Annual Defence Lecture: War and strategy

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Hew Strachan:

The armed forces of the western world, and particularly those of the United States and the United Kingdom, are today involved in waging a war for major objectives – or so at least the rhetoric of that war's principal advocates, George Bush and Tony Blair, would have us believe. It is a war to establish the values of the free world – democracy, religious toleration and liberalism – across the rest of the globe. In his speech to mark the fifth anniversary of the attacks on 11 September 2006, President Bush, showing a prescience denied to the rest of us, declared that it is 'the decisive ideological struggle of the twenty-first century. It is a struggle for civilisation.' This war may have its principal focus in the Middle East and Central Asia, but it is also being waged within Europe, with the supporting evidence provided by the bomb attacks in Madrid and London.

Bush and Blair have called this war 'the global war on terror'. In February 2006 US Central Command, based at Tampa in Florida but with responsibilities which span the Middle East and south-west Asia, recognised the conceptual difficulties posed by the 'global war on terror' and rebranded it the 'long war'. Both titles treat the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as subordinate elements of the grand design. Moreover, the design is so grand that it is one onto which other conflicts can be grafted, even when the United States is not a direct participant. The prime minister of Australia, John Howard, used his country's peacekeeping commitments in East Timor, and his wider concerns about Indonesia more generally, to sign up to the war on terror (with some reason). In 2006, Israel presented its actions against the Hizbollah in Lebanon as part of the same greater struggle (with rather less).

'The global war on terror' is a statement of policy; it is not a statement of strategy. The coalition forces, in both Iraq and (to a lesser extent) Afghanistan, find themselves overcommitted and confronting the possibility of defeat. One of the reasons that they are in this situation is that they lack a strategy. The fact that so many parties are ready to use the word strategy seems to suggest they also understand what strategy is. But they don't. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Clausewitz defined strategy as the use of the battle for the purposes of the war. For him, and just about everybody else in Europe until 1918, strategy was the art of the commander. Today strategy is too often employed simply as a synonym for policy. Bush and Blair say they have strategies when they do not. They have policies, idealised visions of a post-war order, but these are policies which are not linked to regional realities or military capabilities. The circumstances prevailing in Iraq are different from those in Afghanistan, and they in turn are unlike those on the borders of Israel and in Indonesia. What gives each of these conflicts homogeneity is less their underlying natures than the 'war on terror' itself, a phrase which creates the very unity of effects which waging that war in the first place seeks to deny.

The 'global war on terror' is astrategic (if such a word exists). Its declared objective is to eliminate a means of fighting, not to achieve a political goal. It lacks a clear geographical focus: specific wars in particular parts of the world are subsumed in an overarching but amorphous and ill-defined bigger war. Traditionally strategy has been shaped above all by considerations of space and time. The 'global war on terror' is unclear about the space in which it is set, or, rather, it is clear, but the notion that it embraces the whole world is not particularly helpful. It creates a field of operations too big for the world's only superpower. The United States has adopted a

strategy where it cannot use the battle for the purposes of the war. Even its military power cannot be sensibly and successfully applied within such a framework.

Its definition of time is equally destructive of a coherent approach to strategy, as the alternative title of the 'long war' indicates. How long is 'long'? The adjective 'long' is a relative term whose only counterpoint is 'short', and the definition of what wars are long and what short lies in the eye of the beholder. We only see the First World War as long because we are told that those who went to war, partly conditioned by the sweeping Prussian victories of 1866 and 1870, expected to be home by Christmas. However, that was not a general staff planning assumption in 1914: before the First World War most senior officers were well aware that if a major war broke out, it was likely to be longer than what had gone before. Helmuth von Moltke the elder, the chief of the Prussian general staff in 1866 and 1870, expected it to be another Seven Years War or even a Thirty Years War. In fact he was being too pessimistic. As the First World War was finished in just over four years, it could actually be argued that it was in fact a 'short war' after all. Not only was it much shorter than either the Thirty Years War or the Seven Years War, it has also proved to be shorter than many wars which have followed it, including the Second World War and, at current rates of progress, even the ongoing war in Iraq.

And there is a further major block to the formation of a coherent strategy. At least all those wars had clearly defined enemies; neither the 'global war on terror' nor the 'long war' does. Wars are defined by the hostility which underpins them: the participants need to know who the enemy is, not least in order to be able to construct a strategy with which to direct the war. The enemy in the 'global war on terror' can range from a core group of malicious individuals, notably Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, to entire ethnic and religious groups. It is revealing that 'defining the enemy' is now a growth area in strategic studies.

Strategy is a profoundly pragmatic business: it is about doing things, about applying means to ends. It is an attempt to make concrete a set of objectives through the application of military force to a particular case. Even when the Bush administration seems to be applying strategy it is not. The current 'surge' in Iraq finds its overall direction simply from the resolve to increase the number of troops in the theatre of war. Nothing has been done to produce a viable political solution towards which their efforts can be directed, a point made by General David Petraeus on 8 March 2007, in his first major statement to the press after his arrival in Iraq: 'military action is

necessary… but it is not sufficient', he said.[1] In other words strategy lies at the interface between operational capabilities and political objectives: it is the glue which binds each to the other and gives both sense. But it is even more than that: it is based on a recognition of the nature of war itself.

Strategy has to deal in the first instance not with policy, but with the nature of war. To be sure, strategy should serve the ends of policy, but it cannot do that if it is not based on a clear-eyed appreciation of war. War is distinct from policy. Over the last thirty years western military thought has been hoodwinked by the selective citation of one phrase from Carl von Clausewitz's own introduction to his unfinished text, On War, that 'war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means'.[2] That is the statement about how governments might use war; it is not a statement about the nature of war, as a reading of what follows makes clear. On War is a book, as its title self-evidently indicates, about war, not about policy. Clausewitz says very little about the relationship between war and policy, and even less about policy itself. By arguing that a second introductory but undated note, in which Clausewitz said that he regarded book I, chapter 1 of On War alone as complete, was written in 1830, shortly before his death, Michael Howard and Peter Paret have privileged that opening chapter over the rest of the text, and so elevated the nostrum concerning war's relationship to policy over many other – often competing and sometimes contradictory – ideas advanced by Clausewitz. The pre-eminent German Clausewitz scholar of modern times, Werner Hahlweg, believed that the note was written in 1827, and if he was right it belongs at the beginning, not at the end, of what we know to have been a very productive period for Clausewitz's thought. In other words there is a good case for saying that book I, chapter 1 should not be alone in receiving canonical status, and that a great deal else in On War can be regarded as the fruit of the 'late' Clausewitz. Much of the rest of the text, and especially book VIII, says different things about the relationship between war and policy, and about the nature of war.

There is of course a problem in translating the German noun *Politik* into English, since it can be rendered both as politics and as policy. Politics are inherently adversarial, and in this respect at least are like war. Policy has a more unilateral thrust. Governments have policies to tackle problems. They may adapt and refine

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[1] The Herald (Glasgow), 9 March 2007
[2] From Clausewitz's note of 10 July 1827, in On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), 69

those policies in the light of circumstances and as they implement them. (In this respect of course war shapes policy, not the other way round.) But a policy, at least in its idealised form, remains a statement of one government's intent.

War on the other hand is bilateral and even (as in the case of the Iraq war) multilateral. Governments have policies which lead them into wars, but once they are engaged in conflict those policies are shaped by the actions of the adversary. War is therefore not the unilateral application of policy any longer but the product of reciprocal exchanges between diverging policies. Moreover, that interaction itself creates an independent dynamic, that is both incremental and unpredictable. The wars which have fulfilled the policy objectives of one side, such as the wars of German unification in 1866 and 1870, have been few – and mostly also very short. More often wars themselves have shaped the policies of the belligerents, so that the governments' policies at the outset of a war have not proved consistent over its course. The actual outcomes of the war, even if still desirable from the point of view of at least one of the belligerents, are likely to have been very different from the objectives entertained at its outset. The Second World War is a case in point, the current war in Iraq even more so. As one Iraqi exile, Sami Ramadnai, has written: Bush and Blair 'allegedly launched the war at first to save the world from Saddam's WMD, then to establish democracy, then to fight al-Qaida's terrorism, and now to prevent civil war and Iranian or Syrian intervention.'[3] There could be no more graphic illustration of war's reciprocal effect on policy.

Strategy therefore has to rest on an understanding of war and war's nature because it will shape policy. That is why both Bush and Blair have lacked a strategy, because neither understood the nature of war. Both were hoodwinked by the dominant narratives used to explain the recent wars of the west, wars which put them in the framework of 1866 and 1870, not of 1914-18 or of 1939-45. From the Falklands War of 1982, through the first Gulf War of 1990-91, to the Kosovo campaign of 1999, their countries waged wars that were short and sharp, and incurred minimal casualties for their armed forces. They – and not only they, but also their electorates – came to believe that war was indeed a reliable and malleable instrument of policy.

Strategy has collapsed as a tool for the shaping and understanding of war. It no longer has coherence as an intellectual concept. It is also homeless: it has forfeited

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[3] Sami Ramadani, 'In Iraq, public anger is at last translating into unity', Guardian, 20 March 2007

the institutional framework, which provided the basis for the national use of armed force. In 2002-3 the Bush administration sidelined the Joint Chiefs of Staff and ignored the National Security Council; in London, the British government left those with real and strong concerns about the management of the post-conflict phase of the invasion of Iraq without a forum in which to express their anxieties. Neither Bush nor Blair has promoted a style of government which exploits existing institutions; both favour informal networks, which sidestep established procedures. If that is the will of the leader, it is probably impossible to counter it. However, the fact that in both the United States and Britain strategy not only has little intellectual purchase but also lacks a governmental body responsible for its creation has much older and deeper roots than the naivety of Bush and Blair.

Until 1918, as the references to Clausewitz have already suggested, strategy rested on a fairly widespread and common set of assumptions, at least within armies and within Europe. Clausewitz's definition, that it was the use of the battle for the purposes of the war, was much narrower than anything current today. For him, but also for most of those who waged war in the nineteenth century, strategy was the province of generals, not of politicians, and it concerned the conduct of war within a particular theatre of war: it was therefore much closer to what today's NATO armies would call the operational level of war. But in 1918, that definition of strategy could not account for the outcome of the First World War. The operational concepts of classical strategy could not wholly explain even the military outcome of the fighting: the German armies on the western front had not been defeated by envelopment or by breakthrough. In a broader context, strategy as defined by Clausewitz and his peers (if such there were) did not allow for the economic blockade of the Central Powers, or for the argument that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back' because starvation at home had led to revolution and the abdication of the Kaiser.

Clausewitz had said nothing about seapower, and one challenge that classical strategy had to confront in 1918 therefore was that posed by maritime strategy, particularly if the allied victory in the First World War was indeed brought about by sea power, as thinkers like Basil Liddell Hart argued in the inter-war period. Although the application of British sea power in the era of Pax Britannica had pointed the way to its importance, then as now there was a tendency to see maritime strategy as belonging in a separate compartment from strategy itself. This was an issue for the United States as much as for Britain, even more cut off from mainland Europe and equally reliant on its navy rather than its army for its principal defence.

In 1911 Julian Corbett, the first really important strategic thinker produced by Britain, who had read Clausewitz, argued that naval strategy was not a thing by itself. His lectures to the Royal Naval War College distinguished between what he called minor strategy and major strategy. The latter 'in its broadest sense has to deal with the whole resources of the nation for war. It is a branch of statesmanship. It regards the Army and Navy as parts of the one force, to be handled together; they are instruments of war. But it also has to keep in view constantly the politico-diplomatic position of the country (on which depends the effective action of the instrument), and its commercial and financial position (by which the energy for working the instrument is maintained).'[4]

Corbett's 'major strategy' prefigures what Britain would call 'grand strategy' and the United States 'national strategy'. The phrase 'grand strategy' was introduced to British military thought in the aftermath of the First World War by J.F.C. Fuller in 1923. Fuller added a further dimension to Corbett's notion of major strategy. He stated that 'our peace strategy must formulate our war strategy, by which I mean that there cannot be two forms of strategy, one for peace and one for war'.[5] Strategy was now to be applied in peacetime, since how a nation fought a war would in large part be the product of the preparations, planning and procurement it had done in peacetime.

Liddell Hart, the other great British military thinker of the inter-war period, also embraced the notion of grand strategy, contrasting it with what he called pure strategy – by which he meant the art of the general. Grand strategy's purpose was 'to coordinate and direct all the resources of the nation towards the attainment of the political object of the war – the goal defined by national policy'.[6] Grand strategy was what Britain and its allies put into effect in the Second World War. It was the application of national policy in the war, and it involved the coordination of allies and of efforts in different theatres of war: thus the overarching edifice of the British official history of the Second World War is the six volumes of the appropriately titled 'grand strategy series'.

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[4] Julian Corbett, <u>Some principles of maritime strategy</u>, ed Eric Grove (Annapolis, MD, 1988; 1st edn London, 1911), p.308
[5] J.F.C. Fuller, <u>The reformation of war</u> (London, 1923), p.218
[6] Basil Liddell Hart, <u>When Britain goes to war</u> (London, 1928), p.83

After 1945, therefore, strategy and policy had become conflated in men's minds, and this conflation remained entirely appropriate in the Cold War. As Fuller had demanded, strategy was now applied in peace as well as in war; it focused in the threat to use force, in the shape of nuclear war, in order to prevent war rather than to wage it. Moreover, if there were to be war, it would be an existential war, a war for national survival, like the two world wars but even more so. These were the circumstances in which the conflation of strategy and policy made most sense. If a nation is fighting for its existence, its national policy is to wage war: all that it does in the political realm is bent to that end.

As Clausewitz observed in book VIII of On War, 'As policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous, so will war, and this may reach the point where war attains its absolute form'.[7] In other words in major wars, policy sets goals which are more fully consonant with war's true nature, with the unfettered violence that is at its core, than is the case in wars for lesser objectives. Since 1990, the United States and Britain have fought wars that have not been wars for national survival, and so the paths of policy and strategy, which were convergent in the two world wars and in the Cold War, have become divergent. Since 9/11, Bush and Blair have tried to overcome this divergence by using the rhetoric of 'total war', or rather of the 'global war on terror'. But in doing so, they have failed to understand the nature of the war on which they have embarked, which seems far from 'total' to the societies which they seek to mobilise. A policy for national mobilisation for war does not make sense either to neutral opinion or even to their own electorates, not least when the efforts of both administrations continue to give priority to a whole raft of issues which would be of second order importance if either country were really engaged in what it saw as a major war. The true nature of the war on which their countries are embarked requires the intellectual recognition that the two elements, strategy and policy, are both separate in their needs and possibly divergent in their directions. The object is of course to bring them into harmony, but that is not easy: they are different in their natures and seek different sorts of outcomes. Generals seek outstanding victories on the battlefield but even when they achieve them they still don't necessarily win the war: Napoleon learned that, and the United States is relearning it.

We live with the intellectual legacy of the Cold War more than we recognise. Then deterrence and dissuasion were the essence of strategy: this was where reciprocity

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[7] Clausewitz, On War, book VIII, chapter 6A, p. 606

was played out, but it was a field of activity devoid of actual fighting. The wars which actually occurred were defined, in the jargon of the 1960s, as 'limited wars' or 'low intensity conflicts': in other words they were not assimilated into mainstream thinking about war, but were treated as exceptions to the rule. The latter was identified more with the war in Europe in 1944-45, but in an increasingly idealised and remote form. 'Major war', confined to a theoretical existence through war games and exercises, promoted the notion that battle was fought 'symmetrically', between forces that emulated each other and had comparable capabilities. The pursuit of balance was vital to mutually assured destruction, the foundation stone on which deterrence came to rest. But deterrence said nothing much about what generals did in wartime. Notions of victory seemed irrelevant at best and often obscene, since victory in European warfare would not, it seemed, be secured without the use of nuclear weapons and that would involve catastrophic destruction. Soldiers lost control of strategy, and so the discipline which defined and validated the art of the commander, the business of general staffs and the processes of war planning, was no longer theirs.

The discovery of operational thought, first by the army of the United States and then by the armies of NATO, was a way out of this dilemma. Required in the 1980s to think about conventional warfare, partly because of the body blow inflicted on the army of the United States by the defeat in Vietnam and partly because of the need to find useable alternatives to an all-out nuclear exchange within Europe, armies found themselves tackling war, not policy: they had to embrace war's reciprocal nature. However, in doing so, they still accepted the superstructure of the Cold War and the final arbitration of nuclear deterrence, and so continued to allow strategy to be a synonym for policy. When generals now thought about war, they called it the 'operational art', although at one level it was no more than a reiteration of classical strategy. Its obvious product, 'manoeuvre warfare' drew a straight line from Napoleon at Marengo or Jena to Norman Schwarzkopf in the first Gulf war.

Two major deficiencies have, however, increasingly dogged the dominance of operational thought in military doctrine. The first has been its tendency since the end of the Cold War to ignore the true nature of war, its reciprocity, its unpredictability and its friction. In the 1991 Gulf war none of these played as significant role as in most wars in the past: the tenets of manoeuvre war, the product of the thinking of the 1980s, were implemented with overwhelming success in short order, and so became enshrined not as the last hurrah for Cold War military thought but as the benchmark

for the future. The victory spawned a succession of ideas, among them the 'revolution in military affairs', 'network-centric warfare' and 'transformation', all of which focused on the unilateral application of military superiority. It is worth recalling that NATO's thinking on manoeuvre war had been developed against the background of presumed inferiority in the face of a Soviet invasion of northern Germany: its core idea was to use the counter-stroke within a defensive context and as a substitute for the conventional strength of the Soviet Union. Its successor concepts have assumed the use of military force in an offensive mode, based on overwhelming and apparently unanswerable military superiority.

Increasingly too operational thought has developed in a policy-free environment. This did not matter in the 1980s as the political framework was implicit within the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War, NATO armies lacked scenarios into which their operational capabilities fitted. For an army like Britain's this was not a new experience. In the nineteenth century its imperial responsibilities had put a premium on flexibility and adaptability. For other armies, used to thinking about possible wars predominantly against their neighbours, the lack of an obvious threat within Europe created intellectual uncertainty. The presentation of 'manoeuvre war' as a one-size-fits-all model covered over the fact that in the past flexibility did not necessarily have much to do with the operational level of war. Concepts like tempo and 'manoeuvrism' did not worry the heroes of Victorian 'small wars' like Garnet Wolseley. Success was predicated on an awareness of the vagaries of the climate, on its impact on medical requirements and transport needs, and on the economic infrastructure and social conditions of the region. Effective commanders had to be anthropologically and politically aware if they were to understand the dynamics of war in different regions of the globe. The 'operational level of war' tried to ignore this problem by treating the 'battlespace' as something to be shaped by common military doctrines and their attendant technologies. The only anthropological revelations contained in 'the revolution in military affairs', 'effects based war' and 'transformation' are those which concern their authors.

Thanks to Colin Powell and his intellectual legacy, American military thought has been quite explicit about its separation from the context of policy. Powell was the military advisor to Caspar Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, who in 1984 articulated the so-called 'Weinberger doctrine'. In 1992, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Powell himself set out the 'Powell doctrine'. Smarting from the effects of the Vietnam war on the US army, Powell said that US forces should be used to

achieve clear political objectives, which should be determined in advance, and that they should be deployed with overwhelming military force to achieve a quick victory: their 'exit strategy' should be clear. Powell thought he was being Clausewitzian; he was trying to integrate strategy and policy by setting clearly defined and separate spheres of responsibility for each. What he had failed to do was to recognise Clausewitz's distinction between norms and practices, between the ideal and the real. Strategy and policy are indeed distinct in theory, but strategy in practice rests on a dialogue with policy. Confronted in 1992 with Powell's logic, which effectively blocked the deployment of American troops in Bosnia, the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, memorably asked, 'What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?'[8]

The Powell doctrine has collapsed in practice. The Bush administration has been determined to use its armed forces, even when the chiefs of those armed forces advise against it or urge their employment in ways other than those favoured by the administration. Powell would no doubt say that the results of not using overwhelming force and not having a clear 'exit strategy' are evident for all to see. But in advocating a clear demarcation between strategy and policy, he prevented the engagement of one with the other, and his legacy survives in principles to which many in the United States army still adhere. The fact that General David Petraeus's call on 8 March 2007 for a political solution in Iraq was still seen as sufficiently exceptional to be newsworthy makes the point. The generals' normal currency, the operational level of war, has been kept in a separate box from policy, and there is a collective failure to appreciate the effect of war itself on the evolution and even transformation of policy itself, despite the fact that the current war in Iraq provides vivid evidence of exactly that. What the Iraq war also shows, and a point that Powell also failed to address, presumably as a consequence of his belief in American military superiority, was the fact that it would be the enemy – more than the American government – that would be trying to prevent the United States army from achieving quick victory. Classical strategy, and Clausewitz in particular, recognised that the relationship between strategy and policy was central, even if contested. Powell and his heirs have worked hard to resolve that contest by divorcing policy from operational thought. Prussian generals did much the same in 1870-71: Helmuth von Moltke the elder argued that the politician should fall silent when the war broke out. Bismarck did not let him get away with it, but Moltke's case had more legs than it deserved partly because he was

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[8] Colin Powell, with Joseph Persico, <u>My American Journey</u> (New York, 1996; 1st edn 1995), p. 576

perceived to have delivered an overwhelming victory which did provide the political outcome which Bismarck sought.

In the twenty-first century American generals, however much they may sound like Prussian generals in some of their nostrums, have not been so lucky. In Afghanistan in 2002 Bush and Rumsfeld asked the United States armed forces to fight a war totally different in design and nature from that for which they had prepared. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, equipped with one set of operational concepts, found themselves at odds with a Secretary of Defense who thought he could shape the conflict in Afghanistan to suit another. In Iraq the problem was overcome by the simple decision not to coordinate policy and the operational level of war. At CENTCOM in 2002 General Tommy Franks told Paul Wolfowitz that he should 'Keep Washington focused on policy and strategy. Leave me the hell alone to run the war.'[9] Once into Iraq, Ambassador Paul Bremer said that his job was policy and General Sanchez's was the war, and that each should stick to his own sphere.

Strategy, however, lay exactly where the two spheres intersected. By 2003 it had lost its identity: part of it had been subsumed by policy and part of it had been subsumed by operational thought. Because neither the politicians nor the soldiers had a clear grasp of what strategy was they could neither put the pieces back together again nor develop a clear grasp of the nature of the wars in which they were engaged. Moreover, without a clear grasp of strategy, they could not see what had really changed in war as opposed to what merely seemed to have changed. By confusing strategy with policy, and by calling what are in reality political effects strategic effects, governments have denied themselves the intellectual tool to manage war for political purposes, and so have allowed themselves to project their daily political concerns back into strategy.

Terrorism is the most obvious case in point. Terrorism was not invented on 9/11. It is a means to wage war not an objective of war: this is why the 'global war on terror' is so strategically illiterate. But what is new is the exaggeration of its effects through the media and in turn through the reactions of political leaders. Strategy, because it is in dialogue with policy, is affected accordingly. Its ability to put terrorism in context and in perspective is undermined. The novelty of terrorism lies not in its own actions but

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[9] Tommy Franks with Malcolm McConnell, <u>American Soldier</u> (New York, 2004), p. 440

in the responses to the governments trying to oppose it, which paradoxically themselves accord it the very effects that they seek to deny it.

Terrorism is not the only facet of contemporary conflict that is not new. Non-state actors, many of them in the business of war for personal profit, were features of medieval and early modern warfare: indeed the effort by seventeenth century European states to establish a monopoly on the use of armed force was in part a direct response to the suffering and destitution, the rape and pillage, wrought by competing freebooters, mercenaries and private military companies. Moreover, outside Europe many of those native populations which resisted colonialism in the nineteenth century did so not as representatives of states or to further political objectives, but to defend their religious beliefs, their ways of life or their control of resources: their motivations were existential rather than utilitarian. The methods that they used against their European opponents were (in today's jargon) asymmetric. Knowing that, if they directly confronted an organised and disciplined military force, they would lose, they reacted pragmatically and avoided battle. Their strengths in war rested on their local knowledge and their links to the population, and their methods were those of guerrilla warfare and even terrorism.

The identification of 'asymmetric warfare' as a fresh phenomenon reveals how naïve western strategic thought has become. As any decent commander knows, even when two armies with comparable organisations and similar weapons systems confront each other, they will not fight 'symmetrically'. Instead they seek to exploit each other's weaknesses, often looking for the line of least expectation to maximise their own relative advantage. Even the application of overwhelming military force by one side against another is 'asymmetric'. 'Symmetrical warfare' was a product of the Cold War, of the absence of war: it is what armies do in their peacetime imaginations, when they compare a putative enemy's capability with their own and then convert their conclusions into demands for fresh equipment in the defence budget. The popular belief that 'asymmetric war' is new is therefore a reflection of the way in which peacetime norms have shaped the understanding of strategy.

Nor are many of today's wars being fought for reasons that look very new. The impending security concerns of the twenty-first century, climate change, the growth of urban shanty towns, the spread of global epidemics, immigration, competition for resources, have yet to have much impact on strategy in practice. They provide the framework for modelling in defence departments, building scenarios for the future,

but their consequences are not yet with us – and it could be argued that with good management they never will be, at least as causes for war. Today's wars are being fought for very traditional reasons – for religious faith, political ideology, nationalism, and ethnic identity. Moreover they are being waged in parts of the world where armed conflict and political instability have been endemic for decades, including Iraq, Israel and Afghanistan, as well as far too much of Africa. Historical illiteracy is a besetting sin of western governments anxious to deploy forces in regions where memories are somewhat longer. Old conflicts have been given fresh energy by the rationalisations for war embraced in the west. Regional wars have been subsumed within the 'global war on terror' and so gained greater significance. Humanitarian intervention, however laudable its motivation, has frequently done less to end the sufferings of a subject people than to make them the concern of the wider international community.

In other words the big change in war has been the overt readiness of the west to use it an instrument of policy. The chronological caesura was less 2001, more 1990, less 9/11 and more the end of the Cold War. Since then deterrence has lost its salience in both the United States and the United Kingdom. The former does not use the concepts of the Cold War to manage its relationship with Iran; the latter, debating the future of the Trident missile system in the winter of 2006-7, made no effort to incorporate deterrence thinking into the wider context of national strategy and or of its defence capabilities. Before 1990 strategic studies flourished on the back of the idea that their purpose was to avoid war; since 1990 we have not woken up to the consequences of using war. If war is an instrument of policy, strategy is the tool that enables us to understand it and give us our best chance of managing it.

Part of the solution to our present dilemmas is conceptual. Reading the bits of Clausewitz that we glossed over in the Cold War would not be a bad beginning. On War's opening definition of war is not that it is a political instrument but that 'it is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will'[10]: in other words, it is the clash of two competing wills. An unopposed invasion of Iraq would not have resulted in war. An attacker needs to be resisted for fighting to occur: as Clausewitz made clear in the book of On War which accounts for a quarter of the whole, book VI, war therefore begins with defence. As a result the directions which war takes are unpredictable, because its nature is defined by the competition between two opposing elements,

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[10] Clausewitz, On War, book I, chapter 1, p. 127

with each side doing its best to prevent the other achieving its objectives. Those objectives will themselves be adapted in the light of the war's conduct and course. The more protracted the conflict, the more other factors – both those extraneous to the war itself and those intrinsic to it (including chance and what Clausewitz called 'friction' and we might call the 'fog of war') – will shape it.

There is plenty in Clausewitz that can continue to inform our current concerns, but On War will rarely, if ever, be read by statesmen or politicians: not even Bismarck, as far as we are aware, did so. The bigger and more difficult challenge is the need for institutional change, not intellectual awareness. Governments at war need and use different agencies from those they use in peace. Those NATO states contributing forces to ISAF in Afghanistan do not see themselves as at war: the domestic impacts of their military actions overseas are limited. That observation is possibly applicable even in the United States and certainly in the United Kingdom. As a result no state has sufficiently adapted its defence agencies from their Cold War focus on acquiring capabilities to the current priority which is the business of making strategy. Waging war requires institutions which can address problems that lie along the civil-military interface, and can do so on the basis of equality rather than of military subordination to civilian control. Politicians need to listen to soldiers, to what can be done in practice as opposed to what the politicians might like to be done in theory, and to do that states need institutions within which soldiers feel ready to be realistic about the military issues – and about the nature of war.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom recent public pronouncements have made clear the absence of institutions which enable this to happen – or their failure to deliver where, as in the United States, they already exist. In the United States service discontents have in the main been confined to the anger of retired senior officers. In Britain, both the Chief of the General Staff in November 2006 and the First Sea Lord more recently, in February 2007, have briefed journalists on issues that belong squarely on the interface between civil and military leadership, and where their views differ from those of the government. Both their statements and the press's reaction to them suggest that Britain lacks the machinery for the proper articulation of their concerns. This has not always been the case. In 1902, in the era of classical strategy, Britain created the Committee of Imperial Defence to bring service chiefs and political leaders around the same table. In 1916 David Lloyd George created a war cabinet for the same purpose, and it possessed executive as well as advisory powers. This was a mechanism adopted as recently as 1982 by Margaret Thatcher.

The essential features of such bodies were: comparable representation from both sides of the military and political divide; regular, even daily, meetings in time of war, so that strategy remained rooted and responsive to the situation on the ground; and equality in the weight given to military and political viewpoints.

Today Britain does not even possess the institutional basis from which to begin. The Nott-Lewin reforms of 1982 gave the chief of the defence staff his own staff, and so emancipated him from reliance on the single service staffs. They made him the government's principal strategic advisor. But there is little public evidence that the chief of the defence staff has had much influence since the early days of the Blair government. The prime minister listened to General Sir Charles Guthrie; neither of his successors, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce or General Sir Mike Walker, seems – at least overtly – to have had much impact on Blair or the development of strategy. Precisely how does the chief of the defence staff make his views heard? Joint operational control of the British armed forces is exercised through the Permanent Joint Headquarters at Northwood. What are the relationships between Northwood and the chief of the defence staff in Whitehall? This is an internal Ministry of Defence issue. More importantly, how does either link to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or to the Department for International Development? All three government departments – the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development – are represented on the Prime Minister's committee on Defence and Overseas Policy, but the chief of defence staff attends only by invitation.

If wars are to be waged in the twenty-first century, those waging them will need a firm grasp of strategy. Strategy will not flourish if the armed services are silent on the issue, or feel themselves to be constrained by norms in relation to the proper and 'politically correct' conduct of civil-military relations. Just as politicians will never read On War, and so – by extension – will fail fully to understand war's true nature, so it is beholden on servicemen to embrace a sense of strategy that is at once both classical and unfettered by its proper links to policy. The first step in this process is a clear articulation of what strategy is; the second is its application in the machinery of state.