Western Way of War:
EPISODE 42: DISTINCTIONS IN WAR

Moderator: Professor Peter Roberts (questions in Bold)
Respondent: Sir Hew Strachan (responses in Regular text).

Listen here: https://rusi.org/multimedia/distinctions-war

Unedited Transcript

Moderator: Sir Hew Strachan, what does the Western way of war mean to you?

Sir Hew Strachan: It's an open question, Peter, and I think part of the problem is, what do we mean by the West? There is an assumption there, it depends on which side of the world you're in, and it's interesting we give it a global geographical title, isn't it? That we see it as somewhere particular rather than everywhere, in other words that our understanding of Western today might include the antipodes, Australia and New Zealand, probably always did, but they are liberal democratic societies that operate the same way as we do and include many countries between Britain and Australia, and New Zealand along the way. Just as self-evidently, we would say we associated it with the United States. But I think one of the problems with the title, and it's a typical academic response, isn't it, to start unpicking it? One of the problems with the title is that it's also associated with the arguments of Victor Davis Hanson which is about the role of decisive battle in how we think about war. Hanson argued that the Greeks had set a precedent, Athenians particularly but the Greeks especially, in fighting the Persians, Marathon marked the moment when decisive battle mattered. They formed up in a disciplined way, they had an organised force and this was a form of battle which doesn't make sense. The logical way to engage in combat is to creep up on somebody from behind and bash them over the head without his being aware of it, or the equivalent of that. Much less danger to yourself and probably much more consequential in its outcome so why the hell do we go around it in this particularly perverse way?

Why I think challenging that assumption matters is that for a historian what is striking is the decline of battle since 1945 and possibly even earlier. I work predominantly on the First World War, and we're not talking about the First World War today but the First World War did not end with a decisive battle, it did not end as Waterloo ended the Napoleonic wars or the French Revolutionary wars. The Second World War did not end with a decisive battle. After 1942/43, it was pretty clear which way things were going. Both World Wars involved an awful lot of fighting which we might classify as battle but not battle in the sense of a defined event in a limited period of time with major consequences. That largely seems to be absent in 20th Century warfare. There are exceptions, of course there are exceptions. I'm not making an overwhelming argument. But if we assume that the Western way of warfare is something peculiar, as Hanson did in his book which is called Carnage and Culture, at least in the American edition, that that is a dominant pattern in 'liberal societies' and that's really what he was thinking of, then actually we've parted from it. I don't know whether we've parted from it because our opponents don't do it. We in some way still prepare for it, it's still in our thinking. Battles are still points of reference. And we talk about conventional warfare, even if that may be a somewhat passé phrase but it's not gone away completely, as though that is something which is still a recognisable phenomenon.

We don't have recent experience of fighting conventional opponents-, I suppose you could argue the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 would count as a conventional conflict in its opening stages but as we know it didn't
prove decisive, nor did it prove to be the major phase of the Iraq War. So, I think there are a lot of question marks about what the Western way of warfare means. Another way of looking at it would be to say it's actually a societal issue, it's societal. We're talking about liberal democratic societies, how do they fight? Do they fight differently from totalitarian societies, from communist societies, and if so what does that mean? In the two World Wars, what it meant was liberal democracies were really pretty good at mobilising their entire societies for war in ways that didn't necessarily have long-term totalitarian consequences. In other words you could finish the two World Wars in 1918 and 1945 and be a country like Britain or the United States, or France and go back-, France with some difficulty after 1945 it has to be said but it got there in the end, and go back to being a democratic liberal society. That was a remarkable achievement. Now, we don't understand the Western way of warfare really in a sense of total societal mobilisation, partly because we don't expect to fight war on that scale and it would be very interesting if we did have to fight war on that scale whether we would.

The very fact that I have lapsed into saying 'we' is saying something about how in societal terms we understand this. But there is a paradox there that I think goes to one of the inherent problems today in what the Western way of warfare is. How much do we expect society to empathise with it, to engage with it, to be part of it? I think this aspect is deeply topical for a number of reasons. We can explore them. But I would say 2 in particular. 1 is (TC 00:10:00) we have become concerned with a phrase that I don't really like but something called 'hybrid warfare'. It's striking to me that there's more talk about hybrid warfare in those who are deemed to be on the receiving end of it than there is among those who are in the business of inflicting it. What that says to me is actually in the West we're pretty concerned about whether our societies would hold together, and we are concerned about whether our societies would be able to resist either the barrage of cyber attacks and social media and other forms of intervention, or would be able to demonstrate enough societal resilience to cope with the effect of war. The second reason I think that this is important is here we are, we are getting, we hope, to the concluding stages of a year long pandemic, and one of the signs of strength in response to that pandemic has been societal resilience, societal unity. The ability to respect what is required of us as citizens and to behave in ways that represent a common need for security and a sort of common form of defence against the virus.

I think that has made Western societies more aware of the importance of collective values rather than of necessarily the sort of individualism which liberal capitalism may have trumpeted in the last 20 or 30 years in particular, but which actually makes it quite hard to produce the sort of collective response you would need if you were confronting major war or a sustained threat.

Moderator: There are very limited examples of where this Western way of warfare, as we think about it, as Victor Davis Hanson said, actually came about and Waterloo is famously one of those things that sits deep within our consideration. We seem to have drawn quite a lot from this in terms of what our expectation is about how we think battle should be fought and ended, which leads to the point about how now perhaps society feels that wars should be fought, and then to do otherwise would be ungentlemanly. I do wonder, you as a historian, you say this, but do you have something at the back of your mind that says, 'Crikey, the evidence doesn't stack up for this too well'?

Sir Hew Strachan: For the Western way of war? I do. I absolutely feel it doesn't stack up, and there isn't a continuity there because what I would argue, and Peter I think you would recognise this, is that war is a pretty adaptable beast, and actually if you're in the middle of it, if you're being sensible, you will do what best defeats your enemy. That might involve running away rather than forming up on a battlefield, it might be a very sensible option, live to fight another day and choose the battle at the right moment. Or, as I said, it might be much more sensible not to have a battle at all but to wait in a dark place with a particularly nasty weapon and then take your moment to catch your opponent unawares. That all assumes that you want to go to war in the first place, and there is some extraordinary presumption within this that somehow it has to be to do with direct confrontation in ways that put those who engage it at a sort of level of equivalence and
risk. One of the extraordinary aspects, it seems to me, in the debate about drones, and when I was involved with the Changing Character of War Programme we got pretty heavy into this, is that if you use unmanned vehicles of one sort of another have you then crossed some moral line which says you're no longer doing things properly? And as somebody who does work on Clausewitz and is interested in Clausewitz, I understand that. One of the essential points about war is, it seems to me, as Clausewitz would say, it's reciprocal, it's a clash of wills. The opening point of On War you can't have a war on your own, you need an enemy in order to have a war. You go around looking for an enemy but you might not find one, in fact people you don't like might say, 'Come on in, help yourself. Grab it, we won't oppose you.'

So, you need reciprocity within war but does that mean therefore you need to have a living enemy at the moment when you engage who then runs the risk of his or her dying or of you dying? That is actually where the debate has got to because one of the presumptions within so-called 'cyber war', another phrase I'm not particular enamoured of, is that there can be competition within states which is war but doesn't involve violence. There could be a violent consequence of cyber conflict, I understand that perfectly well, that if you bring down the health system, for example, and people die as a consequence then you have undoubtedly caused loss of life, but it's not direct combat in the sense in which we would understand it, although there could be a very competitive engagement going on there. I therefore worry about identifying cyber war as war. I'm not being a Luddite here, I'm not saying that cyber doesn't have a role in contemporary conflict, self-evidently it does, and I'd be even more barking than you might think I am if I suggested the opposite. But it is a tool, and for a war to happen it still involves killing and dying and the shedding of blood, otherwise it doesn't have its distinctive characteristic. And that notion that cyber war can somehow substitute for war as we have known it doesn't get us, at least for my money, into a terribly helpful place.

States often compete, or non-state actors often compete with states or non-state actors can meet with other non-state actors, without using violence. We haven't hitherto had to cloak that in terms which have used the vocabulary of 'war', and by doing so I think we take ourselves into a pretty uncomfortable and dangerous place. Because what we do is fail to recognise how truly distinct the business of war is from what we would see, certainly in Western, let's keep with that adjective because that's central to what we're discussing, Western societies. We now think of Western societies as inherently peaceful societies for whom the normal pattern of democratic government and liberal behaviour is that you don't go to war, you only go to war because you absolutely have to. There is essentially a moral compulsion that you do so. If you work on that assumption, then war is a big thing which you don't engage in without due consideration. And once you start eliding normal competition between states with war itself then where actually is your boundary? Where does deterrence kick in? You may see where I'm going with this but persistent engagement, and its current thinking, the thinking around that, does make it very hard to know what is war and what is not. Simply to argue that our adversaries are doing that to us I don't think is a sufficient response to that criticism of persistent engagement.

Moderator: Going back previously, you looked at this idea of drones, did they constitute war if it was only fighting between machines in the sky, and the same could be said of cyber. The same argument is exactly the same one as people are having about AI and autonomous systems now, is this war or is this not war? Then you've got a reasonable body of evidence that says actually the West has been really effective in waging political competition in economic, diplomatic with trade tools, with money, with influence and it's been pretty effective at coercing and deterring individuals through that. Do those represent part of a wider employment of state powers for war? This interpretation and understanding of what war is is consistently changing. And yet, as you say, that isn't an excuse for us to say, 'Well, therefore it doesn't matter. We should just skip on and act like them.' That's not really good enough in terms of what we believe, right?

Sir Hew Strachan: It's not just a question of belief, the question is whether it's effective. Whether you're actually able to make it work. Coming back to my point about society, how is your society-, we live in a democratic state and the Western (TC 00:20:00) way of warfare, I assume, reckons that those who
participate in it also live in democratic states, and that to me still assumes a degree of complicity among your citizens, a degree of involvement and identification with what you're doing. And so are we engaging in state competition which runs on a spectrum from one extreme piece, whatever that might mean, and that is part of the problem no doubt, and that the other extreme an all-out nuclear exchange? Or do we need some clear demarcation where you can actually turn round and say as Chamberlain said in 1939, 'Sorry to have to tell you, we're at war.' There is a moment when you make that leap and the presumption, short of that, even if you are using violence, is that you are trying to contain it. We have many places in the world where armed forces are clashing with each other and have been doing so for some considerable time. You think of India and Pakistan in Kashmir for example, but there is not an open war between those 2 countries, and it is far better that those 2 countries operate in a situation which we understand as being below the threshold of war than it is their being above the threshold of war.

It's even more the case in relation to India and China in the same part of the world. This suggests to me that all 3 states have some clear understanding that there is a threshold below which they are operating and it doesn’t mean that they are not competing, it doesn’t mean that they are not adversaries but it does mean that actually they haven't got to the point where they've killed anybody. If you start killing people then actually it's very hard for you to come back from it, you have gone beyond a certain point. It is then very hard, as Afghanistan knows only too well, to dial the whole thing down. I say Afghanistan, again I go back to the First World War. One of the things that’s most striking to me as a historian in the First World War is why is it, at the end of 1916 with the experience of Verdun and the Somme, both of them described as battles incidentally, one a very odd battle and it lasted for 10 months and the other a very odd battle and it lasted for 5 months, both of them on bits of ground where fighting happened continuously between 1914 and 1918, and yet we identify the battle as happening in that particularly year. That's a digression but I just illustrate the problems of defining what a battle is. But at the end of 1916, those 2 battles together had accounted for something like 2 million casualties altogether. And these were armed forces of what we would see as rational, sensible countries. In some ways, even if you were on the side of the Central Powers, part of a Western way of war, and yet they went on fighting.

And one of the reasons was that the dead represented a sunk cost. You couldn't turn round and say after the Battle of the Somme in Britain, 'We have suffered 420,000 casualties for nothing.' That was the argument, 'We have to carry on.' And we had a not dissimilar argument when it came to the continuation of the engagement of British troops in Iraq or Afghanistan. 'They can't have died for nothing', 'they can't have died in vain. And that's an entirely natural response, particularly when you think that, as you come from a liberal democratic society, you might be on the right side. There's a presumption within the Western way of warfare that actually we're the goodies and they're the baddies, which also makes this very difficult.

Moderator: That part I think is fascinating, our presumption of right but the adversaries have also got a presumption of right and it therefore becomes this battle of wills. Exactly as you say, 420,000 casualties will not be wasted, they did not die in vain and in many ways society doubles down because of that. It's almost an irrational investment of blood and treasure that goes after something in a belief that therefore it must be right and raises that argument to a level at which it cannot be doubted and changes what is an argument at the moment for casualty averse policy against a reality where society has experienced huge casualties during this pandemic and has not walked back or walked away, or walked out in shock. Do you think that might change how society reacts to war in the future? It was in your point right at the start about how society has reacted to this pandemic.

Sir Hew Strachan: Yes, I think that we’re eventually going to see whether that particular aspect, that is that the frequency of death as a result of the pandemic, makes people accept the notion that death in battle is also acceptable. I think part of the problem here, of course, is what exactly are you fighting for. There is a way in which death by disease, even a disease which we are now learning to manage and produce responses to, death by disease is something that you can’t argue with. The medical profession will do their best to
prevent it happening but death in war is a matter of choice. And that's become particularly the case since 9/11 because of our frequency of using that phrase 'wars of choice' rather than 'wars of necessity'. The implication is the Second World War was a war of necessity, subsequent wars have been wars of choice. And you can argue that. There were plenty of people in 1939 who thought Britain didn't have to fight this war. Britain itself wasn't being invaded, it wasn't essential to do so. We would now see it as the right thing to have done, and I think on the whole it was the right thing. I'm not challenging that presumption in itself. But we gloss the past in order to sustain our interpretation of the present. There are wars there that will be necessary. We don't know when they are, we haven't seen them yet since 1945, but what will they be? Actually the implication in what we do is not that we be fighting, and this is one of the problems that seems to me about the Western way of warfare, it's not that we would be fighting some guy that is actually going to invade our country or a state that's going to invade us.

When we thought about this in relation to NATO and during the Cold War and when I talked in that article you mentioned in the beginning about continentalism, the assumption was that there was a very serious threat from the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union which did actually threaten territorial conquest. And as a consequence of territorial conquest, severe damage to our ways of life and to the freedoms that we enjoy. In other words there was a bundling together, if you like, of geopolitical and ideological considerations there which made it necessary. Right now, we're still finding that very difficult to get our heads round because, particularly as an island off the coast of Europe, or particularly if you're in the United States, there is no geopolitical threat of that magnitude confronting you. There may be an ideological challenger in the shape of China but there is no immediate threat. And we're assuming that what we have to do is respond to China because it behaves in ways that are ideologically unacceptable. And so tied up in the baggage of the Western way of warfare is a presumption that war actually is justified by people with different political systems from ours as opposed to the notion that it's tied up with the idea of war because people are actually either trying to take our territory or we take their territory. That's very passé but one question you might want to ask ourselves is is it really passé? Russia still thinks it's important to get control of Crimea and to have Belarus in their pocket, and so on.

So, what does China talk about? China doesn't talk about an ideological clash, it talks about Taiwan, it talks about Hong Kong. It talks about what it sees as Chinese territory. These are quite old arguments and they are understood in territorial terms rather than ideological terms.

**Moderator:** We come back to that great phrase, the luxury of geography, which both the UK and the United States have because of that stopping power of water, that means that we don't experience the same kind of territorial challenges that you might do in a continental mindset. Which again places a different sense of effort and drivers on militaries and where they might want to be, which takes us all the way back to the start. Hew, we're going to have to draw stumps there because we've taken enough of your time. Thank you very much indeed.