

# **Special Address**



# Strategy and Decisive Battle

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## I

The word strategy comes from the Greek *strategos*—the art of the general. Its basic themes were developed across the centuries under the heading of the “art of war” until it entered the lexicon in eighteenth century France—referring to something more than tactics and less sneaky than a cunning stratagem.<sup>1</sup> It gained currency during the Napoleonic period as it seemed that the Emperor was not only a genius but was channelling some underlying, systematic principles that the wise general would do well to follow. “Tell me,” the elderly, doubtful Prince Bolkonsky asks his son Andrei in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, “how the Germans have trained you to defeat Napoleon by this new science you call strategy.” From the start strategy offered confidence that with the right measures demanding objectives could be achieved on a regular basis. That is still how the word tends to be used.

The development of a special field that came to be known as strategy was a consequence of the steady professionalization of western navies and armies, and the increasingly complex tasks they faced in moving large fleets and mass armies, or in understanding the technical demands of their fields, whether in gunnery or sieges.

Yet we know from recent experience that strategy is extremely difficult. In this lecture I want to consider the origins and limitations of some deep-rooted ideas about the conduct of warfare. I am interested in the persistence of a conceptual framework, which I call the classic model, largely because it derives quite explicitly from the classic works in our field. Even the more influential contemporary writers on strategic theory—for example Ed Luttwak<sup>2</sup> and Colin Gray<sup>3</sup>—have placed themselves clearly in this classic tradition, or else—as with John Keegan<sup>4</sup> or Martin van Creveld<sup>5</sup>—have felt obliged to engage with this model if only to demonstrate why it no longer applies.

This is a striking feature of our field. One cannot imagine a contemporary business strategist insisting on the primacy of early Nineteenth Century texts when marketing new products or launching a takeover bid. A political strategist would find a guide to election campaigns from that period quaint but of no more than historical interest. Yet few self-respecting military strategists feel able to ignore Clausewitz. Many will go even further back

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<sup>1</sup> For the origins of strategy see Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: OUP, 2013). I have drawn on some of the material in this book for this article.

<sup>2</sup> Edward, Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: OUP, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> John Keegan, *A History of warfare* (New York: Random House, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

to Sun Tzu.<sup>6</sup> The daringly modern might take in Basil Liddell Hart from the middle of the last century. Students of military strategy expect to turn to the classics for inspiration, guidance and validation.

There is a good reason for this. Military strategy is still dominated by major wars and these are rare events. The most substantial were the Napoleonic Wars, which inspired the classics, and then the first and second world wars, the first of which began 100 years ago and the second of which ended 69 years ago. The arrival of nuclear weapons encouraged truly innovative thinking but this was more concerned with deterring wars than fighting them. The other sub-field has been guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency, which has had its own revival over the past decade, but by and large these have been seen as diversions from core business.

The re-assertion of classical military strategy in the 1970s was in some respects a reaction against the prevalence of a deterrence mentality in official thinking and the miserable experience of Vietnam. Although this re-assertion was described in terms of “military reform” in key respects it was reactionary. The ideal type of military practice was found well in the past, in idealised forms of warfare that pitted regular forces against each other, prized inspired commanders, kept non-combatants out of the frame, and assumed that the fate of nations would be determined by the result. The complaint from the reformers was that decades of preoccupation with irregular forms of warfare had led to the neglect of the classical form.

A further complaint was that the careers of those responsible for conventional forces had become bound up with large procurement programmes and an intensely bureaucratic Pentagon environment. They had swapped generalship for management and strategy for systems analysis. They had come to see warfare not as a chance to display the arts of higher command but as a grand scheme of accounting with firepower as currency and body-counts as outputs.

This critique found a responsive audience as the American armed forces sought to rebuild after Vietnam. The classical approach was embraced, reflected in the demands for more manoeuvre and less attrition, captured in field manuals and doctrinal developments such as AirLand Battle. In this approach we can note the influence of a number of great figures from the past:

- From Jomini (and Clausewitz) a conviction that a battle could be decisive;
- From the elder von Moltke a belief that the operational conduct of war should be free from political interference;
- From Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart a preference for manoeuvre over attrition;
- From Clausewitz a description of military objectives as centres of gravity.

The context for this return to a classical model was the Cold War, and the residual possibility of a third world war. The adversary in mind was the Warsaw Pact, with its substantial armies and doctrines that could also be traced back to Nineteenth Century thinking. The Soviet focus on the operational art and manoeuvre confirmed the Western approach. If these two great

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<sup>6</sup> The continuing influence of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* can be seen on the web-site <http://www.sonshi.com/>.

armies had clashed they would have been prepared to fight along comparable lines, at least until the nuclear question began to be posed.

Once the Cold War ended there were good reasons to doubt whether there would ever again be another major war and therefore whether these concepts had any relevance. Issues of counter-insurgency reasserted themselves and became even more perplexing. Questions of nuclear deterrence also remain and have also become more perplexing. Furthermore we have had examples of force being used in a variety of distinctive ways, for purposes of coercion or to establish new facts on the ground, that do not fit neatly with these established concepts. New forms of conflict—for example—“cyber-war” are being actively explored. From this one might conclude that the problem with the classical model was simple obsolescence. This is the suggestion, for example, behind claims that we have now entered a “fourth-generation” of warfare.<sup>7</sup>

It is not, however, my argument that we should ignore the classics or, alternatively, that they are now being rendered irrelevant as a result of some transformation in warfare. Geopolitical changes affect the sort of wars that are likely to be fought and changes in weaponry affect the risks attached to them, but we should be careful about claiming some historic discontinuity. The activities associated with the “fourth generation” can be traced back over centuries, while the possibility of major war still animates military preparations. It is not too difficult to think of contingencies that could trigger one. Two great powers—China and Russia—wish to set their borders at different places to their neighbours and both have taken action to make their points. To all extents and purposes Russia and Ukraine have been at war since the end of February, even if so far this has been contained and has taken a grey, hybrid form. At any rate, the adherents of the classical model would not accept that it is appropriate only for major war. It has created expectations for the conduct of all conflicts in which the armed forces are employed.

My argument is that there is a flaw in the model derived from the classics, one that has been there from the start and has always caused problems. The flaw lies in the separation of the military and political strands of strategy, with the assumption that the political is relevant at the start of war, in setting objectives, and at the end, in negotiating peace terms, while military views must take precedence during the phase of active hostilities in between. This separation was unknown in ancient times, as were expected to individuals to combine the political with the military, as was also the case with Napoleon, although he was much better at military than political strategy.

The subsequent separation of the two is understandable. There are distinct competences. Their integration is always going to be a challenge for civil-military relations, and while we properly insist that in democratic societies the military must remain subordinate to the political, negotiating the points at which military advice must be taken before tough political decisions are made, are politicians should be allowed into let into operational issues, is always going to be difficult. In the past politicians who fancied themselves as generals have been almost as

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<sup>7</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Fourth-Generation War And Other Myths* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College: November 2005).

disastrous as generals who fancied themselves as politicians.

In the western tradition the fit between the political and military strands is seen as a top down problem, an issue of civil-military relations only at the highest level. The issue is raised directly in the Clausewitzian axiom that war is a continuation of politics by other means. The problem lay in the assumption behind the classical model that once the politicians had handed down objectives for war, the military should take full responsibility for its actual conduct, and expect a minimum of political interference while doing so. One reason for this was the assumption that political goals would best be delivered by the comprehensive defeat of enemy forces in battle. Victory would leave the enemy state no choice but to agree terms. From military gains, political gains would follow naturally.

At the heart of this model therefore was the concept of the decisive battle as an encounter that would produce a clear result and shape the subsequent political settlement. This was elaborated with the greatest clarity by the Swiss Baron de Jomini, who wrote the most influential text book of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Although Clausewitz is now the better known Jomini was by far the biggest impact in his time and in particular on American military thought. We know of the influence of West Point teacher Dennis Mahan, a keen follower of Jomini, on civil war generals. His son Alfred Thayer Mahan's exerted this Jominian influence over thinking about seapower.<sup>9</sup> The younger Mahan in turn influenced the Italian Douhet's thinking about air power.<sup>10</sup>

It is evidently the case, looking back at the history of warfare over the past two centuries, and not just the big wars, that the classical model has hardly been followed rigidly and sometimes not at all. One reason for this is that it is a theory of battle as much as a theory of war. At its heart is the idea of battle as the decisive act of war, so that military victory in battle results in political victory in war. In battle, when two sets of forces engage directly, then operational considerations will be paramount. But war involves much more, not just in setting objecting and negotiating conclusions, but also in sustaining popular morale, maintaining governmental unity and looking after the bureaucracy of war, in forging alliances and finding bases. In this lecture I want to focus on the idea of a decisive battle, how it evolved and its limitations. Whether or not it continues to have importance will depend on the extent to which future conflicts involve battles, or whether armed force comes to be used in different ways.

## II

On some accounts the western preference for battle as a decisive means of resolving conflicts can be traced back to classical times. In mediaeval Europe battle was a recognized form of dispute-settlement. It was a form of wager, spiced by the possibility of divine intervention.

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<sup>8</sup> Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books: 1992).

<sup>9</sup> On Mahan see Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See Giulio Douhet, Translated By Dino Ferrari, *The Command of The Air* (New York: Coward-McKann, 1942).

The side in charge of the battlefield at the end of the day would have the right to demand a political settlement on their terms.

The underlying logic was pushed to its extreme by Napoleon and then turned into a theory of war by his interpreters, Clausewitz and Jomini.<sup>11</sup> The starting point was an uncomplicated assumption about the relationship between military means and political ends. Over the nineteenth century this assumption became even simpler, to the effect that once an army was victorious in battle it would have the enemy state at its mercy, and so the political gains would surely follow.

Clausewitz also recognized the possibilities of limited war, which had been common in the previous century, and which involved negotiations to conclude a war rather than the complete subjugation of the enemy. He did not explore these possibilities fully, although he might well have done so had he lived longer. His main focus therefore remained the use of battle to eliminate the enemy army as a fighting force, thereby rendering the enemy state helpless.

This became known as the “strategy of annihilation,” a term given special status by the German military historian Hans Delbrück’s distinction between this and a “strategy of exhaustion.”<sup>12</sup> Delbrück saw exhaustion as persuading the enemy to abandon the fight even though its army had not even annihilated. Exhaustion suggested that the enemy had been worn down to the point where it could not face more war. This was most likely to occur if its survival was not at stake and the stakes were limited and susceptible to compromise. Confusion then entered with regard to method, because there was no reason why exhaustion could not result from a series of inconclusive battles.

The German General Staff dismissed the idea that there was ever a sensible alternative to annihilation. This was a common theme across European armies in the run-up to the First World War. Yet a choice between annihilation and exhaustion could not just be one of strategic preference, but must also reflect the material situation. If battle was unavoidable then there had to be sufficient strength to prevail but also, even after a decisive battle, enough residual capability to go on and occupy enemy territory. Without confidence in an ultimate military superiority a push for annihilation was unwise. If force had to be conserved for a long haul then set-piece battles were best avoided other than in the most favourable circumstances. It would be dispiriting if despite the loss of one army the enemy could field another. For this reason an association developed between exhaustion and manoeuvre, as a way of avoiding direct battle. Delbrück appreciated that this approach could be a mixture of battle and manoeuvre and that these were as likely to be as much complementary as alternatives, until it became apparent to one side that a decisive battlefield victory was unattainable.

There were therefore always two distinct strands available as the basis for a critique of

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe Jr., 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press: 1975-1985).  
Gordon Craig, “Delbrück: The Military Historian,” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

the idea of decisive battle.

One had to do with whether it was possible to defeat opponents in the field by means other than direct assault, and the other was about how military strength could be translated into substantial political gain.

Both these strands would have required much more exploration if Clausewitz had been able to fulfil his interest in deviations from the strategy of annihilation. This can be seen in his (generally dubious) concept of the “centre of gravity,” which assumed that the greatest military effect could be achieved by striking the enemy at the source of his power. This was generally expected to be his army, but this most vital strike might also be about undermining that amorphous quality known as “national will” or the cohesion of an alliance.

### III

Let us consider a moment that would not be normally considered central to contemporary military history. It came during the Franco-Prussian war. This war is important for many reasons. It forged German unity under Prussian leadership. It demonstrated the importance of meticulous staff work when it came to mobilizing reserves and exploiting logistical possibilities. The Germans has mastered the art of battle for better than their opponents. Yet while they defeated the French comprehensively at the battle of Sedan they were then frustrated by their inability to conclude the war. The French government with whom they expected to negotiate terms was overthrown, and a new republican government was proclaimed. This vowed to continue to the war. This put the Germans in a quandary. They had never intended to occupy all of France and lacked the capacity to do so. They could put Paris under siege, which they did, but international sentiment was now becoming more sympathetic to France, and the longer Paris held out the more expensive the effort keeping troops in place and the greater the risk that other powers might come to France’s aid. This led to a furious argument between Bismarck, who wanted to fire artillery shells into the city to break the resistance, and the military who saw this as violating the rules of war. Eventually the Emperor backed Bismarck. Paris was shelled and the surrender came. Even then soon Paris was in uproar again with the Commune, and had to be suppressed by the new French government before the harsh terms of the settlement could be implemented.

Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, the architect of the German victory, drew two lessons from this episode, which included the subsequent Paris Commune. The first was that social and political forces were now in play that could complicate forever the orderly business of statecraft. As he got older and watched the rise of socialist movements throughout Europe he became convinced that another major war in Europe would be disastrous precisely because it would be a peoples’ war and unleash these forces and in that way bring down the European order. His successors in the German general staff recoiled from the implications of this thought, which challenged their whole mission, and played it down.

They did, however, take to heart von Moltke’s second lesson. Bismarck’s view was that advice on how “to fix and limit the objects to be attained by the war” was a “political function”

during the war as well as before it and so must lead to a civilian “influence on the conduct of the war.” Von Moltke’s view was that strategy must be “fully independent of policy.” He identified the operational level of war as the one within which the commander must expect no political interference.<sup>13</sup>

For his successors this became a core principle. During the July 1914 crisis the Kaiser briefly raised the question as to whether it was wise for the proposed offensive to pass through Belgium. When told that it was essential he did not pursue the matter. Tsar Nicholas had a similar conversation with his generals about the ambition of the Russian mobilisation. The idea of an “operational level” of war as an almost politics-free zone was never renounced by the German Army, was soon embraced by the Soviet Army and, especially after the political micro-management of Vietnam, became an article of faith for the American military.

#### IV

The persistent belief in this operational level required confidence in the continuing potential of a decisive battle. The experience of the First World War might also have challenged that belief. Winning battles had become much harder as firepower gained in ferocity over greater ranges and it became possible to mobilize more men to pour into a fight. Prior to 1914 the possibility of a decisive advantage was assumed to depend on motivation or manoeuvre or a combination of the two as the way to cope with enemy firepower and getting through the “killing zone” in front of the enemy defensive lines. Men with high morale would face danger heroically; armies with low morale would collapse. A clever manoeuvre that caught an enemy by surprise at a weak point could neutralize physical superiority. The surprise itself would have a psychological effect, leaving the notionally strong disoriented and confused. On the other hand a strong force on guard against potential surprises and trickery could still expect to crush an inferior opponent.

When the great clash came in 1914, and all these theories began to be put to the test, the scale and intensity of the ensuing battles and the length of the deadlock, went well beyond anything envisaged by Clausewitz. Despite all the problems, however, the concept of a decisive battle retained a powerful hold over the military profession, perhaps because in the end the First World War was concluded with a battle that led to the armistice and then Germany accepting the allies’ terms for peace.

The aim thereafter was to find a way of getting to the decision through more effective and less bloody battles. There remained a belief that the right tactics, helped now by tanks and aircraft, could avoid prolonged stalemates in the future. Basil Liddell Hart embraced the idea of indirect campaigns of manoeuvre, reflecting the potential of mechanized divisions, contrasting it sharply with the direct frontal assaults which had been such a feature of the Western Front. To add to the terminological confusion, because of the vast expenditure of human and material resources during the course of the war, the war’s dominant strategy came to be associated with attrition, a word previously used as being interchangeable with exhaustion. As Liddell Hart

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<sup>13</sup> See *strategy: A History*, pp. 102-7.

was also of the view that if the ends of war could be kept limited then so too would be the means, he urged restraint in setting objectives. Lastly, he stressed the possibility of defeating an opponent by leaving them confused, largely because they had been caught by surprise, rather than because of large battlefield losses.<sup>14</sup>

Liddell Hart's attempt to devise a way of winning a conventional war in such a way as to avoid mass slaughter involved a sharp focus on objectives, restricting them to the matter in dispute, so that once settled normal political relations could be restored, and forms of warfare that could reduce unnecessary death and destruction by avoiding battles where possible, relying on surprise and disorientation.

The Second World War, with its unlimited aims, mass battles, terrible atrocities and partisan campaigns, did not end the hold of the concept of decisive battle. Again the war's formal conclusion involved the surrender of the defeated forces. Its continuing hold can be illustrated by the American response to Vietnam. Despite the previous years of guerrilla warfare, punctuated by the occasional battle, the war concluded on traditional military lines, with a successful North Vietnamese invasion of the demoralised South. This allowed the US military to go into a form of denial. In addition to claims that it would have been better if Vietnam had been fought as if it were a conventional campaign, the most important response was to return as quickly as possible to the comfort zone of preparing for a proper, regular war against a great power in the middle of Europe.

In the 1970s, with US armed forces licking their Vietnam-imposed wounds and coming to terms with the implications of an all-volunteer army, there was a strong belief that the Army could best be rebuilt by focusing on the priority task of securing NATO's central front. In addition, since the 1960s American policy-makers had indicated a wish to reduce dependence on nuclear deterrence, which they feared involved increasingly incredible threats. In this respect, the later stages of Vietnam, and then the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, had indicated that new technologies might be generating opportunities to rethink doctrine for conventional warfare as specific targets could be attacked with extraordinary precision. At the same time there were concerns that the European security challenge had become greater than before: the Warsaw Pact was still presumed to enjoy substantial numerical superiority but also to have revamped its doctrine and built up its strength while the Americans had been preoccupied with Vietnam.

There might have been an opportunity, post-Vietnam, for an exploration of the role of armed force in complex political settings. Instead by recasting the Vietnam problem in the classical terms of conventional warfare, and in the light of the new technologies and the Soviet military build-up, the question of military strategy came to be posed in strikingly apolitical terms, as one of operational preferences, notably as a somewhat contrived choice between the schools of manoeuvre and attrition. The most influential figure in developing this dichotomy was the former fighter pilot John Boyd. He followed Liddell Hart in supposing that the key strategic task was to cause uncertainty and confusion in the enemy mind. This could be achieved by undermining the will to fight and encouraging a distorted perception of reality, either by being deceptive or attacking means of communication. His prime example was the

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber, 1954).

1940 Battle of France, where he posed the dichotomy in terms of “Blitzkrieg vs. Maginot Line Mentality.” Whereas attrition warfare focused on the physical domain and used firepower as a destructive force, manoeuvre warfare (blitzkrieg) employed physical force against the mental domain, where the aim was to generate “surprise and shock” by using ambiguity, mobility and deception.<sup>15</sup>

This false dichotomy exercised a considerable influence on American strategic debate, with a big push for “manoeuvre” to displace “attrition.” This all took place within a Cold War context, in which the enemy was both well known and substantial, and the problem was deterring and if necessary resisting aggression across the inner German border. The focus was therefore on a classic great power confrontation involving large armies fighting in the centre of Europe. It was one which made it possible to draw on the classic texts of military strategy updated for the information age. It also encouraged attention to the “operational level.” This was the level at which generalship should be exercised. Once claim was that this level had been neglected, and with it the classical traditions of European war. Edward Luttwak, a major proponent of attending to the operational level, deplored its absence in contemporary American military thought. It was the “operational level” where “schemes of warfare such as blitzkrieg or defence in depth evolve or are exploited.” This had been neglected by the Americans, because of dependence on an “attrition style of war.” Attrition was presented as not so much as a regrettable response to a challenging predicament but a deliberate choice reflecting a particular mind-set.<sup>16</sup>

There was little support from military history for the view that attrition and manoeuvre were matters of either/or. In two world wars the Germans had found themselves fighting attritional campaigns after attempting to force a result with a winning manoeuvre. In terms of NATO’s Central Front at the start of the 1980s the possibilities of manoeuvre were oversold. The language of rapid and unexpected moves was appealing but also vague, and when applied to large and cumbersome modern armies, hard to envisage in practice. It reflected an essentially romantic and nostalgic view of strategy, unhampered by the normal constraints of politics and economics, over-impressed by Soviet doctrine and its supposed vulnerability to manoeuvre warfare, as well as over-optimistic about the Western ability to implement it successfully. The manoeuvre strategies advocated were often impractical. They would be high-risk options in European conditions, with the attendant urban sprawl and complex road and train networks, and place enormous strains on good intelligence and effective command and control. A faulty manoeuvre could lead to absolute disaster and leave the rear exposed.

## V

The focus on manoeuvre reflected a yearning for victory through knockout blows. There were

<sup>15</sup> The best guide to Boyd is found in Frans P. B. Osinga, *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, “The Operational Level of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1980-81, pp. 61-79.

three problems.

First, however brilliant the plan to deliver the blow, it might fail in execution. Here we face the problem, as von Moltke famously put it, of plans not surviving contact with the enemy. Moves that appeared brilliant and bold in conception can become feeble and lacklustre when implemented.

Second, even if a strong punch is delivered it must leave your opponent helpless on the floor rather than just reeling. If sufficient force escapes to fight another day, or have been held back as a reserve by the enemy, then the fighting can continue. Campaigns marked by initial military success can start to drag if there is no early capitulation. Even if the enemy's regular forces are defeated irregular resistance might still be faced along, as when Napoleon's army faced Spanish guerrillas, as well as a sullen and uncooperative population. To ensure terms are followed, an occupation of the defeated country might be required, but this can be as demanding and time-consuming as inflicting the defeat in the first place. On the other hand, eschewing occupation can make it harder to enforce a political settlement.

Third, the actual key to victory can often be less the quality of military planning or even performance in battle but the intensely political tasks of sustaining civilian morale in the face of growing hardships and sacrifices, or in recasting the balance of power by forging and sustaining alliances with countries with shared security interests, or in breaking up enemy alliances.

Battles can therefore be inconclusive, opponents unexpectedly resilient, the balance of alliance can be as important as the balance of military strength, conflicts can end in messy and unsatisfactory ways. Pacifying opponents to the point where they are unable to resist your will is extremely demanding and rarely achieved. Nor is it the case that these pitfalls and the demands on the military can be reduced by keeping the political objectives limited. The force required to defeat an enemy depends on enemy capabilities and effort and not on the interests at stake. If you set enemy defeat as your task then this can lead to substantial fighting even over a relatively trivial dispute.

We know that western, and particularly American, armed forces are very good at battle. This was shown in Iraq, twice, and in Afghanistan. In 1991 the battle did lead to the political result required, the liberation of Kuwait, but it left open a conflict that refused to subside and led to another war, another clear battlefield victory, but in this case followed by social and political upheaval that has been going on for over a decade and has recently got worse rather than better.

## **VI**

We are now in a very different context to the Cold War bipolarity in which the classical model was revived. Then there was a political context that was well understood and not expected to change significantly. Now we have an international situation that is dynamic and uncertain, with rising and falling powers, competing economic systems and forms of government, complex interdependencies and constant media coverage and intensive social networking.

Countries or factions that have been demonised one moment turn up the next as potential partners, and vice versa.

All this makes it even more difficult to set long-term goals, other than the most general sort. The classical model was always problematic. Its problems are aggravated in a world where it is essential to address the political and military strands of strategy together at all times. If we fail to do this there will always be the temptation in military rhetoric to promise definitive solution to problems that cannot be solved by military means, and in political rhetoric to set aspirations that fit with core values and principles but far exceed available resources and known means of implementation.

Conflicts develop through stages, so that the first move rarely turns into a knockout blow, and that later moves will depend on how the first moves affected the situation, including unintended consequences and the unanticipated responses of others. For these reasons many armed conflicts do not end with clear winners and losers, but rumble on, or end in unsatisfactory compromises that create scope for later conflict. This is not to say that there will not be occasions when there will be a clear winner after forces engage. It is just that this is the exception rather than the rule. The challenge is therefore to think more carefully from the start about the interaction between the political and military strands of strategy, and to recognise that a conflict moves through its stages leaders will have to show adaptability and flexibility.

