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NEIGHBORS AND RIVALS

China in Turkey's Educational System



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The Root of Anti-Chinese Protests in Turkey: Strategic Insights from Education

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The attempted July 15 coup d'état in Turkey occurred on the heels of numerous core issues relating to the political culture in this important country. For the purpose of this report, we will examine a less-known incident, while briefly examining the connection to current Turkish education. Just a year before the coup, during the summer of 2015, rampant anti-Chinese protests took place in Turkey with Turkish demonstrators burning Chinese flags and attacking Chinese tourists and restaurants while China warned its citizens traveling in Turkey to take precautions.[2]

Several demonstrations were held across Turkey to protest alleged Chinese maltreatment of ethnic Uyghurs during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The protests gathered momentum following alleged reports that China had imposed strict bans on the Uyghur Muslim minority in China's large northwestern region of Xinjiang also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Uyghurs are Muslims who speak a Turkic language.[3] It was reported that they had been banned from worship and fasting during Ramadan. Turkish news outlets also reported that Chinese police killed eighteen "Uyghur Turks."[4]

The Chinese government has said that it fully respects the freedom of Muslim religious beliefs and that the alleged accusations were both completely at odds with the facts and exaggerated by the Turkish media.[5]

Anti-Chinese demonstrations started in the beginning of July 2015, when Turkish citizens, brandishing sticks and throwing stones, attacked a Chinese restaurant in the city center of Istanbul. The assailants reportedly shouted that they did not want a Chinese restaurant there and that the Chinese owners should "get out of our town"![6]

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[2] "China warns citizens travelling to Turkey over anti-China protests," *Hurriyet Daily News,* July 5, 2015). Accessed September 10, 2015, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/china-warns-citizens-travelling-to-turkey-over-anti-china-protests.aspx?PageID=238&NID=84982&NewsCatID=359.

[3] "Uyghurs can understand 60 percent of Turkish," according to a Uyghur living in Turkey. "Some Uyghurs travel to Turkey to connect with local culture, religion, but fail to find what they hoped," *Global Times*, Aug. 24, 2015, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/938731.shtml.

[4] "Katil Çin 18 Uygur Türkünü öldürdü" [Chinese Murderers killed 18 Uyghur Turks], *Yeni Akit*, June 24, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/katil-cin-18-uygur-turkunu-oldurdu-76933.html.

[5] "China-Turkey relationship strained over Uighurs," *BBC New,* July 9, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33440998.

[6] "Istanbul Chinese restaurant attacked in protest at Uighur suppression," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 1, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbul-chinese-restaurant-attacked-in-protest-at-uighur-suppression-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=84846&NewsCatID=341.

On July 4, protesters throughout Turkey burned China's flag, along with effigies of the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong.[7] On the same day, a group of Turkish Ultra-nationalists and Islamists gathering in touristy central Istanbul to protest the alleged restrictions on Uyghur religious freedom, attacked a group of Korean tourists, mistaking them for Chinese.[8] Devlet Bahçeli, Turkey's opposition leader of the rightist Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, [MHP]), said that the attack on the Koreans was "understandable" given that both peoples have "slanted eyes."[9]

Several days later, on July 9, the Thai embassy in Istanbul was attacked by a group of about two hundred men affiliated with the East Turkestan Solidarity Group, following Thailand's decision to deport approximately one hundred Uyghurs back to China. Protesters, with rocks and thick wooden planks, broke windows and pounded on doors while shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" [Allah is the greatest] while waving "East Turkestan" flags.[10] East Turkestan or "Uyghurstan" is the name used by Uyghur separatists and supporters in place of Xinjiang.



Protestors burned Chinese flag during a protest near the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey on July 5, 2015. (Photo: Reuters) [11]

Anti-Chinese protests have occasionally flared up in the past because of China's alleged ill treatment of the Uyghurs. These actions should be examined against the background of the Turkish Republic's educational system.

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[7] "Anti-Chinese protests in Turkey: Bashing and wooing China," *The Economist*, July 11, 2015. Accessed September 10, 2015, http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21657419-pious-sinophobia-wont-deflect-turkeys-strategic-dreams-bashing-and-wooing-china.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Thai consulate in Istanbul attacked after Uighurs deported," *The Telegraph*, July 9, 2015. Accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11728758/Thai-consulate-in-Istanbul-attacked-after-Uighurs-deported.html.

[10] "İstanbul'da Eylemciler Tayland Konsolosluğu'nu Bastı" [Activists raided the Thailand Consulate in Istanbul], *Son Dakika*, July 9, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2015, http://m.sondakika.com/haber/haber-istanbul-da-eylemciler-tayland-konsoloslugu-nu-7491447.

[11] "China says tourists attacked in Turkey during anti-China protests," *Reuters*, July 5, 2015. Accessed September 12, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/05/us-china-turkey-idUSKCN0PF08L20150705.



Kore'deki Türk Kuvvetlerinin komutanı Tahsin Yazıcı Paşa'mız, BM Ordu Komutanı Walton Walker'dan madalyasını alırken

The Turks and China: Neighbors and Rivals

Generally, one might assume that China and Turkey—faraway countries bookending the vast Asian continent from East to West—should share very little common history; certainly not enmity. The Turkish educational system, however, takes a wider view of its national identity and history. To Turkish students, the Turks encompass peoples and ethnic groups who have historically spoken Turkic languages. As applies to China, this refers particularly to the great empires of the Huns, the Göktürks (Celestial Turks), and the Uyghurs. Turkish-Chinese relations thus assume mythic proportions, covering millennia and a vast expanse geographically.[12]

As will be discussed, the Turkish curriculum considers the Turks and the Chinese as both neighbors and rivals. Interestingly, this enmity seems not to include the only real battle between Turkish and Chinese soldiers in modern times: the Battle of Wawon, which took place during the Korean War (1950-53).[13] Referring to the significance of Turkey's participation in the Korean War, a current school textbook explains that "for the first time in its history, The Republic of Turkey sent troops out of the country."[14] But while Turks and Chinese soldiers fiercely fought against each other in Korea, this fact is overlooked in the textbook. Turkish participation is presented in the context of joining NATO and the great appreciation of Turkish heroism among its Western allies and South Korea.

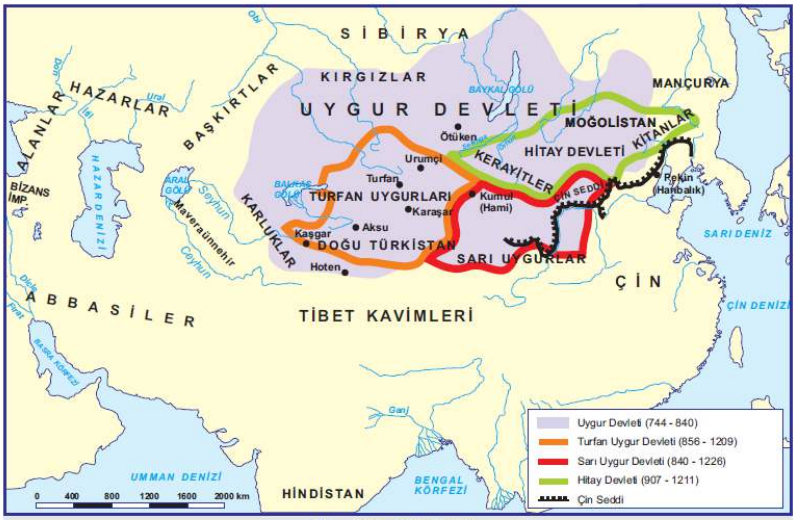
The caption of the above picture to the left reads: "The commander of the Turkish Forces in Korea, our Tahsin Yazıcı Pasha receives a medal from the US Army Commander, [General] Walton Walker."[15] The textbook also quotes major Western newspapers as well as Radio South Korea, which states:

> In Korea, the Turkish Armed Forces, which achieved what no other unit in the world's military history did, went from victory to victory as it continued its attacks for a long time. South Korean territories are now freed from the enemy's invasion. Migration has stopped. The role of the Turkish Armed Forces in the recovery of our land has been immense.[16]

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[12] Kemal Kara, *General Turkish History for High-Schools 1*. (Istanbul: Önde, 2005), pp. 120–28.
[13] A.K. Starbuck, "Korean War: 1st Turkish Brigade's Baptism of Fire," *Military History*, December 1997. Accessed June 12, 2016, http://www.historynet.com/korean-war-1st-turkish-brigades-baptism-of-fire.htm.
[14] *Contemporary Turkish and World History*, Grade 12, Seventh Printing, Ministry of National Education, 2015, p. 102.
[15] Ibid., p. 104.
[16] Ibid.

The assumed tension between Turkey and China goes back millennia in history. In this historical view—which does not relate only to the past but also to the present—Turkey and China are neighbors and rivals. Past geopolitical conditions are kept alive in students' imaginations through the presentation of maps, historical texts, cultural history and vivid images. As an example, the following map describes the historical Turkish Uyghur Empire which covers parts of China as well.[17]



7. Harita: Uygur Devleti

7. Map: The Uyghur State

Even more expansive is the next map, showing the Turkish Hun Empire stretching from Western Europe all the way to Manchuria in the East, Central Asia and the Northern Indian continent.[18]



4. Harita: Avrupa ve Büyük Hun Devleti

4. Map: Europe and the Great Hun State

As neighbors, the Chinese and Turks coexisted in various conditions throughout history.

[17] *History*, Grade 9, 2015, p. 91.
[18] Ibid., p. 81.

> The beginnings of the Turkish-Chinese relationship extends to a time before the Common Era. These relations persisted, sometimes in war and sometimes in conditions of friendship; yet, even during those periods in which relations appeared to be friendly, China never gave up the idea of conquering the Turkish lands.
>
> The most important reason for the competition between Turkey and China was that each nation hoped to control Central Asia. A discussion of Turkish-Chinese relations is presented in three parts: the Huns; the Göktürks; and Uyghurs.
> ***General Turkish History for High-Schools 1*, 2005, p. 120.**

Chinese observers were said to be impressed by the quality of life in Turkish lands. A Chinese ambassador to the Uyghur region reports:

> Inside their state, there are no poor people; the state helps those who have no food. Many of them live one hundred years. There are no signs of death before the age of maturity.
> ***History,* Grade 9, 2015–16, p. 4**.

From the Turkish curriculum's perspective, China was deficient in terms of social justice, with its strong central authority and dynastic rule. "In China, the social structure was comprised of nobles and peasants. This social structure did not recognize the right of freedom for peasants or their way of life and the rights of the various classes were very different from each other."[19]

However, the curriculum also recognizes the achievements of the Chinese civilization, even as it lauds Turkish, Mongolian and Tibetan cultures as being "influential alongside the Chinese culture." Apart from agriculture, China was making yarn, silk, porcelain and cloth and its merchants were involved in trade along the Silk Road all the way to Rome. The textbooks teach that China excelled in manufacturing processes such as cotton lint and silk and arts-and-crafts like, ceramics, sculpture and pottery. Chinese architecture is especially evident in military and religious structures. "The Great Wall of China and Buddhist temples are the best examples of Chinese architecture." Chinese architecture is also described as "fine, and having elegant style." The texts also credit the Chinese for having pioneered the development of inks, paper, gunpowder, the compass and the printing press.[20]

While the above excerpts seem to provide a fair description of at least a portion of Chinese civilization along with a rather dispassionate look at Turkish-Chinese relations, the overall spirit of the text is that the Chinese typically represented the "evil side," devising sly means to grab Turkish lands.

> The Chinese rulers were not successful in stopping the Turks. This desperation led the Chinese to take further measures as follows: a) They married Chinese princesses to Turkish rulers; in doing so, they sent many servants alongside

[19] *History,* Grade 9, 2015–16, p. 53.
[20] Ibid.

> the princess to the Turkish palace. These servants were spying by collecting information about Turks. b) They made the Turkish rulers dependent on the Chinese and China, by sending gifts to Turkish rulers. c) They led to the dismemberment of the Turkish state by playing one ruler off against another. ***History,* Grade 9, 2014–15, pp. 76–77.**

> By intrigues and cabals, the Chinese brought the destruction of the Turkish people . . . The sons of the Turkish nobles became the bondsmen of the Chinese and unsullied Turkish daughters became Chinese concubines. The Turks renounced their Turkish names . . . and served the Chinese for fifty years.
> ***Turkish Literature,* Grade 10, 2014–15, pp. 5–6**.

As presented by the curriculum, The Great Wall of China was erected as a security barrier to protect China from the Turks; it is introduced as an example of human rights abuse leading to the death of great many workers. The barrier proved to be useless and led to more Turkish unification as invaders managed to penetrate it.

> Later, we see that the Huns became the strongest state in Asia and the Chinese were forced to build China's Wall against the Turks. Tens of thousands of people were employed in the construction of this barrier, which had been erected in order to protect China. A great many of them could not endure the harsh working conditions, died, and were buried thereabout. But again, this wall, which stretches for thousands of kilometers, could not prevent the Turks from leaping over it. In addition, some scholars argue that this situation played out in favor of Turks. It was observed that concurrently with the Chinese wall, Turkish and related communities clung more tightly together.
> ***History,* Grade 9, 2015–16, p. 22**.



China's Wall[21]

Thus, while the general perception that China was a sophisticated and refined civilization protecting itself with the Great Wall of China against "barbarian" Turkish

[21] *History,* Grade 9, 2015–16, p. 53

and Mongol attacks, the view presented in the Turkish Republic's curriculum is quite the opposite—that the Chinese civilization owes much to the Turks and others. The Chinese are seen as the aggressors while the Turks only defended their independence. The following illustration, displays a Turkish anti-Chinese struggle for independence:[22]



Kürşat and His Friends Fighting for Independence against China

While the curriculum attempts to imprint a narrative of splendor and large powerful empires in the memories of young Turkish students, it also reminds them that their nation was occupied by foreign powers, both Western and Chinese. Culture is the key to save the spirit of the glorious Turkish nation, even under foreign occupation.

> After the Chinese had occupied the Eastern Göktürks Khanate, they began pressuring Ishbara Qaghan so that the Turks would start speaking Chinese, wear Chinese clothing and adopt Chinese customs. Thereupon, Ishabara Qaghan sent a letter to the Chinese emperor in which he so answered: "I will remain dependent on you; I will pay taxes; I will give you expensive horses as presents. But I cannot change our language; I cannot cut our long hair; I will not give my people Chinese clothing to wear. We cannot take your customs

[22] *History*, Grade 11, 2015-16, p. 6.

and your laws. Because, this is what makes our entire nation pulsate with precision like one heart.
***History*, Grade 11, 2015-16, p. 5.**

Imperial Fascination and Current Policies



Illustration for Discussion on "The Strategy of the Turkish Army"[23]

The conflicts between China and the various Turkish empires of days past seem to really matter to the authors of the curriculum, along with the idea that the world should consider Turkey in a leadership role. These include Turkish (in English often called Turkic) peoples and states; the dwellers of former Turkish-led Muslim empires (particularly the Ottoman but also the Seljuk); the Sunni world; and the Muslim world in general. Turkey also considers itself to be part of other blocks, such as Europe, NATO, the Third World and the Mediterranean Basin.

Turkish heritage, particularly the imperial variety, is important and is being taught in a lively manner. In that context, Ottoman and Islamic coloring take precedence along with the history of the modern Turkish Republic. However, the ancient Turkish empires of Asia are also thought to be relevant to the present. Thus the following text criticizes China for its suspicion of Turkish solidarity policies:

> Turkey's great interest to the Central Asian Turkish republics in the early 1990s was regarded as Pan-Turkish policy at that time, but it disturbed China.[24]

[23] *History*, Grade 11, 2015-16, p. 12.
[24] *International Relations for Secondary School*, 2014–15, pp. 164–165.

The accompanying map of the "Turkish World" is made out of contemporary flags of the various countries and territories of which it is comprised. Note the "East Turkestan" flags covering vast swaths of Chinese territory.[25]



Türk dünyası

The Turkish World

[25] Ibid, p. 164.

An even more telling map is the following one, portraying the current Turkish World divided into three categories: Independent States (green), Autonomous Republics (yellow) and Non-Autonomous Turkish Regions (rose pink):[26]



Map of the Turkish World

The vast Turkish territories covered by this map, penetrate into many countries throughout Europe and Asia (but do not show other vast areas remembered by Turkey as zones of influence/membership, such as the Ottoman territories, Islamic lands and the Third World). The following text narrates a story of three Uyghur siblings walking from East Turkestan (Xinjiang) to Ankara in order to join the "Turkish people" rather than live under China's yoke. This text (published for the current academic year), suggests that the fascination with past empires and its ethnic and religious roots, form part of Turkey's present-day policies and worldview:

> Three brothers from East Turkestan [Xinjiang] arrived in Ankara by walking eight months. The smallest of them was a twelve-year-old girl. Two others were males, ages sixteen and eighteen. These three siblings passed this long way by going through all sort of difficulties including, hunger, cold and heat. There was only one thing that they carried with themselves carefully; it was their father's letter written to Ataturk. In this letter, their father wrote that since he could not endure having his children live in Chinese Turkestan as captives, he entrusted them to the Turkish people.

The longing to join the center of the vast Turkish nation, as just described, forms part of the ethnic Turkish identity that remains the main component of the nation's self-image. Even as the study of the Ottoman and Seljuk are more widespread than the

[26] *History,* Grade 9, 2015–16, p. 204.

early Turkish (while the current government stresses the role of Islam and Islamic civilization), the ethnic identity of Turkey—both local and transnational—remains strong. Turks are taught to trust other Turks. "The Turk has no friends but the Turk" [*Türk'ün Türk'ten başka dostu yoktur*], is a popular national dictum repeated in textbooks since the 1930s. Regard the following excerpt from the literature text, which illustrates the relevance of the great cross-Asian Turkish empires to current times:

> O son of Turks, from now on, there is neither me, nor you, but there is big Turan [pan-Turkish nation] . . . With the Turkish sprit, there is only one united Turkic state.
> ***Turkish Literature,* Grade 11, 2014–15, p. 156**

Fascination with empires and transnational entities is not limited in the Turkish curriculum to the pan-Turkish theme. Indeed, it is not restricted to the Turks, as one can also find maps and information about other world empires and civilizations, comprising an endless list (including Iranian, ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Phoenician, Hebrew, Indian, Hittite and Uratu, Assyrian, Babylonian and Arab-Islamic, among many others). More prominent in the curriculum, however, are those empires and large states directly linked to the Turks, mainly the Seljuks and Ottomans, as well as the Islamic World (which has become an important political category and merits a separate discussion).

Fascination with empires of the past and attachment to transnational entities, such as Islamic or pan-Turkish nations, does not remain in the realm of national and personal imagination within the curriculum but often translates into action (although we never found calls for violence such as occurred in the summer of 2015).



Illustrating Islam

Discussion: The Curriculum and Strategy

Turkey stands at the crossroads between Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and considers itself attached to all. The Anatolian Plateau was the cradle and center of ancient civilizations, such as the Göbekli Tepe, Çatalhöyük, Hittite, Greek and East-Roman (Byzantine). Anatolia (Asia Minor) and Thrace (Trakya) were also ruled by various empires, from both the east and west. The Seljuk Turks began migrating into the area in the eleventh century, starting the process of Turkification within an Islamic (mainly Sunni) context, most notable being the Ottoman Empire. Still, the territory of contemporary Turkey has been home to many non-Turkish and non-Islamic groups such as Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Assyrians, Alevi, non-Muslim Arabs and Jews. Turkey is also geopolitically and centrally located between Eastern and Western cultures, thus serving as a meeting point for Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Regardless of this dazzling ethno-cultural diversity, the central identities of the Turkish Republic—though legally a secular-democratic nation-state—remain Turkish and Islamic. The combination of the two entails a heritage and national imagination that is almost limitless. It is a historical fact that peoples speaking a variety of Turkish dialects ruled over large parts of Asia, Europe and the Middle East for a considerable time. For more than a thousand years, most of the Middle East (including Iran) was for the most part successfully ruled by Turks, although it is not clear to what extent these ruling classes identified themselves as Turks (a relatively modern concept).

Turkey's imperial and civilizational heritage makes for an impressive history and the colorful narration of that story in the curriculum doubtless contributes to the enrichment of its young generation. The perceived splendor of these past events conveys a sense of purpose and collective identity that may indeed help to maintain the cohesion of Turkish society. It also instills a sense of pride and self-confidence in students reminding them of their country's engagement with the world. One especially positive aspect of the curriculum is the portrayal of various civilizations not Turkish or Islamic, which allows for a universal worldview.

In light of this portrayal of Turkey's history, the curriculum emphasizes that it is only natural for the Turkish Republic to play a leading role in the region and the world at large; it educates its young citizens to be familiar with this role.

However, the dramatic presentation of certain past events, such as the bumpy relations between the Turks and Chinese—seen as a historical conflict between "us" and "them" might be considered to go too far. The Turks are presented as good and just; the Chinese as authoritarian and exploitative. The Turks are seen as brave freedom seekers; the Chinese as scheming and hegemonic. The Chinese tactics are "flawed" while their civilization is indebted to the Turks and Mongols; their security barrier (The Great Wall of China) is aggressive and abused human rights. Finally, the Uyghurs of China are described as captives who need to run away to freedom in Turkey.

A note of caution is necessary: if one studies this curriculum strictly according to UNESCO's standards for peace and tolerance, it is possible to see that the curriculum presents—often in great detail—a wider picture. Achievements of other civilizations and various regions and worldviews, amid the richness of humanity's heritage, are to be found within this curriculum's textbooks. Even China, while often presented as a rival, is also shown at times to be a good neighbor. China's accomplishments are also revealed. Good things about the Turkish state, as witnessed by a Chinese ambassador are quoted, suggesting that at least some Chinese people are sympathetic to the Turks.

But the continuing negative presentation of China, historically a faraway country with no real conflict of interests with Turkey, is hard to fathom. Yet, this is a fact that observers should be fully aware of, simply because it seems to have consequences today as was made clear by the 2015 anti-Chinese events.

Conclusion: Empire-building Drives the Middle East

Perhaps the most important lesson of this limited research is that strong imperial drives are still lurking in the Middle East. There is a great awareness of individual Muslims, governments and movements that wish to unite the world under the banner of Islam. Little attention is given to strong national identities, as a separated yet related part of the same challenge. To this point, does the call for Islamic unity represent a hegemonic drive more than a spiritual one? For many in the Western world and beyond, imperialism and colonialism are generally seen as reminders of a negative past, but whose memory endures. In the Middle East, however, imperial drives appear to be thriving, building on past heritage and hope for future empire. All this requires careful further study.

Indirectly, this study suggests the need for more thinking about the role of Islam in much of the violence currently spreading throughout the world. It may be useful to explore the idea that the impetus for Islamism, or "radical Islam," may only serve as a vehicle for such imperial ambitions. Much of the violence that we witness in Turkey is associated with conflicts between Turkish and Kurdish citizens. In both the foreign (external) Turkish-Chinese conflict and internally between Turks and Kurds, Islam is clearly *not* the main cause of the conflicts (even though elements of faith are employed at times, either to calm or exacerbate conflicts). In other words, it would be a mistake to blame Islam *per se* for all violence despite this mostly Islamic region.

Once again we find that the study of school curricula may be an indispensable tool for strategic assessment. One should not underestimate the power of the great images and attitudes imprinted in the minds of millions of young people from an early age. Experience has shown that these attitudes and images, coming from the textbook's authoritative pulpit, do not remain in the realm of imagination, within the confines of the students' brains. They are bound to spring out and directly influence all of our real-world concerns, including our safety and prosperity.