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Article 1.

The Daily Beast

Don't Underestimate Israel's Capability to Strike Iran, Insiders Say

Dan Efron

February 25, 2012 -- Israeli officials are pushing back against what appears to be a growing perception among experts and analysts that its military lacks the capability to deal a significant blow to Iran's nuclear installations, warning skeptics not to underestimate the Jewish state.

The officials, including currently serving political figures and retired military officers, pointed out in interviews with The Daily Beast that Israel has a history of [surprising its enemies and surpassing expectations](#), from the lightning assault of the 1967 war to the daring rescue operation for hostages at Entebbe in 1976.

Their remarks seemed calculated to counter reports like [the one in The New York Times](#) last week that suggested Israeli planes would face huge challenges in reaching Iran and destroying its nuclear installations, which are buried deep in the ground and scattered throughout the country.

But even as the officials sought to cast doubt about the assessments, they were unlikely to dispel the suspicion that Israel might be deliberately overstating its capabilities in order to prod the United States and other powers to deepen economic sanctions against Iran and, if necessary, launch their own military action to stop Tehran's uranium enrichment.

"These reports don't tell the whole story," said one senior official who, like all the others, asked not be identified discussing Iran. "If we need to do it [attack Iran's nuclear facilities], believe me, there are enough ways."

Others echoed the remarks, including a retired senior officer who said:

"People take us seriously because we have a record in these things.

Nobody should doubt us."

Israel has been warning for years that Iran is developing nuclear weapons capability, a claim that was largely substantiated by an International Atomic Energy Agency report last November. Tension over the Iranian program has risen dramatically in recent months, with Israeli leaders [repeatedly vowing](#) to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold by [whatever means necessary](#).

The United States takes the threat seriously. Fearing an Israeli attack would set the Middle East ablaze and tilt the world economy back toward an economic recession, President Obama has dispatched to Jerusalem a series of high-ranking officials to pressure Israel to give the latest round of sanctions – including an oil embargo and measures against Iran's central bank—a chance to work.

Others said some skepticism—from analysts or even from government insiders—always preceded Israel’s major operations, including its 1981 attack on Iraq’s nuclear plant.

Obama is expected to press the point personally with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when the two men meet in Washington next month. But a growing number of analysts, including Israelis, are now saying openly that Israel’s warnings are at least partly a disinformation campaign. The skeptics include Martin van Creveld, Israel’s preeminent military historian and theorist, who said in an interview that Israel could do some damage to the Iranian program but [could not knock it out](#).

“I would not be surprised if there was a strong element of political theater” to the Israeli threats, he said.

Barry Rubin, an Israeli expert on terrorism and international affairs, described the notion that Israel would attack Iran as “an absurd idea” and concluded: “It isn’t going to happen.”

“So why are Israelis talking about a potential attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities? Because that’s a good way—indeed, the only way Israel has—to pressure Western countries to work harder on the issue, to increase sanctions and diplomatic efforts,” Rubin [wrote on Pajamas Media](#).

The officials who spoke to The Daily Beast said the doubters weren’t seeing the whole picture. One alluded to advanced technology that Israel possesses that could not be factored into the analysis of experts because it remains secret. Others said some skepticism—from analysts or even from government insiders—always preceded Israel’s major operations, including its 1981 attack on Iraq’s nuclear plant.

One former Israeli official, speaking to a group of journalists recently, also rejected the idea that Iran’s response to an Israeli attack would upend the region.

“My assessment is that Iran will react but it will be calculated and according to Iranian means. The Iranians cannot set the Middle East on fire,” the former official said. “It will not be the doomsday promises of Iran... They do not have the capability to do what they threaten to do.” Asked if Israel has the capability to deal a serious blow to Iran’s program, he said: “If not, why is everybody worried?”

A Radioactive Situation

[Eric S. Margolis](#)

February 24, 2012 -- Not so very long ago, open discussions of a possible Israeli or American attacks on Iran's nuclear military and civilian infrastructure would have seemed beyond the realm of reality. But in today's super-heated climate of hysteria and fearmongering over Iran's nuclear program, talk of launching a war that could engulf the region and create an ecological catastrophe is considered matter of fact.

There is still no hard proof that Iran's nuclear program is designed to produce nuclear arms. Tehran claims its program, the proudest emblem of national modernization, is entirely designed for energy generation as oil reserves are beginning to decline.

U.S. intelligence and UN inspectors report that Iran is not working on nuclear weapons. But given that its neighbors possess such weapons, why wouldn't it? Even Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak, wondered aloud why Iran would not seek such arms. The United States has recently aided India's nuclear-weapons program.

Israeli Capabilities and Targets

Israel, according to former president Jimmy Carter, has some three hundred nuclear devices in its arsenal, capable of being delivered by medium-ranged ballistic missiles, submarine-launched cruise missiles and aircraft with standoff missiles. Two of Israel's three German-supplied "Dolphin-class" submarines carrying nuclear-armed missiles are reportedly stationed off Iran's coast, providing an invulnerable second-strike capability for the Jewish state. Any Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would result in Iran being vaporized.

Still, Israel's right-wing Likud Party may actually intend to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, just as Israel attacked Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities to preserve its Mideast nuclear monopoly. Whipping up a crisis over Iran also serves to deflect attention from the unresolved question of Palestine and from Israel's growing social and economic problems.

Israel's potential target list in Iran is clear. At least twelve major nuclear or nuclear-related sites would have to be struck to seriously damage Iran's nuclear program, some of which is buried deep underground. Leading targets include the aboveground heavy-water/reactor facility at Arak; reactors at Bushehr (a civilian power reactor relying on Russian-supplied fuel), the new underground enrichment facility near Qum at Fordow, the ore conversion plants near Isfahan, and other facilities at Qazvin, Damghan, Tabriz, Lavizan, Chalus, Darkhovin and Parchin.

As threats of an Israeli attack have grown in recent years, Iran has dispersed, hardened and buried its newer nuclear facilities. The new plant at Fordow, for example, is believed to be buried 260 feet under granite. This may be too hard and too deep for even a brace of U.S. monster thirty-thousand-pound MOP bombs to penetrate or crush. Israel has no aircraft that can carry such a huge load, which was designed for the U.S. B-2 stealth bomber.

Curiously, as war fever grips the United States and Israel, few have raised the question of the enormous dangers involved in bombing Iran's nuclear facilities.

The Repercussions of an Attack

Destroying Iran's many reactors and processing facilities could release large amounts of radiation and create radioactive dust storms. Winds would carry this toxic miasma over Afghanistan and its large U.S. military garrison. Dangerous radiation would also extend to Pakistan, western India, Iraq, Kuwait and to the Gulf, where large numbers of U.S. military personnel are based. Equally ominous, radioactive dust could blanket oil fields in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. High-altitude winds would spread radioactivity around the globe, as occurred at Chernobyl in the Ukraine, but at a factor of twenty times or more.

Israeli attacks by air and commando units could damage or delay development of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, but the Jewish state lacks the power to permanently destroy it. Israel also fears some of its pilots will be captured and put on show trial. So Israel is straining every sinew to get Washington to do the job. The Pentagon has estimated it will need to strike at least 3,200 targets in Iran, including nuclear facilities, air and naval bases, military production plants, headquarters, communications hubs,

missile bases, Gulf ports, and that reliable catchall, “command-and-control facilities.” And this is just in the first wave of strikes.

Air and missile strikes as well as special forces raids would have to continue for weeks, perhaps months. Air wars generate their own “mission creep” as new targets are discovered or old ones moved around. Power stations and high voltage lines, civilian airports, truck plants, radio and TV stations, intelligence headquarters—all will be added to the hit list.

During the first Iraq war, U.S. forces even destroyed many of Iraq’s sewage-treatment and water-purification plants, leading to epidemics of water-borne diseases. Iran could expect the same punitive treatment. Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was a war hero and highly decorated officer of Iran’s special forces during the Iran-Iraq War. He was credited with many successful missions deep behind Iraqi lines. Iran’s tough special forces will launch ground attacks on U.S. units and bases in Afghanistan, Central Asia, Kuwait and down the Gulf to Oman. Such raids may force the United States to send Marines, then regular ground troops into Iran to forestall attacks.

All wars are unpredictable; a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran would be particularly so. Iran is a large nation that can take a great deal of punishment: it sustained five hundred thousand dead and wounded in the 1980s invasion by Iraq, which was engineered by the United States and its Arab oil allies. In fact, some Iranian hard-liners have told me they will welcome U.S. ground attacks on their nation.

“America will break its teeth on Iran,” one told me. I heard the same gasconading from Iraqis before the 2003 invasion. But while Iran’s air and naval forces are hopelessly obsolete and would be quickly eliminated, its regular forces, basiji militia and elite units have reasonable power while fighting on the defensive.

Israel, for its part, has been issuing incessant alarms over the existential dangers it faces from Iran, even going so far as to invoke the specter of another Holocaust. Such wildly inflated claims have panicked the world Jewish community and led to war hysteria in North America.

In reality, without nuclear weapons, which it is not believed to possess, Iran has little ability to seriously injure Israel in a war. Iran’s medium-ranged Shahab-3 missiles are inaccurate and carry small warheads. They would likely not be much more effective than Saddam Hussein’s Scuds that

were fired at Israel, producing only one fatality—from a heart attack. Israel also has a very effective, multilayered antimissile system built with U.S. aid and linked to U.S. early warning satellites watching Iran. Iran has no air force worth speaking of. The biggest risk Israel faces is an extremely lucky hit by a Shahab missile on its Dimona reactor in the Negev that could release radiation over populated areas.

Iran's ally in Lebanon, the Hezbollah movement, could shower northern Israel with thousands of unguided artillery rockets. But the last time this happened, during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006, Hezbollah fired four thousand rockets at Israel, killing 160 Israelis. Israeli air attacks killed 1,200 Lebanese and Palestinians.

Hezbollah now says that an Israeli attack on Iran will not automatically cause it to launch new waves of short-ranged missiles at Israel. Thanks to generous U.S. help, Israel has also erected an antimissile defense system along its northern border with Lebanon.

So even if Hezbollah joined an Iranian counterattack, Israel's losses would be tolerable. Attacks on Israeli targets around the world, and perhaps U.S. ones, would be minimal. The alleged Iranian revenge attacks for the murder of Iranian scientists delivered against Israeli diplomats in India, Thailand and Georgia were remarkable for their ineptitude and amateurishness.

Entangling Alliances

The most important result of an Israeli air campaign against Iran would be to draw the United States into a long-running conflict with the Islamic Republic that it neither wants nor can afford. U.S. troops in Afghanistan could even risk being cut off and forced to evacuate by air, leaving much of their matériel behind.

It seems inconceivable that a great world power, the United States, could allow tiny Israel to drag it into a new war in the Muslim world. But this is just what is happening, reminding us of how in 1914 tiny Serbia provoked war between its patron, Russia, and its foe, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the best foreign-affairs mind in Washington, called for U.S. warplanes in Iraq to interdict any Israeli air assault across Jordan-Saudi Arabia-Iraq. U.S. aircraft are no longer based in Iraq, but they are close by in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and at sea in and around the Gulf. They need only target Israel refueling aircraft to block an air assault.

President Dwight Eisenhower would have threatened such a move without hesitation. But in an election year, the less-than-resolute Barack Obama would most likely shy away from such decisive action. Israel also has the ability to provoke a clash with Iran in the Gulf that could lead to a general war.

We should also recall that the main source of rivalry and tension between Israel and Iran is over creation of a Palestinian state. For America's interests, forceful diplomacy to resolve this obdurate problem and the possible creation of a nuclear-free zone in the Mideast are the logical answers. President Obama promised as much but lost his resolve in the face of the determined pro-Israel lobby.

The United States has lost its last two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is getting entangled in conflicts in East and West Africa and Yemen. All these wars have been paid for by piling-up debt. Starting war with Iran would be easy. But no one knows what Washington's war aims would be, how to define victory or how to end war with an enraged, vengeful Iran.

A third major conflict, this time with Iran, would further wreck America's finances and plunge the republic in an Orwellian state of permanent war. Eric S. Margolis is an internationally syndicated columnist. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, International Herald Tribune, Los Angeles Times and others. He is a regular columnist at Huffington Post, [REDACTED], The Gulf Times (Qatar), Khaleej Times (Dubai), Nation Pakistan, Sun Malaysia and a member of the Institute for Strategic Studies in London. His most recent book is American Raj: Liberation or Domination? (Key Porter Books, 2008).

Article 3.

The Daily Beast

The Iran-Washington Conspiracy?

Leslie H. Gelb

February 24, 2012 -- Tehran and Washington have discovered a surprising common bond: to pretend that they might be heading toward serious negotiations to curb [Iran's nuclear capacity](#). What's more, they are pretending for the same reason: to ward off [an Israeli attack on Iran](#).

Their moves are barely noticeable—vague diplomatic pronouncements, ops, lots of behind-the-scenes orchestration by Russia. They don't want much attention—just enough to persuade Israel to wait on military action, to buy time. The American line is that the economic sanctions are working and weakening Tehran's will. Iran's line is we're willing to compromise, but we're not going to be pushovers.

Of course, there is no actual collusion between Iran and the United States; they don't trust each other. But both have reached the conclusion that war is worse than continued uncertainty—at least for the time being, as far as the United States is concerned.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has been driving the process. Moscow is one of Tehran's last reliable friends, which makes Russia agreeable to Iran, but suspect in the West. Nonetheless, Lavrov has presented Iran with an unpublished, and perhaps vague, step-by-step proposal with reciprocity at each step. The idea is for both sides to move gradually toward Iran's limiting (not eliminating) its nuclear capacity, plus extensive inspections and the West's lifting economic sanctions against Iran plus giving security guarantees.

U.S. officials and other sources claim a breakthrough occurred in the Russian-Iranian talks last month. The big concessions, they said, were made by Tehran. Iran would hold its uranium enrichment to 5 percent, well below the threshold needed to make nuclear weapons, maintain only one uranium facility, and allow extensive inspections. These diplomatic mumblings were never spelled out in an official document. Instead, they were followed by a general and short letter sent from Saeed Jalili, head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. The addressee was EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, posting officer for the P-5+1 (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany).

Next comes a small, but consequential buy-in to this process by the United States. At a press conference last week with Ashton, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the letter "an important step." Ashton pronounced herself "cautious and optimistic." In diplomatic parlance, that's not chicken feed. And remember, they were making nice to a mere 200 word letter that said practically nothing, suggesting they were really giving a nod to something else going on.

A variety of diplomats said that the hidden information was spelled out in a recent op-ed by Hossein Mousavian, a key figure on Iranian nuclear matters. In it, he urged each side to meet the other's bottom line. The West would allow Iran to produce reliable civilian nuclear energy (in other words, continue uranium enrichment at low levels), and Iran would commit to intrusive inspections. Also, Iran would agree to provisions that would prevent its development of nuclear weapons or a short-notice breakout capability. In return, the West would remove sanctions, and normalize Iran's nuclear standing at the U.N. Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Mousavian added that he regarded the Lavrov plan as well as statements by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (proposing to limit uranium enrichment to 20% in return for the West supplying fuel rods for Iran's research reactor) to be "the most conducive path to reaching such a deal." This, again, was a nice little link to the authenticity of the Russian plan, but still nothing official.

The players in this game awaited another positive signal earlier this week, when international inspectors arrived back in Iran. But they were denied access to a key military facility and publicly announced their disappointment and departure Wednesday. Those who say the game goes on insist this is just a temporary setback, part of an Iranian strategy to look tough at home even as they maneuver abroad. The chest-thumping for home consumption was further punctuated this week by a senior Iranian general threatening a preemptive military strike against any "enemy" who threatened Iran.

To look on the bright side of things, all the tough moves and talk could be aimed at Iran's parliamentary elections set for next week. This will pit President Ahmadinejad's "moderate" governmental party against even more conservative groups. (The reformers just don't count this time.) It is said that Ahmadinejad doesn't want to be outflanked on the right by the conservatives; thus the tough talk. Afterwards, he would resume positive negotiating steps toward the West. Or maybe Iran is just a political mess with no one really in control.

So, to see what Iran might be up to, the West will have to wait until April, at the earliest. However, this could have a devastating effect on the Iranian-American maneuvers to hold off an Israeli attack. It's hard to convince Israel that the sanctions are working and that Iran is bending in the face of

Tehran's stone-walling the international inspectors and threatening preemptive assault. But that still appears to be the main play of the Obama administration. General Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told CNN on Sunday that an Israeli attack would be "premature" and "destabilizing." Those are fighting diplomatic words against fighting. But they come from America's top general, and they undoubtedly reinforce National Security Adviser Tom Donilon's private messages to Israeli leaders in Jerusalem last week.

Both sides have reached the conclusion that war is worse than continued uncertainty—at least for the time being, as far as the United States is concerned.

The mutual moves Tehran and Washington are making to convince Israel that serious negotiations are on the horizon are wearing thin. There isn't enough happening in the diplomatic back channels. Thus, two choices remain: Ahmadinejad has to defy the conservatives and be more forthcoming publicly. Not likely. Alternatively, President Obama will have to suck it up in an election year and offer a comprehensive proposal of its own. Also unlikely. At this point, then, Tehran's and Washington's subtle maneuvering to buy time is less a strategy than a prayer.

Article 4.

The Daily Beast

How Israel Could Remove Assad

Diplomatically and Bring Peace to Syria

[Bruce Riedel](#)

February 25, 2012 -- If Israel is willing to think outside the box, it can deal Bashar al-Assad, Iran, and Hizbullah a body blow without firing a shot. Defense Minister Ehud Barak simply needs to convince Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu to put back on the table the offer Barak made to Assad's father in 2000—return of the Golan Heights to [Syria](#) in return for peace with Israel.

Twelve years ago this spring, Barak, after months of hesitation, finally put down a concrete offer to [Hafez al-Assad](#). In Shepherdstown, W.Va., then Prime Minister Barak had rebuffed Syrian Foreign Minister Sharaa's repeated requests to state clearly what Syrian territory captured in 1967 Israel was prepared to give back to Syria on the Golan. Sharaa offered full peace with extensive security arrangements, including demilitarizing the Golan, limiting Syrian troop deployments near the Heights even in and around Damascus, and exchanging ambassadors in return for a full withdrawal to the ceasefire line that marked the border before the 1967 war. Finally, in Geneva in March 2000, Barak gave President Clinton authority to offer Assad all of the Golan except a thin strip 500 meters wide along the northeastern shore of Lake Tiberius. Syria would be compensated with territory elsewhere and thus get 100 percent of its lands back. Clinton promised billions in military aid to Israel to help sell the deal. But it was too late; Assad was on his deathbed, focused more on his son's succession, and said no. It was a tragic missed opportunity.

Barak's offer was very similar to one Bibi had made earlier in secret to Assad. It was a good deal in 2000, and it is a good deal today. If Israel puts the offer back on the table now, it should say clearly it is only open to a post-Assad government. The Assads lost their chance. Israel should make clear this is the basis for negotiations, not a take it or leave it proposition. And it should include one more issue. In return for full peace and full withdrawal, a post-Assad government would need to cease all military and intelligence cooperation with Iran and Hizbullah. Cooperation with parties still at war with Israel would be inconsistent with a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. Syria breaking with Iran and [Hizbullah](#) will break the supply line between Tehran and Beirut. Hizbullah leaders have always said this would be a disaster for them.

The Syrian opposition, of course, already hates the Shiite Iranian regime and its terrorist ally Hizbullah for backing the Assads for the past three decades. Since the start of the Syrian uprising a year ago, Iran and Hizbullah have done all they can to help Bashar, so this would not be a hard sell.

By putting its peace offer back on the table, Israel can play a constructive role in the Syrian crisis. It can say that not only can a post-Assad Syria move toward freedom after decades of dictatorship, it also can move

toward peace. Syria has been at war since 1947—it is the cold war with Israel that two Assad presidents have used to justify their brutal regimes. Of course, Bashar and his allies will denounce the Israeli move as evidence the opposition is really just a Zionist conspiracy. Many in the opposition or its extremist allies, like al Qaeda, will denounce it as well. But it will get support from those Syrians who want an end to decades of war and a restoration of their national sovereignty over the Golan. Syria can never restore its territorial integrity by war; only negotiations offer a chance to do that.

The entire international community will applaud Israel's initiative. The United States can help rally support behind it. Israel will be seen as a peacemaker and a friend of change.

Israel has nothing to lose. It has already made this offer before. If Assad survives, Israel keeps the Golan. If he is replaced by chaos, then there will be no negotiations and no peace. If a new Syrian government arises ready to make peace, then Israel has helped to isolate Hizbullah and broken the Syrian-Iranian axis.

Ephraim Halevy, the former head of Israel's secret intelligence service, Mossad, has rightly argued that toppling Assad and weakening Hizbullah is a far more important and strategic opportunity for Israel today than a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Hizbullah has 50,000 rockets aimed at Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem. Syria has hundreds of SCUD missiles tipped with chemical warheads that could end up in Hizbullah's hands.

The entire international community will applaud Israel's initiative. The United States can help rally support behind it. Israel will be seen as a peacemaker and a friend of change.

Hizbullah needs to be deconstructed if there is ever to be peace in the Middle East. A unique window may be opening up to isolate it in Lebanon and then exert regional pressure from a post-Assad Syria to break it apart. Israel can help start the process.

Since the start of the Arab Awakening a year ago, Israel has correctly adopted a low profile. It also has looked off-balance and seems to yearn for the era of the dictators that provided predictability. That era is gone forever. Now is the time for Israel to take some dramatic step to show it is ready for

a new Middle East. President Obama should explore all options with Bibi when they meet next month, not just military options but also peace plans.

Article 5.

Asia Times

A Chinese vision begins to emerge

Peter Lee

Feb 25, 2012 -- The dominant stereotype of Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East is "amoral oil grubbing mercantilists who never met a dictator they didn't like".

Perhaps.

But the job of an amoral, oil-grubbing mercantilist has been made much more complicated and challenging as tensions rise in the region and heightened demands are placed on the People's Republic of China (PRC). Saudi Arabia, China's largest oil supplier, expects China's support in its campaign against Iran.

Iran turns to China for help in breaking the sanctions blockade that threatens its oil exports, its access to the global financial system, and its domestic economy.

The United States, the European Union, Turkey, the Gulf States and a big chunk of the Arab League excoriate China for seconding Russia's veto of an anti-Bashar al-Assad resolution in the United Nations Security Council. However, contrary to its image as an opportunistic and reactive player in the Middle East, China has not only dug in its heels on Syria; it has stepped up with a diplomatic initiative of its own.

China also voted against the non-binding Syria resolution drafted for the UN General Assembly by Saudi Arabia, the oil baron that is generally regarded as calling the tune for China on Middle Eastern issues.

On February 23, China also announced it would not attend the "Friends of Syria" aka "Enemies of Assad" meeting in Tunisia this Friday designed to further delegitimize and isolate Assad to pave the way for his ouster, putting it at odds with the West, the Gulf nations, and much of the Arab

League.

China had already dispatched Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun to Syria and the Middle East to lobby for Russia's and China's (and Assad's) preferred solution to the crisis: channeling political and opposition activity into votes on a referendum on a new Syrian constitution on February 26, and parliamentary elections four months down the road.

Chinese diplomats have also reached out to the Arab League to argue that the PRC's stance is in line with the league's policy on Syria.

China took the extra step of decoupling its position from Russia's, presenting itself as an honest broker and not an Assad partisan, and reaching out further into the ranks of Syria's opposition to publicize its contacts with Haitham Manna of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change.

Chinese papers are full of articles asserting the "principled stand" and "responsibility" of China's Syria policy, one that will "withstand the test of history". [1]

The interesting question is why the PRC is getting out in front on this issue, instead of letting Russia, Syria's long-time ally and arms supplier, carry the ball.

Syria means virtually nothing to China in terms of oil or trade. Assad's fall would discommode China's friend and energy supplier Iran but would also please China's friend and energy partner Saudi Arabia.

So why not simply reprise China's acquiescence on Libya, stand aside, and deliver a final adieu to Assad as he and his regime vanish into the meat-grinder of domestic and sectarian anger, international sanctions, and Gulf-funded subversion and destabilization?

The back-of-the-envelope explanation is that Russia and China were burned by the Security Council's humanitarian resolution on Libya, which turned into a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led free for all against Muammar Gaddafi's forces.

However, an abstention on the Syrian resolution, whether or not Russia decided to veto, would have allowed China to have burnished its rather tarnished West-friendly humanitarian credentials while reasserting its abhorrence of foreign interference.

It appears that China has decided it is time to stake out its own position in

the Middle East as a great power with its own significant and legitimate interests in the region, instead of trying to shoehorn itself into whatever diplomatic coalition the United States or Russia invokes to deal with the latest crisis.

Yes, China as "responsible stakeholder" appears ready to take the Middle Eastern stage.

The Chinese move is an ironic and predictable counter-point to America's "strategic pivot" into East Asia.

The Barack Obama administration has openly announced its desire to shed the incubus of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (and quietly signaled that the last thing it wants is to go for a Middle East conflict trifecta with a third war against Iran) and seek its future in the Pacific.

This presents an opportunity for China to fill the leadership vacuum, at least in part, and stake its claim to the Middle East as a crucial fulcrum of the PRC's own Pacific Century future.

The PRC claims two qualifications as a force to be reckoned with in the Middle East.

First, and most obviously, it is the biggest importer of Middle East energy. China and the other Asian importers have a far bigger stake in the stability of the region than the United States.

Second, and less intuitively, the PRC believes that its model of authoritarian rule underpinned by economic development offers the best model for a stable and peaceful Middle East.

Partisans of democracy and Western values will respond with a derisive snort at this idea, especially after the intoxicating spectacle of the Arab Spring.

However, with the apparent exception of happy little Tunisia, the revolutionary upheavals in Libya and Egypt have brought with them enough bloodshed and division to make a lot of people nostalgic for the days when a strong man mediated and suppressed at his discretion the political aspirations of various ethnicities, races, confessions, tribes and classes.

A lot of these nostalgic people, it can be imagined, inhabit presidential palaces - or just plain palaces - east of Suez and west of the Indus.

Virtually all of the states in the Middle East, including Israel, are either authoritarian or employ a type of managed democracy to keep a lid on

things. In fact, they resemble the PRC, which itself struggles to impose unpopular Han dominance on restive populations in Tibet and Xinjiang. Therefore, China can present itself as a more natural and sympathetic partner to rulers in the Middle East than the United States, which shocked Saudi Arabia in particular with its abandonment of Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak as the revolutionary agitation reached its climax.

Tellingly, the Chinese media have been virtually silent on the Saudi-directed crackdown on Shi'ite democracy protesters in Bahrain and its suppression of Shi'ite demonstrations inside the kingdom itself, a piece of forbearance that Saudi Arabia perhaps appreciates as much as America's embarrassed silence over the issue.

The first crisis in which China has the opportunity to test-drive its Middle East strategy is Syria.

Though to Western observers it may appear utterly quixotic for the PRC to promote a peaceful political resolution through a referendum and elections conducted by the Assad regime, given the bitterness engendered by the one-year crackdown and the chorus of Western and Arab derision and condemnation, the Chinese hand is not as weak as it appears.

Minorities' fears of sectarian bloodletting, even if self-servingly encouraged by the Assad regime, are genuine. The liberal, democratic, non-sectarian peaceful uprising has been overshadowed by a resistance that is rural, Sunni, conservative, armed and, in some manifestations, alarmingly sectarian, and which has largely stalled without penetrating the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo.

Formal armed intervention on behalf of the Syrian opposition is off the table, largely because of deep-seated doubts about the Syrian National Council, which looks like a stalking horse for the Muslim Brotherhood filled with bickering exiles with little presence inside the country.

Tellingly, the "Friends of Syria" conference scheduled for Friday is expected not to anoint the Syrian National Council as its only friend, merely describing it as "a" (as opposed to "the sole") legitimate voice of the Syrian people.

Simply imploding the Assad regime to spite Iran would appear to be easy, but has not happened.

Turkey is already providing safe havens for the Free Syrian Army, but

apparently has not unleashed it. Western Iraq is aboil with doctrinaire Sunni militants happy to stick it to the Alawite regime, and Qatar has allegedly already laid the groundwork for underemployed Libyan militants to find profitable occupation fighting alongside the opposition in Syria, but utter bloody chaos has yet to erupt.

The fact that Aleppo and Damascus have only been ravaged by two car bombs is perhaps a sign of Wahabbist restraint, and may have been taken by the PRC as a sign that the Gulf Cooperation Council's commitment to overthrowing Assad is not absolute.

By the brutal calculus of authoritarian regimes, the Syrian government has shown restraint in its military suppression of the populist revolt and has not completely forfeited its domestic legitimacy. Seven thousand dead over 12 months is no Hama. Assad's uncle Rifaat (now residing in a \$10 million mansion in London's Mayfair district and somehow beyond the reach of world justice) killed approximately 30,000 over a few weeks as he besieged, assaulted and purged the Muslim Brotherhood stronghold in 1982.

By Chinese standards, 7,000 dead is, if not a bloody blip, something along the magnitude of the show of state force inflicted on pro-democracy protesters in Beijing and other cities in 1989.

Just as the ruling group in Beijing considers the Tiananmen incident the key act in an authoritarian drama that kept the PRC from sliding into political chaos, and established the political foundation for 20 years of high-speed growth, the Ba'athists apparently regard Hama as the cornerstone of three decades of national stability.

In fact, 30,000 killed apparently doesn't even disqualify one from eligibility as a potential leader of Syria.

Al-Arabiya, the English-language voice of conservative Saudi opinion, interviewed Rifaat al-Assad in his luxurious digs. Rifaat, who has assumed leadership of a Syrian opposition group, the National Democratic Council, generously shared his view on the Syrian problem:

"The solution would be that the Arab states guarantee Bashar al-Assad's security so he can resign and be replaced by someone with financial backing who can look after Bashar's people after his resignation," he argued.

"It should be someone from the family ... me, or someone else," he said.

[2]

Perhaps Bashar al-Assad will extract the lesson that the slaughter needs to get into five-digit figures before he is considered genuine leadership timber by the demanding standards of the Middle East.

In a situation in which the opposition political movement has stalled, the situation is degenerating into an armed conflict, and the great powers are apparently unwilling to hurry things along militarily, Chinese support of Assad's referendum and election plan is not unreasonable.

But there are difficulties, the greatest of which is that the door to reconciliation is in danger of swinging shut permanently as the government tries to squelch the defiant opposition and make a defensible case for itself as the indispensable guarantor of Syria's stability and unity.

Significant swaths of the Syrian countryside and many towns are apparently de facto out of government control. The government, which still possesses an overwhelming and relatively loyal military force, appears to have made the decision that trying to reassert government control is either too difficult or too polarizing, and is letting the local opposition run things, at least for now.

Probably the Assad regime is hoping to get some political wind at its back so it can move back into these villages under the banner of reconciliation or stability as part of the referendum/election process, and not a simple reconquest.

Then there is Homs or, more accurately, the Baba Amro district of Homs, which has turned into a symbol of resistance, armed and otherwise, to Assad's rule.

Assad's Western and domestic opponents have put the onus on Russia and China for enabling the Homs assault by their veto of the UN Security Council resolution, a toothless text that would have called for Assad to step down.

However, the significance of the veto was not that it allowed Assad to give free rein to his insatiable blood lust for slaughtering his own citizens, as the West would have it.

The true significance of the veto was the message that Russia and China had endorsed Assad as a viable political actor, primarily within Syria, and his domestic opponents, including those holding out in Baba Amro, should

think twice before basing their political strategy on the idea that he would be out of the picture shortly thanks to foreign pressure.

It is difficult to determine exactly what the government's objectives are for Baba Amro. Hopefully, they are not simply wholesale massacre through indiscriminate shelling.

Recent reports indicate that the government, after a prolonged and brutal softening-up, has decided to encircle the district, send in the tanks, and demonstrate to the fragmented opposition that "resistance is futile", at least the armed resistance that seems to depend on the expectation of some combination of foreign support and intervention to stymie Assad and advance its interest.

Whatever the plan is, the Chinese government is probably wishing that the Assad regime would get on with it and remove the humanitarian relief of Homs from the "Friends of Syria" diplomatic agenda.

The difference in coverage of Homs between the Western and Chinese media is striking.

Even before the deaths of journalists Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik, the agony of Homs has been the subject of wall-to-wall coverage in the West. A Google News search for "Homs" yields over 6,000 stories.

Even as the siege grinds on and horrific reports and footage fill the Western media space, Chinese media coverage seems to echo the old saw about the tree falling in the forest, as in "if a mortar shell falls in Homs and it isn't reported, maybe nothing important is happening".

Chinese references to Homs are usually along the following lines:

Libyan websites disclosed the death of three Libyan Islamists at the Baba Amro neighborhood in Homs last Monday. Other websites cited similar cases about the killing of a number of fundamentalists who came in from Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan to fight in Syria.

Even foreign press have reported the killing of five Wahabbi terrorists in the Damascus suburb of Zabadani, including the Kuwaiti Fuad Khaled, better known as Abu Hozafa, during clashes with security men.

Media reports also said that no less than 1,000 gunmen from al-Qaeda have infiltrated into Syria and most of them stationed in Damascus suburbs and the central city of Homs. [3]

The message that Syria and China hope the domestic opposition will extract from Homs in the next few weeks is that, in the absence of

meaningful foreign support, armed resistance has reached a dead end; it is time for moderates to abandon hope in the local militia or the gunmen of the FSA and turn to a political settlement.

To Syria's foreign detractors, the message will be that the genie of armed resistance has been stuffed back into the bottle thanks to "Hama Lite"; and the nations that live in Syria's neighborhood might reconsider their implacable opposition to Assad's continued survival.

In particular, China would need to make its vaunted good offices available in the matter of getting Saudi Arabia to overlook its hatred for all things Assad, perhaps by serving as guarantor that Syria would no longer funnel aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

China is playing a dubious hand.

After one year of a brutal crackdown, that on top of decades of bullying and torture by Syria's security apparatus, even members of the moderate opposition will probably be disinclined to put their future in the hands of the Ba'ath and the new constitution.

Internationally, Assad has been officially designated the current Monster of the Century and the intangible psychic benefits and real political and strategic advantages of terminally ostracizing his regime, no matter what it means for Syrian society, will probably be too tempting to ignore.

However, if Assad can manage the Baba Amro endgame and put Homs behind him, and gets some of the genuine opposition to participate in the summer elections, perhaps China will offer Syria a much-needed economic boost: supporting the war and sanction-crippled economy and, through it, Assad's regime by a program of aid and investment that will defy the sanctions regime that will undoubtedly continue to dog the regime.

If Assad can survive through the long, hot summer of 2012, China will count it as a victory for its approach to the Middle East - and a rebuke to American pretensions to moral and diplomatic leadership in the region. It's a long shot, as Global Times, China's voice of brawny nationalism, acknowledged:

China has chosen a difficult role as a mediator. If neither the West nor the Arab League cooperates, the Syrian opposition can hardly heed the appeals of China. The chance of a prompt and peaceful settlement is slim. ...

It's unnecessary for China to see a quick effect. The time for the opposition to agree to a compromise is yet to arrive. But if the Assad administration

continues to hang on, chances of a peaceful negotiation will grow. ... Any progress made by Chinese efforts to promote a peaceful settlement will mark a significant diplomatic achievement. China will not become deeply involved in the way the US has become with the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. The West will not allow that to happen, either. What China wants is for the principle of settling a crisis through peaceful channels to be understood and supported. [4]

Yes, the West might not be ready to have China play a leading role in the Middle East. But China can afford to be patient ... especially since the consequences of any miscalculation and failure will be borne by the citizens of small and distant Syria.

Peter Lee writes on East and South Asian affairs and their intersection with US foreign policy.

Notes

1. [China's stance on Syria "withstands test of history": spokesman](#), Xinhua, Feb 17, 2012.
2. [Exiled Assad's uncle wants to lead Syria transition](#), Al Arabiya News, Nov 14, 2011.
3. [Escalating situation in Syria evokes fears of similar Iraqi fate](#), Xinhua, Feb 13, 2012.
4. [China has a tough job as Syria mediator](#), Global times, Feb 24, 2012.

Article 6.

The Financial Times

Why we all need a drone of our own

Francis Fukuyama

February 24, 2012 -- For the past couple of months, I've been building myself a surveillance drone. My craft consists of a remotely controlled quadcopter – a small helicopter with four rotor blades that looks like a flying X – with an onboard video camera that sends a live feed back to my

laptop base station. It also transmits telemetry data about its altitude, speed, bearing and location from its onboard global positioning system receiver. In future, I plan to equip the aircraft with an autopilot system that will allow it to fly from one GPS-specified location to another without my having to pilot it.

I decided I had to have my own drone after hearing about the US army's RQ-11 Raven, made by a company called AeroVironment. This drone is no more than a glorified remote-control aircraft that a soldier launches by tossing into the air. It can send video back to the squad so they know whether, for example, there are bad guys lurking behind the building in front of them. I don't have too many terrorists lurking in my neighbourhood near Stanford. On the other hand, I've done a good deal of photography over the years as a hobby. I thought it would add another dimension, quite literally, if I could photograph, say, the Coastal Redwoods not just from the forest floor, but from above the tops of the trees. Frankly, however, now that I've started this project, the motive has shifted to one of pure technological empowerment. I'm astonished at what home-made drones can do, and at the fact that there's an enthusiast group called DIY Drones with more than 20,000 members who are busy programming new controllers and making the technology readily available to ordinary people. We are of course familiar with the way drones have changed the nature of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Armed drones such as the Predator and Reaper have struck deep into Pakistan, where they are used to target individual Taliban commanders with deadly accuracy. By next year, the Air Force will have more drone pilots than pilots of F-16s. Flown from half a world away in the Nevada desert, they have given the US a means of projecting power far into another sovereign country with no risk of an American airman being shot down and captured, as U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was back in 1960. They are also controversial, since they periodically kill innocent civilians, and are one important reason for the [disastrous state of US-Pakistan relations](#) today.

The technology is not standing still. Down the road are insect-sized drones that could be mistaken for a housefly or spider, which could slip in under a door-sill to record conversations, take photos or even inject a lethal toxin into an unsuspecting victim. Systems such as these are under development by the Army's Micro Autonomous Systems and Technology (Mast)

programme, in partnership with a variety of corporations and university labs. Further into the future are nanobots, particle-sized robots that could enter people's blood streams or lungs.

At the moment, the chief concern about the domestic use of drones is privacy. My drone could be used to look inside a neighbour's third-floor window, or at a private party or an exclusive construction site – though, of course, I would never ever be tempted to use it for such a thing.

The American Federal Aviation Authority used to restrict the commercial use of drones for purposes such as real estate snooping or crop dusting, but a new law makes all of this legal. Several civil liberties groups have warned that the proliferation of cheap drones will make Americans rethink how much privacy they really have, given technological change.

But there are longer-term dangers involving criminal or violent uses of drone technology – such as targeted killings, which can now take place at much longer range than previously. US law makes a distinction between government-sponsored assassinations, which have been illegal since 1976, and targeted killings, which are performed every day in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The latter are supposedly done only in self-defence, but there are no generally accepted rules for how this should be defined. As the defence budget shrinks, targeted killings by drones and special forces will seem an attractive way to project power on the cheap.

Surely, however, America's rather liberal use of this technology has something to do with the asymmetry of power between the US and its current opponents in places such as Pakistan, [Somalia](#) and [Yemen](#). But this situation will not last for ever. Drone technology is within the reach of many countries, and has been filtering down to ordinary consumers year by year. (Much of the hobbyist drone technology comes from China, even now.) If I can have my own surveillance drone, anyone can.

What will the world look like when not just the US but many other countries around the world operate fleets of drones; and when powerful, sophisticated drones are owned by lots of private individuals? What would our attitude be if our enemies could pick off visiting dignitaries as they stepped off the aeroplane in a supposedly friendly country, or attack soldiers in their bases in Europe or Asia? Or if Americans became vulnerable in Florida or New York? Drones might become an inexpensive delivery vehicle for terrorists or rogue states that can't afford to deliver

payloads in ballistic missiles. Some of the remotely controlled aeroplanes that hobbyists build are a third to half the size of their full-scale counterparts. As the technology becomes cheaper and more commercially available, moreover, drones may become harder to trace; without knowing their provenance, deterrence breaks down. A world in which people can be routinely and anonymously targeted by unseen enemies is not pleasant to contemplate.

Drones have plenty of legitimate uses, in police work, traffic control and farm management. Pressure from these users is why the FAA liberalised its rules, making it a great wild west out there for hobbyists and tinkerers. Only when people start thinking through the nature of a world in which drones are cheap and ubiquitous will they start to get worried. That's why I want to build mine now, before the government makes them illegal.

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Article 7.

New Statesman

All machine and no ghost?

[Colin McGinn](#)

20 February 2012 -- The more we look at the brain, the less it looks like a device for creating consciousness. Perhaps philosophers will never be able to solve the mystery.

The philosophy of mind is concerned with fundamental questions about consciousness - about its existence and nature. The science of psychology is concerned with its empirical workings - how one mental thing leads to another, basically. The former is a branch of metaphysics, the latter of dynamics. The central defining property of the mind is consciousness, so philosophy of mind is concerned with the existence and nature of consciousness: what is consciousness, why does it exist, how is it related to the body and brain, and how did it come into existence?

These are big, difficult questions. Focus on your current state of consciousness - your experience of seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, willing, and so on - and ask yourself what kind of being this consciousness is, what its function might be, how it is related to the activity of cells in your brain, what could have brought it about in the course of evolution. Allow yourself to feel the attendant puzzlement, the sense of bafflement: now you are doing philosophy of mind.

Try to imagine a world with no consciousness in it, just clashing quanta in the void and clumps of dead, insensate matter (the way our universe used to be); now add consciousness to it. What difference do you make to things, what is the point of the addition and how can you add consciousness to a world without it? Do you somehow reassemble the material particles? I predict it will seem to you that you have made an enormous difference to your imagined world but you will not understand how the unconscious world and the conscious world fit intelligibly together. It will seem to you that you have performed a miracle (contrast adding planets to a world containing only gaseous clouds). But does our world really consist of miracles?

We can distinguish five positions on consciousness: eliminativist, dualist, idealist, panpsychist and mysterianist. The eliminativist position attempts to dissolve the problem of explaining consciousness simply by declaring that there isn't any: there is no such thing - no seeing, hearing, thinking, and so on. There is just blank matter; the impression that we are conscious is an illusion. This view is clearly absurd, a form of madness even, and anyway refutes itself since even an illusion is the presence of an experience (it certainly seems to me that I am conscious). There are some who purport to hold this view but they are a tiny (and tinny) minority: they are sentient beings loudly claiming to be mindless zombies.

More subtly, there are many who insist that consciousness just reduces to brain states - a pang of regret, say, is just a surge of chemicals across a synapse. They are collapsers rather than deniers. Though not avowedly eliminative, this kind of view is tacitly a rejection of the very existence of consciousness, because the brain processes held to constitute conscious experience consist of physical events that can exist in the absence of consciousness. Electricity in the brain correlates with mental activity but electricity in your TV presumably does not - so how can

electrical processes be the essence of conscious experience? If there is nothing happening but electrochemical activity when I say, "My finger hurts," or, "I love her so," then there is nothing experiential going on when I say those things. So reduction is tantamount to elimination, despite the reductionist's intentions (it's like maintaining that people called "witches" are nothing but harmless old ladies – which is tantamount to saying that there are no witches).

The dualist, by contrast, freely admits that consciousness exists, as well as matter, holding that reality falls into two giant spheres. There is the physical brain, on the one hand, and the conscious mind, on the other: the twain may meet at some point but they remain distinct entities. Dualism may be of substances, properties, or even whole universes, but its thrust is that the conscious mind is a thing apart from, and irreducible to, anything that goes on in the body. When I think, my brain indeed whirs but the thinking stands apart from the whirring, as clouds stand aloft from the earth or magnetism exists separately from gravity. Dualism proposes to give the mind its ontological due but the problem is that it has difficulties organising a rendezvous between the two spheres: how does the mind affect the brain and the brain the mind? Whence the systematic correlation and interaction? And how did the mind come to exist, if not by dint of cerebral upsurges? Dualism makes the mind too separate, thereby precluding intelligible interaction and dependence. At this point the idealist swooshes in: ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing but mind! There is no problem of interaction with matter because matter is mere illusion - we merely hallucinate brains. The universe is just one vast spirit, or perhaps a population of the same, consisting of nothing but free-floating consciousness, unencumbered and serene. Stars and planets are just perturbations in this cosmic sensorium.

As an imaginative fancy, idealism has its charms but taking it seriously requires an antipathy to matter bordering on the maniacal. Are we to suppose that material reality is just a dream, a baseless fantasy, and that the Big Bang was nothing but the cosmic spirit having a mental sneezing fit? Where did consciousness come from, if not from pre-existing matter? Did God just create centres of consciousness ab initio, with nothing material in the vicinity? Is my body just a figment of my imagination?

Perhaps we would do better to dial idealism back a bit: it is not that everything real is mental but that there is more mentality out there than meets the introspective eye. Perhaps all matter has its mental aspects or moments, its local injection of consciousness. Thus we have panpsychism: even the lowliest of material things has a streak of sentience running through it, like veins in marble. Not just parcels of organic matter, such as lizards and worms, but also plants and bacteria and water molecules and even electrons. Everything has its primitive feelings and minute allotment of sensation.

The cool thing about panpsychism is that it offers a seductively silky explanation of emergence. How does mind emerge from matter? Why - by virtue of the pre-existence of mind in matter. Mind is all around, so we don't need a magic mechanism to spirit it into existence from nowhere - it was already present at the time of the Big Bang, simmering away. (What did the hydrogen atom say to the carbon atom at the time of the Big Bang? My ears are ringing.)

The trouble with panpsychism is that there just isn't any evidence of the universal distribution of consciousness in the material world. Atoms don't act conscious; they act unconscious. And also, what precisely is on their microscopic minds - little atomic concerns? What does it mean to say that atoms have consciousness in some primitive form (often called "proto-consciousness")? They either have real sensations and thoughts or they don't. What is a tiny quantity of consciousness like, exactly? Panpsychism looks a lot like preformationism in biology: we try to explain the emergence of organic life by supposing that it already exists in microscopic form in the pre-life world - as if the just-fertilised egg has a little, fully formed baby curled up in it waiting to expand during gestation.

So where does this leave us? The available options all seem to encounter fairly bone-crushing objections. Here is where I entered the picture, 25 years ago. I could see the problems with the standard theories but I couldn't accept that nature adores a miracle, or that it is simply unintelligible.

Consciousness must have evolved from matter somehow but nothing we could contrive or imagine seemed to offer the faintest hope for explanation. Hence, it occurred to me that the problem might lie not in nature but in ourselves: we just don't have the faculties of comprehension that would enable us to remove the sense of mystery. Ontologically, matter and

consciousness are woven intelligibly together but epistemologically we are precluded from seeing how. I used Noam Chomsky's notion of "mysteries of nature" to describe the situation as I saw it. Soon, I was being labelled (by Owen Flanagan) a "mysterian", the name of a defunct pop group, and the name stuck.

I am not against the label, understood correctly, but like all labels it suggests an overly simple view of a complex position. At first the view was regarded as eccentric and vaguely disreputable but now it is a standard option - though one with very few adherents. Its primary attraction lies in the lack of appeal of all the other options, to which supporters of those options are curiously oblivious. People sometimes ask me if I am still a mysterian, as if perhaps the growth of neuroscience has given me pause; they fail to grasp the depth of mystery I sense in the problem. The more we know of the brain, the less it looks like a device for creating consciousness: it's just a big collection of biological cells and a blur of electrical activity - all machine and no ghost.

Latterly, I have come to think that mystery is quite pervasive, even in the hardest of sciences. Physics is a hotbed of mystery: space, time, matter and motion - none of it is free of mysterious elements. The puzzles of quantum theory are just a symptom of this widespread lack of understanding (I discuss this in my latest book, *Basic Structures of Reality*). The human intellect grasps the natural world obliquely and glancingly, using mathematics to construct abstract representations of concrete phenomena, but what the ultimate nature of things really is remains obscure and hidden. How everything fits together is particularly elusive, perhaps reflecting the disparate cognitive faculties we bring to bear on the world (the senses, introspection, mathematical description). We are far from obtaining a unified theory of all being and there is no guarantee that such a theory is accessible by finite human intelligence.

Some modern philosophers pride themselves on their "naturalism" but real naturalism begins with a proper perspective on our specifically human intelligence. Palaeoanthropologists have taught us that the human brain gradually evolved from ancestral brains, particularly in concert with practical toolmaking, centring on the anatomy of the human hand. This history shaped and constrained the form of intelligence now housed in our skulls (as the lifestyle of other species form their set of cognitive skills).

What chance is there that an intelligence geared to making stone tools and grounded in the contingent peculiarities of the human hand can aspire to uncover all the mysteries of the universe? Can omniscience spring from an opposable thumb? It seems unlikely, so why presume that the mysteries of consciousness will be revealed to a thumb-shaped brain like ours?

The "mysterianism" I advocate is really nothing more than the acknowledgment that human intelligence is a local, contingent, temporal, practical and expendable feature of life on earth - an incremental adaptation based on earlier forms of intelligence that no one would regard as faintly omniscient. The current state of the philosophy of mind, from my point of view, is just a reflection of one evolutionary time-slice of a particular bipedal species on a particular humid planet at this fleeting moment in cosmic history - as is everything else about the human animal. There is more ignorance in it than knowledge.

Colin McGinn is professor of philosophy at the University of Miami. His latest book is "Basic Structures of Reality: Essays in Meta-Physics" (Oxford University Press USA, £32.50)