ballistic missiles that are meant to deter US aircraft carriers from coming too close. If the political class in Europe are transfixed by the refugee crisis, the US political class seem similarly transfixed by the 2016 presidential elections. A strong and united voice from the West is lacking. In the words of Dr Chipman, this is "making the world safe for autocracy."

Neat and tidy solutions do not readily present themselves. The Minsk process which addresses the Ukraine situation reconvenes at the beginning of October. There is no movement in the labyrinthine discussions over how best to deal with Syria. Transnational terrorism and migration flows merge in the minds of the public and politicians to paint a picture of a world in flux. The people in Whitehall who are currently putting together Britain's National Security Strategy, which is supposed to feed into the forthcoming Strategic Defence and Security Review, would do well to study the Strategic Survey, and remember the quotation 'everything affects everything.'