




THE UTILITY OF FORCE

RUPERT SMITH

A KNOPF  BOOK

The
Utility of Force

The Art of War in the Modern World

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*To all those who followed me or took my direction
when I thought these thoughts*

Preface

This book has been forty years, and then three, in the making: a life in military service, and a period of reflection.

From the time the 1991 Gulf War ended until I left the army in 2002 I was asked if I was going to write a book, and on each occasion I said no. Sometimes I asked my questioners what the book was to be about, and they would answer along the lines of, “You have done so much, surely there is a story to tell.” I took from these answers that they expected some account, chronological with anecdotes and personalities and events encountered along the way, and the more the telling uncovered a fresh angle on events, the better it would be. I have not kept a record in such a way as to be at all confident in telling such a story, even if I had thought about my service as source material for such a book.

Then, just before I retired, I was standing amidst a number of people, glass of wine in one hand and sandwich in the other, indulging in the hospitality of a learned institute prior to giving a seminar on, as I recall, “The Prospects for a European Defence Identity,” when I was asked the question again. My reflex response was the usual denial. One of those who heard the question and answer was a great historian, a man whose writings and wisdom I admired; he said, “Don’t say no, now. When you have retired write a report to self and then you will know if you have something you want to write for others to read.” From that conversation on I have reflected on this advice, and while I have not, as such, written that report to self, I have thought at length about what might be included in it.

What do I report about? What have I to say about where or when I have served that is not already part of the record? After each event reports were written by me and others about all salient issues: those involved, the situation, the actions taken, the equipment or lack of it, and so on. Why repeat myself? Or did I, deliberately or not, leave something unsaid? These thoughts, or as one of my French comrades would say, *thinks*, have slowly distilled into one report entry:

On every occasion that I have been sent to achieve some military objective in order to serve a political purpose, I, and those with me, have had to change our method and reorganize in order to succeed. Until this was done we could not use our force effectively. On the basis of my lengthy experience, I have come to consider this as normal—a necessary part of every operation. And after forty years of service, and particularly the last twelve, I believe I have gained an understanding of how to think about this inevitable and crucial phenomenon of conflict and warfare. The need to adapt is driven by the decisions of the opponent, the choice of objectives, the way or method force is applied, and the forces and recourses available, particularly when operating with allies. All of this demands a

understanding of the political context of the operation, and the role of the military within it. On when adaptation and context are complete can force be applied with utility.

In stating the foregoing I am not raising the old cry of armies preparing for the last war. Indeed, if armies do not prepare for the last war, they frequently prepare for the wrong one—if for no other reason than that governments will usually fund only against the anticipated primary threat as opposed to risk, and the adversary will usually play to his opponents' weakness rather than strength. For example: when we deployed to the Gulf in 1990 we went in circumstances that lay outside the parameters of British defence policy since the late 1960s. As a result only the very oldest equipment had been designed to operate in a desert. The more recent acquisitions had been designed to work only in north-west Europe—and therefore none had sand filters, a vital necessity in desert warfare—and all within a concept of battle associated with that great confrontation, the Cold War. In this grand scenario the armies of the West, mobilized and under NATO command, would conduct a forward defence, while the air forces, in the main those of the United States, attacked the Warsaw Pact columns and the Soviet heartland, first with conventional high explosive and then with nuclear weapons. This was to be total war, and it was for this we were organized, particularly in the fields of supply, maintenance and medical support. But our aims in the Gulf in 1991 were limited; the war was not total. In addition, the British forces were deployed as minority partners in a coalition dominated by the United States and without the mechanisms of political control that have been evolved over the years by NATO. On the plus side, Iraq's generals—or was it only Saddam Hussein?—chose to fight in such a way and on such terrain that they played to many of the strengths of the U.S. and NATO way of war, particularly in the use of air power. And so, in these circumstances it was necessary to adapt our method and organization, concentrating on those to do with land warfare and its support, while continuing to play to our strengths in the air.

Change or adaptation is also required when the objective that is to be achieved by military force is different from that prepared for. In the case of the Gulf War this was not necessary since the objective for the actual use of military force, as opposed to its threat, was very similar to that we had prepared for in Europe: the destruction of the Soviet Operational Manoeuvre Groups being much the same as the destruction of Saddam's Republican Guard. Thus much of the preparation for the tactical battle in north-west Europe was still applicable. However, when military force is expected to be deployed to achieve an objective different from that prepared for, such as the coercion of President Milosevic of Serbia to hand over the province of Kosovo to an international administration, then this will also affect the nature of the battle and require an adapted or new method of operating, as well as changes in the process of command and organization.

Perhaps the most extreme example of this change of objective is to be found in the employment of the British army in Northern Ireland, where it is operating in aid of the constabulary. Indeed, in British army jargon this type of operation goes under the heading of Military Aid to the Civil Power. The long history of such operations, founded in the days of empire and practiced frequently in the retreat from empire, has meant that for the British army many changes in tactical method and organization have become institutionalized and applied as similar situations are identified. In other words, the British army has been in a constant state of change and adaptation for good operational reasons. However,

has retained much the same organization throughout this period, adapting its formations and units each and every operation. Doctrine has been used more to justify the basic organization than explain why the adaptations have worked.

All armies are facing the need for transformation, particularly those of NATO and the former Warsaw Pact, but currently this is a debate concerning technology, numbers and organization—no how these forces are to be fought, and to what purpose.

I have spent many years thinking about, practising and implementing the use of force, and what I have to report is an approach to considering the use of military force and then applying it to achieve one purpose. I am penning this report at a time of global security concerns, when military force is being considered or actually used in a wide range of scenarios, often with allies. Even a few examples reflect the complexity of these scenarios: terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, peacemaking, peacekeeping, control of the mass movement of people, environmental protection, the protection of availability of some scarce resource, be it energy, water or food. There are many more, possibly less obvious, examples, but the point remains the same: military force is considered a solution, or part of a solution, in a wide range of problems for which it was not originally intended or configured.

I began my military service in 1962 and was commissioned an officer in 1964; in training and theory I was therefore a product of the industrial war machine deemed necessary for the Cold War. And yet, possibly barring my experience in the 1991 Gulf War, all the military operations I have participated in and commanded were not those of industrial war. As a result, I have spent many years bringing reconfigured forces into situations seeking a solution—most especially during the final decade of my forty years' service, when I held senior command in a number of major international theatres, starting with the British Armoured Division in the Gulf War of 1991, UNPROFOR in Bosnia in 1995, the forces in Northern Ireland from 1996 to 1998, and as the NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) from 1998 to 2001. With the exception of my time in Northern Ireland I was commanding forces of other nations—nineteen in NATO in addition to partnership countries; nineteen in UNPROFOR, including contingents from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Russia, the Ukraine and Egypt—and being commanded by officers of other nations representing either their own nation or an international organization. In addition, I have had staff officers on my teams from a number of other nations, including Pakistan, Russia, Australia and New Zealand. I have led forces against both states and those non-state actors that are now so predominant in our modern military operations. At the same time, my service has afforded me detailed insight into the forces and capabilities of many of the militaries of the world, including the most prominent.

Between 1992 and 1994 I was the assistant chief of the defence staff, responsible for the oversight of all the UK's operations. Here, as in all my deployments throughout the decade, I was working closely with those concerned with achieving the overall political objective so as to apply force to best advantage. In other words, I worked in tandem with diplomats and politicians, civil servants and officials of the UN and other international organizations, implementing the largely political mandate handed down to me. It was this insight into the civilian national and international decision-making

processes that I took with me into subsequent commands, and which led me to realize there was dissonance between the organization of existing forces and their operational activity. No less, became obvious to me that the extant theories of military organization and application and the unfolding realities were wide apart. No more was I part of a world of wars in which the civilian and military establishments each had its distinct role in distinct stages. The new situations were always a complex combination of political and military circumstances, though there appeared to be little comprehension as to how the two became intertwined—nor, far more seriously from the perspective of the military practitioner, how they constantly influenced each other as events unfolded. I therefore set about trying to understand this matter, first and foremost for my own purposes in command. It was through these musings that I realized we were now in a new era of conflict—in fact a new paradigm—which I define as “war amongst the people”; one in which political and military developments go hand in hand. This understanding greatly aided me in my military work. In my period of reflection post-retirement, it was this theoretical idea that was the background to my unwritten report to senior officers. Ultimately the two merged into this book.

The Utility of Force is intended to explain how force can be used to greater utility—as both a conceptual and practical discussion. Indeed, I must emphasize practicalities: my service record is one of practical experience at all levels of command and in a wide range of circumstances. This point is significant because alongside theory there is also a need to understand the practicalities of the use of force and the realities of operations and combat. Indeed, I have come to see that this lack of knowledge often compounds the lack of understanding of conflict: the politicians quite rightly expect the military to respond to their requirements, but too often do so without any comprehension of the practical considerations of the matter, let alone conceptual ones. If force is to continue to be used, and to have utility, this situation must change.

The book follows a chronological development, but is a thematic discussion rather than a definitive history. Indeed, its three major parts may be read separately as extended individual essays, or else together as a multifaceted examination. I make no claim to a comprehensive telling, but rather a reflection, my own, on the world I lived in for many years, on the tools and methods I was given and trained to use, on the confrontation and conflicts I experienced, and on the different approaches ultimately arrived at within them. To this extent I must emphasize I have made every effort to refer either to the military as a whole or to the individual services when relevant, but I am aware that there may be places in which I use the term “army” in a collective sense for all military services—in the cases to the air and the naval services I offer my sincere apologies. I have also used the male pronoun throughout as a matter of simplicity. A note on sources may also be of use: this is not a work of definitive research. Facts, figures and narrative tales of the past are offered only as examples of the analyses and themes, and sourced only where a specific quotation makes this necessary. There are also technical issues: force and its uses is a subject of some breadth. However, in seeking to bring my ideas to a wider audience I have tried to avoid using military jargon or technical terms, although in some cases this has been unavoidable. This is especially true to the Introduction, which is somewhat technically loaded as a basis for the following narrative. To those with no interest in such matters, I offer George Orwell’s excellent advice to his readers in explaining the intermingling of political and military concepts in his book *Homage to Catalonia*:

If you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip; I am trying to keep the political parts of this narrative in separate chapters for precisely that purpose. But at the same time it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish Civil War from a purely military angle. It was above all a political war.

Finally, I wish to emphasize this is a work of interpretation rather than an academic monograph—and it is in such a spirit I recommend it be read.

Part of my reluctance to write in the first place is that I distrust memory; my own as much as others. I am not suggesting we lie deliberately, but the moment an event has occurred and we know its outcome we are prone to reorder and reinterpret the information and decisions we took in light of that outcome. This very natural human characteristic is evident to anyone who has filled in an insurance claim after they have damaged a car. It also leads to the phenomenon of “Failure is an orphan but success has a thousand fathers.” Keeping this in mind, I must emphasize I have drawn on my memories to illustrate the points I am making, not in order to provide a record, and I ask that those who were there with me at the time and have another memory bear with me in this indulgence.

Over the years I have encountered and been privileged to work with many people—literally thousands—who have either knowingly or unknowingly contributed to my understanding of force and forces. To them all I owe a debt of thanks and I have dedicated this book to those who took my lead or direction as we endeavoured by force of arms to impose our will on our opponents. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the many staff colleges, academic institutions and intellectual fora that have given me a platform to introduce and develop my ideas.

The creation of this book was aided and abetted by many. Wilfrid Holroyd was an eloquent and speedy researcher, who managed to cover great swathes of history with due aplomb. Thanks also to those long-suffering friends who read the early drafts and whose comments and encouragement guided the revisions, most especially Dennis Staunton, John Wilson, Chris Riley and Laura Citron—who for two critical months in the final stages of producing a manuscript also helped keep the household nearly sane. All errors and misjudgements are, however, entirely my own. I am in debt to Professor Nigel Howard, whose explanation of Confrontation Analysis and Game Theory at a seminar in 1995 excited my interest. Our subsequent discussions helped me to order my thoughts and the lessons I had learned previously into a coherent structure with the result that, for the first time, I was able to understand my experiences within a theoretical model which allowed me to use them further. Michael Sissons, my agent, always believed in this project—even if it took time to become presentable. Allen Lane, Stuart Proffit, my commissioning editor, provided unfailing and good-humoured support and advice which did much to shape this book. Liz Friend-Smith made contact with Stuart and the world of Penguin very smooth. Thanks also to Trevor Horwood for polishing the manuscript.

effectively, and to John Noble for the comprehensive index, a fascinating read in itself. Finally and primarily, this book would not have been written if it had not been for Ilana Bet-El, my partner and author, historian and journalist. Her enthusiasm for the project gained a publishing contract in the first place, my efforts having failed to pass even my agent, and has sustained us both subsequently throughout the process of producing a manuscript—and then painfully correcting it. Her skill, knowledge, analytical capability and insights, and contribution to our debate are in evidence on every page.

Introduction: Understanding Force

War no longer exists. Confrontation, conflict and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world—most noticeably, but not only, in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Palestinian Territories—and states still have armed forces which they use as a symbol of power. Nonetheless, war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists.

Consider this: the last real tank battle known to the world, one in which the armoured formations of two armies manoeuvred against each other supported by artillery and air forces, one in which the tanks in formation were the deciding force, took place in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war on the Golan Heights and in the Sinai Desert. Since then thousands more tanks have been built and purchased, especially by the groups of nations in NATO and the former Warsaw Pact. Indeed, by 1991, when the extended event known as the Cold War ended, NATO allies were estimated to have over 23,000 tanks between them whilst the Warsaw Pact states had nearly 52,000. Yet over the past thirty years armoured formations have either supported the application of air power and artillery, as in the 1991 and 2003 wars in Iraq or in Chechnya in 2000, or else their units and sub-units have been committed piecemeal often to provide heavily protected infantry support vehicles in urban operations such as those now undertaken by coalition forces in Iraq or by Israel in the occupied territories. But use of the tank as a machine of war organized in formation, designed to do battle and attain a definitive result, has not occurred during three decades. Nor, for that matter, is it ever likely to occur again, for the wars in which armoured formations could and should be used are no longer practical. This does not mean a battle fought with large groups of forces and weapons is no longer possible, but it does mean that it will not be an industrial one in either intent or prosecution; industrial war no longer exists.

This reality is now acknowledged by some military planners who are advocating rapid and light forces. However, such advocacy largely refers to the circumstances of modern battle—but within an outdated concept of war. And yet it is the entire concept of war that has changed: it has shifted into a new paradigm.

Since the events of 11 September 2001 there has been much discussion of Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations, a discussion which has been useful in trying to come to terms with the motives of terrorists and their horrific activities. But in order to understand the true implications of these to the world in which we live, and most certainly for understanding how the premises of war in all its wider definitions have changed, one may be better served in applying Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions. Kuhn noted that all scientific communities—in this case military thinkers—practice within a set of received beliefs that are rigidly upheld, to the extent of suppressing novelty

that are subversive to them. A shift occurs when an anomaly finally does subvert the existing traditions of scientific practice. This is a revolution, what Kuhn calls “a paradigm shift” that necessitates both new assumptions and the reconstruction of prior assumptions—which is the main reason it is strongly resisted.

Reflecting upon war, it is clear the current shift in paradigm began with the introduction of nuclear weapons in 1945, and the point in which it became dominant was in 1989–91, at the end of the Cold War—a title that is a gross historical misnomer, since it was never a war but rather a prolonged confrontation; but for the sake of clarity I shall conform to it. For it was the introduction of nuclear power that made industrial war practically impossible as a deciding event; indeed, the Cold War was conducted within the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Nonetheless, strategic planners in support of this concept, developed forces within the old paradigm of industrial war—but in parallel and often with the same forces, they were fighting other wars such as those in Vietnam and Algeria—increasingly non-industrial wars against non-state opponents. In other words, the Kuhnian anomaly occurred possibly as early as 1945, and whilst acknowledged by the political and military leadership as a reality its true significance was resisted by military planners, not least because there was little choice: integral to MAD was the credibility of the prospect of cataclysmic total war. The ending of the Cold War unmasked the new paradigm that had long been lurking, although it was not necessarily comprehended as such. Indeed, the ensuing debate of the past fifteen years has generally settled on the organization and development of forces and resources within the old paradigm.

It is now time to recognize that a paradigm shift in war has undoubtedly occurred: from armies with comparable forces doing battle on a field to strategic confrontation between a range of combatants, not all of which are armies, and using different types of weapons, often improvised. The old paradigm was that of interstate industrial war. The new one is the paradigm of war amongst the people—and this is the background to this book.

I am aware that the term “paradigm” has become something of a catchphrase in our times, usually intended as a synonym to a proven model. To be absolutely clear, I do not use it in that sense, but rather in the way Kuhn defined paradigms, as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.” The paradigm of interstate industrial war clearly served the military and political communities in such a capacity, but it is now time to comprehend the paradigm of war amongst the people in the same way.

War amongst the people is both a graphic description of modern warlike situations, and also a conceptual framework: it reflects the hard fact that there is no secluded battlefield upon which armies engage, nor are there necessarily armies, definitely not on all sides. To be clear: this is not asymmetric warfare, a phrase I dislike invented to explain a situation in which conventional states were threatened by unconventional powers but in which conventional military power in some formulation would be capable of both deterring the threat and responding to it. War amongst the people is different: it is the reality in which the people in the streets and houses and fields—all the people, anywhere—are the battlefield. Military engagements can take place anywhere: in the presence of civilians, against civilians, in defence of civilians. Civilians are the targets, objectives to be won, as much as a

opposing force. However, it is also not asymmetric warfare since it is also a classic example of ~~disinterest in the change of paradigms~~. The practice of war, indeed its “art,” is to achieve an asymmetry over the opponent. Labelling wars as asymmetric is to me something of a euphemism to avoid acknowledging that my opponent is not playing to my strengths and I am not winning. In which case perhaps the model of war rather than its name is no longer relevant: the paradigm has changed.

Nation-states, especially Western ones and Russia but others too, all send in their armies, the conventionally formulated military forces, to do battle—to have a war—in these battlefields, and they do not succeed. Indeed, throughout the past fifteen years both the Western allies and the Russians have entered into a series of military engagements that have in one way or another spectacularly failed to achieve the results intended, namely a decisive military victory which would in turn deliver a solution to the original problem, which is usually political. This is basically due to a deep and abiding confusion between *deploying* a force and *employing* force.

In many cases forces have been deployed and then force has not been employed. The UN in the Balkans is an example: by 1995 there were tens of thousands of UN troops based mostly in Croatia and Bosnia, but they were barred by the Security Council resolutions that placed them there from using any actual military force. As Commander UNPROFOR in Bosnia in 1995 I spent a lot of time trying to explain to a range of senior figures in the UN and in various capital cities precisely the issue: that keeping over 20,000 lightly armed troops in the midst of the warring parties was strategically unsustainable and tactically inept; that presence alone amounts to little. Or, as I used to put it to my international stakeholders, you become a shield of one side and a hostage of the other.

In other cases force has been employed but with little if any effect, as in the no-fly zones over Iraq in the years preceding the 2003 war, when targets were constantly being hit by coalition aircraft far away from the media glare (apparently known amongst some pilots as “recreational bombing”), but with very little consequence with regard to the continuing horrors of the Saddam Hussein regime. Sometimes great force has been employed, as in the case of the Gulf War of 1991 or in Chechnya in 2000, and the result has been less than strategically conclusive: the military operation was a success but the essential strategic problem remained unresolved. On other occasions force has been applied in such a way that the method and its purpose is difficult to explain to allies and the public at large, as in Kosovo in 1999, when a bombing campaign anticipated to last a week or so stretched over seventy-eight days and eventually involved hitting civilian infrastructure in Serbia proper rather than Kosovo—even if it turned out to be the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, a hit for which I was *personally* blamed by the Beijing press—in order to attain the retreat of the Milosevic forces. Or, as in the last war in Iraq—which caused a great rift amongst allies before, during and after its engagement, and to this day—when the actual military campaign was brief but the aftermath and its entanglement in civilian life was lengthy and messy.

In all these cases military force may have achieved a local military success, but frequently that success failed to produce its political promise: there was no decisive victory. In other words throughout these fifteen years statesmen, politicians, diplomats, admirals, generals and air marshals have had difficulty both in applying military force to advantage and in explaining their intentions and actions. For example, throughout 2003–4 the Israelis were wrestling with the same problem, as were the coalition forces in Iraq. This endemic problem is the result of the shift in the paradigm of war and the continued resistance to it: politicians and soldiers are still thinking in terms of the old paradigm.

and trying to use their conventionally configured forces to that end—whilst the enemy and the battle have changed. As a result, the utility of the effort is minimal: the force may be massive and impressive, but it is not delivering the required results, nor indeed any result that is in proportion to its assumed capabilities. As with the difference between deploying and employing a force, this reflects a lack of understanding of the *utility* of force—which is the core issue at stake, and the subject of this book.

It may be as well to begin this investigation with a discussion of military force, since it is common to all paradigms of war—and unfortunately is often commonly misunderstood. Force is the basis of all military activity, whether in a theatre of operations or in a skirmish between two soldiers. It is both the physical means of destruction—the bullet, the bayonet—and the body that applies it. It has been so since the beginning of time. Indeed, the essence of force and its military uses are identical now to those described in the Bible, Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, the Greek or Nordic myths, and just about any historical book on battle and warfare.

Military force when employed has only two immediate effects: it kills people and destroys things. Whether or not this death and destruction serve to achieve the overarching or political purpose that the force was intended to achieve depends on the choice of targets or objectives, all within the broad context of the operation. That is the true measure of its utility. It follows that to apply force with utility implies an understanding of the context in which one is acting, a clear definition of the result to be achieved, an identification of the point or target to which the force is being applied—and, as important as all the others, an understanding of the nature of the force being applied. Imagine a landslide that needs to be cleared from a road. The objective is the pile of rocks, the context is the surrounding hills that are unstable, including the villages upon them and the infrastructure of electricity, gas and water that surrounds the area. The definition of the result to be achieved is a clear road, as quickly as possible. The pile of rocks on the road is the target to which force is to be applied. That leaves the basic question as to the nature of the force: should it be mechanical diggers or explosives? Each poses a promise of a solution, but possibly at different speeds and costs—the explosives would be quicker, but may set off another landslide; the diggers would be safer, but slower. Either option would deliver a clear road, but the utility of each would be different.

Military force is applied by armed forces composed of men, matériel and their logistic support. The capability of these armed forces to act is never merely an inventory of the three but rather a function of their organization, and always in relation to the opposing forces, the circumstances of the time and the specific battle. This is because the enemy in any fight is not inert or merely a constant object of plans. The enemy is *always* a reacting being that not only has no intention of falling in with your plans, but will actively be setting out to foil them—whilst making plans of his own at the same time. The enemy is an adversary, an opponent, not a sitting target. Response and adjustment are as much part of a plan of attack unfolding as the original blueprint. Without fully comprehending this, most military activity, at every level, will never be clear to the onlooker. Indeed, I have learned this at personal physical cost: I was blown up. In Northern Ireland in 1978, in concentrating my company's efforts on the IRA's principal activities and threats (I believe successfully), I lost sight of the need to keep learning. I did not credit them soon enough with an ability to change the nature of their attack.

my forces, as opposed to improving their capacity to continue with what they were doing. In the event they ran a device into the marketplace of Crossmaglen when a market was in process, which they had not done before. The radio-controlled bomb was carefully designed and placed to have only the most local effect; I and another officer, on a day I thought predictably safe, were caught in the blast and a fireball. I had failed to realize that my enemy had a free, creative mind and was not thinking nor was going to think like me. From that point on I tried to construct all my operations, in Ireland and elsewhere, so as to learn continuously what my enemy was intending to do rather than assuming knowledge.

An armed force may be made up of either regular or irregular forces, but there is a difference. A regular force is employed to serve a political purpose decided upon by a lawful government, which instructs the military, as a legally sanctioned and formed body answerable to that government, to apply the force. A regular force is therefore legal, deadly and destructive. An irregular force can be just as deadly and destructive, but operates outside the state, and therefore the laws of that state. However, their irregularity does not in itself put them beyond the protection of international law. Irregular forces range from the gangs of organized crime through resistance and terrorist organizations to guerrilla forces and even some structured as armies, such as the Vietcong towards the end of the Vietnam War.

An armed force is essential to any independent geopolitical entity that is part of the international system, yet it must always be made legal—converted into a regular military force. Over the centuries emperors, kings, princes and democratic governments have pondered this aim since all have faced the same problem: how to have an armed force available to advance and protect their interests, at an affordable financial and political cost, and in such a way that it does not threaten them. Historic circumstances have produced solutions different in their detail but all with four common attributes, all authorized and rooted in the structure of the legal recognized state—which is what sets them apart from irregular forces:

- an organized military body,
- an hierarchical structure answerable to the highest in the entity or the state,
- legal status to bear arms and to have a separate disciplinary code,
- centralized funding for the purchase of warlike matériel.

These four attributes are all apparent in the military forces of today across the globe, and are indeed their underpinning. Together, they ensure a military force works cohesively and legally—but also entirely separately from society. A force draws its members from society, and exists in order to serve it, but nevertheless in order to preserve its identity it functions with its own codes in parallel to society. It can be seen that over time irregular forces are often brought under control by the political body, often with difficulty—in an attempt to make the force regular.

The conversion of an irregular force into a regular force is equally important from the public perspective: ~~we tolerate this lethal body within our society because it is under the control of~~ elected leaders and so operates within the law. In conflict zones around the world, from the Balkans to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Afghanistan, it is sometimes difficult to see when a regular military force has lost its legitimacy and reverted to being an armed irregular force, whilst in some cases an irregular force is transiting towards legitimacy and becoming a regular military force. It is easy enough to see that a drug-funded warlord in Afghanistan heads an irregular force, but is the PLO, when operating in Gaza or the occupied territories, a regular or irregular force? Or when the elements of the old Yugoslav army, a regular force known as the JNA, became the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) in Bosnia in 1991, did this formation become an irregular force or was it another regular force? This problem of identifying the regularity of a force applies to any armed independence movement and to the vast majority of our conflicts today, and it is one the international community has yet to grapple with coherently, as we shall see in the third part of this book. For the majority of our conflicts involve the legitimacy of the sides and their causes, including their military forces. In Bosnia, for example, the international community did not recognize the Bosnian Serbs as a separate entity, which is why it was difficult to define the legitimacy of the BSA.

In the Western world we live in an age of growing uninterest in all aspects of military force. Whilst the horrors of 11 September 2001 induced a renewed public interest in security, and in the U.S. a vast increase in defence spending, in overall terms since the end of the Cold War public discourse on matters military has mostly been relegated to debates on defence budgets and the legality and morality of the use of force—whilst discussion of the actual meaning of force, and its utility, has become nearly obsolete. Indeed, the public international outcry and discourse in the lead-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the invasion of Iraq by a U.S.-led coalition in March 2003, reflected that in many ways deciding the morality and legality of the use of force automatically defined its utility: if it was moral and legal it would be successful and deliver the desired result; if not the inverse would be true. Yet this cannot be so; whilst the application of force for immoral reasons or in an illegal way is not to be countenanced, it is also not a sufficient manner in which to understand a core reality: we the people need a force as a basic element of our lives for two generic overarching purposes—defence and security. Put more particularly, or even personally, we need people to defend our homes and ourselves and to secure our interests. Like every other aspect of force, these two purposes are eternal—which means that in times of peace as in times of war the maintenance of a force can never be entirely dismissed, even if it is expensive; nor can a focus upon the morality and legality of the use of force supplant the very basic need to understand its utility.

In recent years, especially since the end of the Cold War, the basic deadly purpose of a military force has become obscured and its independent nature, as defined by its four basic attributes listed previously, has often been misunderstood in popular Western perception, especially as wars have become media events far away from any ongoing social reality. This obscuring and misunderstanding is equally true of the politicians who seek to both deploy and employ military forces for humanitarian and policing purposes for which they are neither trained nor intended. This does not mean that the hierarchical and disciplinary attributes of a force cannot be adapted for wider use, nor that weapons should not be used other than for purely military activity between armies. However, it is necessary to understand that in many of the circumstances into which we now deploy, our forces as a *military force* will not be effective. The coalition forces in Iraq were a classic example of this situation: the

effectiveness as a military force ended once the fighting between military forces was completed May 2003. And though they then went on to score a series of victories in local skirmishes, they had greatly diminished—if any—effect as an occupation and reconstruction force, which had become the main mandate. They were neither trained nor equipped for the task, and therefore could not fulfil it. To use the parlance of this book, there was little utility to the force.

The pursuit of both defence and security is adversarial, emanating from confrontations apparent and potential. Confrontations between people with differing interests and priorities are endemic within all societies. When those societies that are called states confront one another over some issue, and that cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties, and they seek to resolve the matter by force of arms, we call the resulting conflict war—even if it is currently inappropriate, as stated at the start of the objective of both sides being to establish their respective versions of peace. Generally, except in self-defence, the use of military force is seen as an act of last resort to be entered into only after all other measures to achieve a resolution have been exhausted. Over the past centuries states have developed laws and protocols to manage these conflicts—generally known as the Geneva Conventions—together with military and governmental institutions to conduct them. Once at war the adversaries whilst expected to obey the Conventions, do not have to play by the same rules of the game; indeed much of generalship involves arranging to play on a pitch, in a style and to rules that suit your side and disadvantage the other. Furthermore, and unlike all other socially acceptable behaviour except some sports, wars and fights are not competitions: to be second is to lose.

Wars and conflicts are conducted at four levels—political, strategic, theatre and tactical—with each level sitting within the context of the other, in descending order from the political; it is this that gives context to all the activities of all the levels aimed at the same objectives, and enables coherence between them. The first, political, level is the source of power and decision. This level has always existed in that armies enter combat not merely because two or more of them happen to be hanging around an empty battlefield and decide to fill in some time but because an issue between two or more political entities cannot be settled in other ways and therefore military means are resorted to. Historically, the political and military leaderships of a state or entity tended to be identical, since the ruler was usually the prince or king who both made the policy and led his army—if only nominally. With the evolution of nation-states throughout the nineteenth century the political and military leaderships became separate in democracies and have remained so to this day. The position of the queen in the UK and the U.S. president in relation to their nations' armed forces, although each constitutional arrangement is different, reflects the historical unity of the political and military leaderships. In modern conflict it is the political leadership that controls the military—and it is there that the purpose of entering into the conflict is decided. This decision must be taken in relation to the threat posed to whatever it is that is valued—be it territory, sovereignty, trade, resource, honour, justice, religion or anything else. Like any other major decision, in life as in war, it can be taken only after an evaluation, first of the risk of the threat materializing, and second of what is actually risked if the threat succeeds. For example when faced with the ultimatum of 3 September 1939, giving him two hours to begin withdrawing his troops from Poland or else be at war with Britain, Hitler knew the threat would materialize, but clearly deemed it not sufficiently threatening to his plans and actions. Conversely, Chamberlain and his government, having watched Hitler first take the Sudetenland then march into Poland, knew the threat

was materializing before them, with the distinct possibility of it reaching the British Isles—and therefore knew what was at risk. Other than negotiating with Hitler or simply waiting for his forces arrive, there was no option other than to issue an ultimatum, and then go to war.

It is during this analysis of threats and risks that the role of military force is introduced, in terms of what it is expected to achieve and the manner of its achievement. The purist will argue that this should be decided early in the debate, but in practice this only occurs with an imminent threat. In the main, this policy debate is about anticipated threats and unfolds much like decisions about insurance: we know we need some, but not so much as to inhibit life today to cover some distant prospect that may not occur. Nonetheless, since the policy provides the nest for the strategy, in peacetime the strategist must still be involved with the formulation of the former. For it is he who brings the harsh realities of combat to the debate and the product of his efforts is to be found in the quality, morale, adaptability, equipment and quantity of the forces available to his successors when faced with an opponent.

Having made a decision at the political level to enter conflict, activity moves to the strategic level in which the political purpose of having recourse to military force, either as a potential or in the actual use of force, is translated into military formations and acts. This translation then gives rise first to the existence of the force itself, and subsequently to its deployment and employment. However, it must never be forgotten that the political considerations provide the context within which the strategy rests. Therefore the relationship between the political and strategic levels must always be very close, to the point of engaging in continuous reassessment and debate, which does not stop until the overall purpose or aim is achieved. At the same time, it must always be remembered that the political objective and the military strategic objective are not the same, and are never the same: the military strategic objective is achieved by military force whilst the political objective is achieved as a result of the military success.

It is the task of the strategic commander to understand fully the object of his endeavours and the forces and resources available to him, to the degree that he can select his aim. The word “aim” encompasses more than a task or objective: it is both a target and the direction of all senses on that target so that one’s strength or force is focused to hit that target with the greatest accuracy and effect. The strategic aim can be difficult to define and yet it is essential to do so. Without an aim firmly linked to the political purpose it is difficult to use force to advantage, because the commander does not know what outcome or effect must be achieved in order to support the achievement of the overall political purpose.

Devising the strategy to achieve the aim involves striking a series of compromises. There is no such thing as a perfect strategy or even plan; indeed, to seek such perfection is to forget or deny that the enemy is not inert and has a free creative part in the conflict which is directly opposed to one’s own. As such, one should be seeking to devise a strategy that is better than his opponent’s in the circumstances. Nor is the expression of a strategy a carefully crafted plan, but rather a desired pattern to events. As I put it in a directive to my commanders in November 1990, prior to our departure to the Gulf for the 1991 war with Iraq: “Command in war rarely involves the rehearsal of a carefully laid plan. The enemy, who is missing in peace, is taking every step he can to destroy the coherence of our organization and plans. It is the will and the method of overcoming the enemy that decides the outcome.”

A strategy therefore is an expression of the aim and its links to the overall purpose and the context of the conflict, together with the limitations on action that flow from that political purpose in the circumstances. It will describe the desired pattern to events together with the measures intended to achieve this pattern, and it will allocate forces and resources. Finally, it should appoint the necessary commanders and state their responsibilities and authorities. The compromises are in the main centre on the nature of the pattern to events and the allocation of forces and resources to achieve them. The test of a good strategy is that it achieves its object without the necessity for battle. As Sun Tzu put it “What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy; next best is to disrupt his alliances; next best is to attack his army.” However, these adversarial affairs rarely allow one strategy to be so successful over the other.

Attacking the army brings us to the tactical level, where we find battles, engagements and fights. The scale of these events covers both the individual action and the collective. They range from the great sea battles such as Trafalgar or air battles such as the Battle of Britain to a submarine sinking a warship, for example the *Belgrano* in the Falklands War, or a dogfight between two aircraft over Kenya in 1940. On land the scale incorporates events from the battle of the Somme to some brief skirmish in a Belfast or Basra alley. Indeed, a battle is made up of a whole series of engagements on a variety of scales: individual, fire team, sub-unit, unit and formation. There is no end of permutations in the manner these are played out, in varying combinations of weaponry, battlefield terrain and weather, and in the face of an opponent who is taking active measures to do unto you as you intend to do unto him.

The essence of all tactics is fire and movement, and the basic tactical dilemma is to find the correct balance between how much effort to apply to striking the opponent to achieve the objective and how much to countering his blows. In many ways, tactical warfare is akin to the art of boxing—and I hope both clearly to be an art. The combatants require physical fitness, a degree of skill and endurance and courage in the face of an opponent’s blows. On this basis each party guards and strikes, seeking a break through the other’s defence so as to deliver telling combinations of punches and ideally a knockout blow. The combinations are drilled into the boxer by long practice. His art is in forcing his opponent to leave a vulnerable spot unguarded and recognizing the opportunity in time to take violent advantage of it. All this is true and necessary in battle too, especially the drill of combination blows. But Queensberry rules do not apply, and the art of tactics is more like a lethal brawl in the gutter where there are no rules or referees, and where low cunning matched with the maximum use of force available wins the day. I use these analogies to emphasize that tactics is not only about the manoeuvre of a force; it is about the application of force, lethal force, to an opponent and avoiding his intention to do the same. The outcome of tactics is simple: kill or be killed. The successful tactician must be more nimble and move faster relative to his opponent, so as to bring fire to bear in telling quantities. To do this he may well use fire and obstacles, natural and man-made, to delay or suppress the enemy’s ability to move.

Finally, we come to the level that links the tactical to the strategic: the theatre, or operational, level. In our modern circumstances I think theatre is a better description, and in the main I shall use it from now on—largely because of the widespread use of the term “operational” for a variety of activities in the military and civilian worlds. The theatre, or operational, level of war is conducted in the theatre of operations—a geographical area containing in its military and political totality an objective that can

achievement alters the strategic situation to advantage. For example, the 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy were an operation in their own right that changed the strategic reality: western Europe could now be liberated and Germany conquered. To be clear: an operation in a theatre is not merely a collection of tactical battles that take place within a defined geographic area. The theatre commander must make the plan, his campaign, which designates the path towards his final objective—given him by the strategic commander—and orchestrate the activities of his command to achieve tactical objectives that take the command as a whole in the designated direction. The theatre commander has to understand the political context of his theatre, comprising as it will the politics of the area in question, those of his political and strategic masters, and of his force—particularly with multinational forces, as is more frequently the case, when the political and strategic components become multiplied and often entangled.

My own commands throughout the 1990s offer a good example of the levels of war. In 1990–91, as commander of a British division subordinated to U.S. VII Corps in the Gulf, I was a tactical-level commander—and so was my corps commander, Lieutenant General Fred Franks. The theatre commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and his subordinate generals had to understand the political and strategic context of the deployment of my formation, and take this into account in its employment, which they did. In 1995, as Commander UNPROFOR, I was in effect a theatre commander. The politics of the conflict in Bosnia, and those of the troop-contributing nations to my command, were such that they defined the theatre. The overall force commander—since UN forces were also deployed in Croatia and Macedonia, thereby necessitating a central commander—was based in Zagreb. He found himself in limbo: neither a strategic commander nor able to command the three theatres simultaneously. This is because the UN is an organization without a permanent military structure. It therefore has no capacity to create a strategic command, which is why it can never offer a serious option for the use of military force. Between 1996 and 1998, as General Officer Commanding (GOC) Northern Ireland, I was clearly a theatre commander directly answerable to the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), my strategic commander in London. When I became the NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) in November 1998, I was a commander at the strategic level of an alliance, albeit a deputy to the supreme commander. Additionally, as the senior European commander in NATO—which is always the case with the DSACEUR, since the SACEUR is always an American—I was the strategic commander of the nascent EU force. Finally, as GOC and in my NATO and UN roles I spent much time interacting with the political levels, in theatre and in capitals, which I did not do as a tactical commander. Such divisions of labour and authority, not always clearly understood by those enmeshed in them, are the realities of modern command.

Much more will be said of all levels of operation throughout the book, since they are the frameworks within which force is applied. However, at this point it is important to understand two basic and largely obvious points: first, it is the political level that makes the decision to enter conflict and it is the political level that decides to stop it; the military implements both of these decisions. Second, all activities sit within the overall context of a given strategy, and when the fight begins each engagement nests within the greater engagement of the superior commander; the achievement of each commander contributing, at least in theory, to the achievement of his superior. The understanding of the context of a particular operation is as important as understanding the superior commander's intentions, so as to ensure there is coherence of the effects of action at each level—each contributing to the others. However, in our modern circumstances most fights do not go to the strategic level: w

amongst the people is mostly a tactical event, with occasional forays into the theatre level—yet we still persist in thinking of them as wars, which will deliver decisive victories and solutions. It is important to understand why.

Our understanding of the use of military force is based in large measure on the old paradigm of interstate industrial war: concepts founded on conflict between states, the manoeuvre of forces of mass, and the total support of the state's manpower and industrial base, at the expense of all other interests, for the purpose of an absolute victory. In the world of industrial war the premise is of the sequence peace-crisis-war-resolution, which will result in peace again, with the war, the military action, being the deciding factor. In contrast, the new paradigm of war amongst the people is based on the concept of a continuous crisscrossing between confrontation and conflict, regardless of whether the state is facing another state or a non-state actor. Rather than war and peace, there is no predefined sequence, nor is peace necessarily either the starting or the end point: conflicts are resolved, but not necessarily confrontations. For example, the Korean War ended in 1953, but the confrontation with North Korea remains unresolved; or, more recently, the bombing and military action against Serbia following its abuse of the Kosovars ended in 1999, but there is still no decision on the final status of Kosovo and the confrontation between Serbia and the international community remains in place.

War amongst the people is characterized by six major trends:

The ends for which we fight are changing from the hard absolute objectives of interstate industrial war to more malleable objectives to do with the individual and societies that are not states.

We fight amongst the people, a fact amplified literally and figuratively by the central role of the media: we fight in every living room in the world as well as on the streets and fields of a conflict zone.

Our conflicts tend to be timeless, since we are seeking a condition, which then must be maintained until an agreement on a definitive outcome, which may take years or decades.

We fight so as not to lose the force, rather than fighting by using the force at any cost to achieve the aim.

In each occasion new uses are found for old weapons: those constructed specifically for use in a battlefield against soldiers and heavy armaments, are now being adapted for our current conflicts since the tools of industrial war are often irrelevant to war amongst the people.

The sides are mostly non-state since we tend to conduct our conflicts and confrontations in some form of multinational grouping, whether it is an alliance or a coalition, and against some party or parties that are not states.

These six trends reflect the reality of our new form of war: it is no longer a single massive event or a single military decision that delivers a conclusive political result. This is because the relationship between the political and military factors has also greatly changed. Whilst the four levels of war have remained intact, and it is still the political leadership that makes the decision to use force, our world of constant confrontation and conflict means that the political and military activities are constantly intermingled throughout. To understand any modern conflict, therefore, both must be examined in parallel—since they will evolve and change together, impacting the one on the other. Only when the use of force is properly analyzed in this way will it have utility.

Military force does not have an absolute utility, other than its basic purposes of killing and destroying. Every confrontation or indeed conflict is different, not only in location and sides but in nature, especially in our era of humanitarian interventions or military operations amongst the people, such as those in Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003. Force can be used to advantage only if its utility in the circumstances is understood and the force comprehended. To do this it is necessary to understand the nature of military forces, since they are the medium through which force is applied. There does not exist a generic “military force.” There may be more standard, even generic types of resources: land, sea and air forces; special forces of various kinds; fighter and bomber aircraft; carriers and submarines; missiles and artillery; tanks and machine guns; and a variety of weapons systems and technological aids in our current era. These are all important components, but they are just that: components, to be selected by a commander for a specific force. And each force is specific—to a period, to a state, to a war, to a single theatre of war, possibly to a battle. Even a standing force is specific: a result of the factors of the time of its formation. For at base, it must be understood that battle is an event, a specific circumstance, and therefore every element of force must be understood as a product of the circumstances in which it was created or used. The battle of Waterloo was the battle it was because it took place in 1815 in Wallonia; because Napoleon raised an army of a certain size and Wellington and Blücher had the armies they did; because Napoleon devised one plan and fought his forces in a certain way, whilst his two opponents devised their plan and fought their forces in another way—and so on. If the battle had taken place a month later it is possible all these factors would have been different—their dependence on the circumstances of the day, and understanding their significance, is the true framework of military activity.

The basic act of forming a military force requires the massing of troops and matériel. But this would not in itself produce a usable force. The men and matériel must be found from society in such a way that they are affordable and are suitable in quantity and quality. Some nations rely on conscription, others on volunteers for their manpower; some seek equipment of the greatest sophistication and apparent power whilst others have older, simpler equipment. And yet, as we have seen in many recent military engagements, possession of modern sophisticated equipment does not necessarily lead to victory. And that is because every single force, anywhere in the world, is constructed in accordance with a purpose: a defence and security policy and a military doctrine, which demands certain amounts of troops and matériel of specific qualifications, that all interlock into a coherent force. And the greater the coherence the greater the chance of the force succeeding in battle.

As we will see throughout this book, lack of coherence—whether in purpose or between purpose and force—is a major reason for the failure of forces.

Beyond geography, money has always been the greatest deciding factor in the structure of a force. Even the size of a population and the availability of potential troops have been secondary to financial considerations: you can always buy in extra force if money is no problem. Historically, in the formation of forces money has usually represented a balance of investment between the actual and anticipated purpose of the military force and the costs to society, immediately and over time. The most obvious costs are money and manpower, and these must be estimated not only as they exist when a force is being formed, but also in costs to a society's overall and continued well-being. For example, the force cannot take all the people who would be needed for the harvest or the maintenance of the economy, since both the force and society would starve; or else not all horses can be requisitioned since the harvest would probably languish rotting in the fields; or indeed, even in total war not all factories can be devoted only to weapons manufacturing since the basic needs of society must be catered to if it is not to collapse. In short, the formation of a force must reflect a realistic balance of investment from available and future resources. This logic dictates that if people are cheap and horses dear, the foot soldiers—the infantry—will predominate; if a population is small but comparatively rich, the cavalry or artillery rather than the foot may dominate; or if labour is expensive, a standing force will be less well armed, since the price of arms production is high.

All these considerations are still true today, when weapons are manufactured globally and are theoretically available to all: a force must represent the correct balance between the available and future resources of a state. For if the costs of manufacturing or purchasing the weapons and maintaining the force are so great as to become a burden that adversely affects the economy of the society, then at best the society fails to prosper and at worst the leaders have destroyed the very thing they sought to defend. We now tend to see this outcome as a mark of an underdeveloped society, and also of an undemocratic society, since people will always seek prosperity over military strength unless their survival is under threat. Maintaining an expensive and large military machine can therefore be assured only in very rich democratic societies such as the U.S. or else in those societies in which the population is under threat—either externally, as in democracies such as India or Israel, or else internally, as in despotic regimes such as North Korea or even Iran.

Like many other aspects of force, striking the balance of investment has exercised kings, princes and governments since time began. Various measures have been tried more or less successfully to manage the dilemma. The more technical arms, for example the artillery or the warships, were held centrally by the monarch, since they were very expensive and had no commercial use and therefore it was not possible to take them up from trade or enter into some contractual relationship with the private citizen. No less, kings did not want powerful weapons or vessels to get into the wrong hands. Equally, however, the balance of investment must always reflect the basic structure of a society. Even if assets can be bought in, the core logic of a force is based on the people and place from which it comes: a landlocked country will not usually have a navy; a poor country will have fewer arms than a rich one; a populous state will have a larger army than a less populated one.

In deciding on the balance of investment governments have always been careful to differentiate between defence and security—as noted, the perennial purposes for which forces exist. In essence, the balance has usually been struck at the point in which peace is cheapest to maintain or attain. The

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