Western Way of War:
EPISODE 44: EVOLVING THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR INTO (AND OUT OF) COIN

Moderator: Professor Peter Roberts (questions in Bold)
Respondent: Brigadier Ben Barry (responses in Regular text).


Unedited Transcript

Moderator: I'm joined by someone who lived and breathed coin from Bosnia to Iraq. Brigadier Ben Barry has been the Senior Fellow for Land Warfare at IISS since 2010. Ben, what does the western way of war mean to you?

Ben Barry: As practised in Iraq and Afghanistan, both the regime-change operations and then the subsequent stabilisation, it means air superiority, largely un-interfered with. It means the amassing of considerable amount of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, much from the air. It also means opened supply lines, ample use of contracts, large, pretty secure bases, and it also means vast amounts of secure bandwidth. Adjusting the assumptions from those that were featured over Iraq and Afghanistan, to dealing with a state competitor who's going to challenge access, is going to practice area denial and it's going to make it more difficult to employ air power and secure bandwidth, is really a challenge that the western way of warfare, as envisaged by the US and its allies, is now having to evolve to shape. You could also say the western way of warfare over the last couple of decades has featured casualty aversion. That casualty aversion of course was driven by the ever-increasing unpopularity of the war, which was a reflection of their problematic nature and diminishing success. I think a war where there was popular support, as we saw for the Falklands, would probably see much more tolerance of casualties. It's also interesting the US and UK's apparent tolerance of casualties inflicted by COVID, of which there was a good posting on your website recently, but I think there's a risk in the western way of war, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. 1 of the reasons the United States Army struggled to adapt to counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan was because when it walked away from Vietnam and reorientated itself on state-on-state warfare against the Soviet Union, it deliberately discarded its experience and its ability to think about counter-insurgency.

Moderator: This idea of discarding experience, it's a military cultural thing. When we shifted from the Cold War into the operations in the Balkans, that we discarded all Cold War experience. That experience was no longer important when we went into 2003 and shock-and-awe. We forgot some of those experiences about how we related to the people in the Balkans. Those 2 words sum up a meaningful part of the military conversation we don't have, 'discarding experience'. Do you think this 'discarding experience' is a cultural phenomenon for one military or do we think all militaries do the same thing?

Ben Barry: I think it's a phenomenon of all hierarchical organisations. It's also a mark of some non-hierarchical ones, like sports teams. Jane Austen would say it's a truth universally acknowledged in organisations. Certainly the British were guilty of it. The army I served with by the end of the 1980s had considerable experience of counter-insurgency, and also that blend of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism that was practised in Northern Ireland, and it was taught. There was a month on it at staff college for example. 2 factors helped the British throw this away. 1 was the migration from single-service staff colleges into a joint-staff college. When that happened, what had been the month on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism was deleted. It was replaced in the syllabus by the then fashionable discipline of peace-support operations. There was less than half a day on counter-insurgency and that was for land-
component people. The revolution in military affairs, which succeeded brilliantly in the regime-change phases of Afghanistan and Iraq, was never tested against irregular forces and against insurgency. It's particularly egregious what happened in the British Army because in the year 2001, in the first half of that year, their doctrine people published some excellent counter-insurgency doctrine, but only a few hundred copies were run-off and it was never promoted internally within the army. It was until the army was leaving Iraq and reaching its peak of size in Afghanistan that new counter-insurgency doctrine was issued, 3 years behind the US counter-insurgency doctrine, which, ironically, many of the British commanders preparing to go to both theatres read and took with them, and sought to apply.

Moderator: It's about the pace of your ability to discard experience. You see it in the reports from Afghanistan, the British experience in Helmand, which is this rotational experience. That the previous deploying formation was thought to be useless and the new one would deliver the panacea of all campaigns. You saw this rejection of experience. It felt like it (TC 00:10:00) almost got down to the section level.

Ben Barry: I look at this several different ways in my book. There's a chapter in the middle called 'learning under fire' which looks at positive and negative experiences of the British, particularly the US, but also pays acknowledgement to the learning that the Taliban carried out. To be fair to the British Army, in 2008 General Richards, who was then Commander-in-Chief felt that unless he put the army on a war footing it was going to lose in Afghanistan. The redacted copy on the MOD website of its lessons-learned study of Operation Herring, does give you a feel in its excellent introduction of the changes that had to be made. It seems to me that part of this is the institutional friction in both the Pentagon, the US, and British political leadership, and the Ministry of Defence, and to a certain extent in the higher management of all 3 services, they wanted to fight the war that they wanted to fight, rather than the war they were in. There was also an institutional failure to put institutions on a war footing and start doing ruthless prioritisation. My sense is that the armed forces have got better at ruthless prioritisation. My conversations with people in the army and the Ministry of Defence, where they slightly apologetically explain that they haven't got wrong to that particular thing because COVID's been number 1 priority, the integrated review number 2, and also the effects of COVID and lockdown on the availability of personnel and their work rates. I think they've been quite upfront on that which is healthy. This isn't rocket science. It is a steady stream of military history and there are plenty of really good examples of organisations that have gotten this right and gotten this wrong, including organisations like the RAF in the inter-war years, that simultaneously gets air defence right, invents networks-enabled air defence, but also gets strategic bombing wrong.

Quite clearly it's a cultural issue, but the thing that can really break through this is leadership. It requires quite a developed approach to leadership because you can't afford to throw away all the characteristics of combat leaders, particularly in bloody wars like they happened, but I saw plenty of examples in both US and UK forces, and again in the Taliban, of leaders who could lead change. They were also prepared to recognise when what they were doing wasn't working, and they needed to find a better way. I saw it myself in my British Army career in Northern Ireland and the Balkans, and indeed in quite a bit of Cold War soldiering.

Moderator: It's interesting you talking about institutions being put on a war footing. Ambassador Crocker and General David Petraeus said exactly the same things about their frustration with in the US, the inability to accept reality and fight the war you were in, rather than the war you wanted to be in was really difficult for them. That's a similar position to, you could argue, what militaries are finding themselves in now. It feels like what you and others are saying is that that stuff is not bedded in anything serious. It's bedded in hopeless optimism and has no foundation in evidence. But to change those is the requirement of great leaders. I'm struck by Soleimani of the IRGC who really led the IRGC through huge changes in adapting their way of fighting to what he was seeing in the adversary. That was exactly what you're talking about, right?
Ben Barry: Yes, in my book I form a judgement, that gives me no pleasure, that if any party can be said to have won the Iraq war, it's Iran, because Iran quite clearly has achieved a much higher proportion of its strategic objectives than the US and its allies like the UK. Soleimani was continuity. He commanded Quds Force for several decades and I think there are real lessons for the west for so-called hybrid thresholds, sub-threshold grazer (ph 15.17) and conflict that we should be learning from history and from the bad guys. That's why my view is that many of the lessons from counter-insurgency, like the comprehensive approach, like the inter-agency approach, like the relationship between operations, development and information operations of which I've got a few examples in the book, including those from the work of US civilians, as well as military, many of those lessons in my view are very relevant to hybrid threshold, sub-threshold. Perhaps I could mention a particular lesson of Quds Force. We've done quite a bit of ISS work, as indeed you've done in your institute about the Iranian way of war and what you might call proxy war. We released a major dossier of a year's research on Iran's networks of influence which is free on our website. I came to the conclusion, having looked in detail at what Quds Force did in Iran and Syria that it was what we would call a permanently constituted inter-agency task force. What have you got in it? You've got support to terrorism, as this latest court case reveals. You've got special forces of a pretty conventional kind for special forces. You've also got political warfare and in fact Quds Force officers are usually the Iranian ambassadors in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Yemen. You've also got the ability to bring conventional forces under control of Quds Force in a very western way. Then it does propaganda, it does information operation, it does politics. It also does development and hands out suitcases full of money.

If you were to take a different perspective, if you look at the way the British set up military headquarters to support resistance networks in Europe in the Second World War, there were 2. 1 each with the European theatre and another with the Mediterranean theatre. If you look at what was in those headquarters, it was very similar. There were diplomats doing a political bit. There were plugs into land, see and air component. Special forces as we now know it didn't exist then, and different special forces were used. Again, what you had were standing inter-agency task forces. If people want to learn about it, I strongly recommend Paddy Ashdown's book, the Cruel Victory, about the rising in the Vercors where the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, particularly a boundary dispute between London and the Mediterranean, are all very cruelly exposed.

Moderator: There is a great phrase 'better to admire your adversaries than the best of your friends'. There is something there that gives you an idea of what you should be looking at. Predecessors of UK SF were the ones that were great and created the doctrine in fermenting descent. The UK were leading lights in this, but we discarded those experiences pretty comprehensively. How good are we in recapturing experience?

Ben Barry: It's very difficult to tell. I do, as you do, a lot of work helping the British Army wrestle with problems and it's a privilege to do so and I hope we make a difference, but it seems to me a lot of the air/land tactics and operation design that was evolved in Germany by the end of the Cold War are still extremely relevant. The use of artillery, operating under air inferiority, fighting in woods and forests, and fighting from woods and urban areas, rear operations, multinational operations at core level. I did quite a bit of that in my past and have written about it. I also was a company commander in Berlin where the art of fighting in cities was extremely-highly developed and tested on tough, realistic exercises in urban training areas. The only time I've been asked to share that knowledge was a day-long seminar on (TC 00:20:00) artillery in Cambridge. I've offered it many times to the army and to people in MoD, but I've never been taken up on it.

Moderator: You give the same great pack scenarios to a bunch of contemporary, staff college high-flyers and you give the same a bunch of company commanders who have the experience of the '80s an '90s. You say, 'What are your solutions?' And you compare the difference because I think the differences would be market. Your frame of reference for fighting at scale is decidedly different between those who grew up
in a period of great pack competition and those who have had 20 years of high intensity war fighting, but in a coin/CT scenario. Those differences are going to bring out very different lessons, are they not?

Ben Barry: I'm sure you're right. There is a strength to the British Army, the US Army, and many European armies, and the Australians and New Zealanders who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. People fought. The army I served in, with the exception of the Falklands and the Sierra Leone operation, up to about 2003, it had not done much heavy fighting. No doubt all those armies marched to the sounds of the guns, and there's a whole generation of people who knows what it is to advance under enemy fire. As they rise through the management and chain of command that will give them a strength that armies that opted out of fighting in those wars, which includes some armies that went to Iraq and Afghanistan and chose not to fight other than self-defence, there's no doubt that's a strength, but it has to be seen through the lens of all those advantages the US, UK and allied forces had. I think there is a way to break out of this. The British Army, I think, developed an extremely well-developed approach to warfare about how it would fight the Soviet Army in Europe. It was constantly being tested on annual cycle of brigade division and quadrennial core-level exercises. I'll give you a personal example. I was a battalion intelligence officer and several times we did battalion defence against real attacking armoured brigades. If you applied what you were taught at Ashford, and did intelligence preparations of the battlefield, it enabled you to make pretty accurate predictions of the way you were going to be able to attack and use it to drive your planning. There are all sorts of other practical lessons, and increasingly as the Cold War went on the first British corp, their big set piece exercises, increasingly the enemy force was given more free play. It was remarkable. The biggest corp exercise ever in 1984, the Red Division and Five Airborne Brigade, the enemy force had virtually free play. 2 British brigade headquarters were wiped out during the first week. 1 of them being the headquarters, the brigade I was in.

What has changed since then is the proliferation of the most fantastic simulation tools. I think if you, through a wormhole, brought forward the likes of Admiral Cochrane or Nelson or Heinz Guderian or Basil Liddell Heart, and allowed them to see what can be done off the shelf, commercial war games, let alone than can be done at places like the Combined Arms Tactical Trainer or the fantastic simulators that are being fielded for F35, they would see these would have enormous potential. They'd want to be trying out new ideas in such environments as much as they can. Not only can you use this for mission rehearsal, but you can also use it to try out new ideas. Let's talk an example that's much in the press, unmanned ground vehicles, the possibility of robotic combat vehicles, as the US Army are planning to field them. That sort of thing, you can take 1 of the games of Bohemia interactive and someone can write some code, and you can then have unmanned armoured vehicles that you could realistically experiment with, for example for a battle-group attack. I can't tell you how jealous I am of this capability that current militaries have.

Moderator: I'm struck by your description of the Cold War exercise scenarios where the adversary was given so much freedom. That's considerably different to today. The training outcomes are so carefully codified that giving the adversary too much freedom overturns many of the training objectives and therefore is not possible. What we're left with is a procedural-training culture that is supposed to deliver improved performance for individuals, but at the expense of training and growth for the institution. The training is about achieving individual success rather than growing the overall institutional progress towards operational capability. I think you're absolutely right, to have these simulation tools available is a fantastic opportunity.

Ben Barry: Can I give you an example which is described briefly in my book? As part of the preparation of the US-land component for the invasion of Iraq there are at least 2 major war games at something called the Warrior Preparation Centre in Germany which has advanced computer-simulation tools to enable them to simulate operations between core and company level. There are also a number of mission-rehearsal exercises, such as the ones done by an aviation brigade. Early on, they identified that urban warfare in Baghdad was going to be a particularly difficult problem. They ran a number of seminars on urban warfare, but they also told the first armoured division in Germany, 'We want you to explore how we might crack
Baghdad, and you've got the simulator to do it.’ One of the outcomes of that was it was perfectly feasible to send battle group or brigade-sized columns into Baghdad from the outside for raiding. But when they did it in the simulator, the lightly armoured M113 vehicles and their soft-skinned vehicles got shot up, whereas the heavily-protected tanks, the RPGs bounced off them. The simulator had that degree of fidelity. When the second-armoured brigade combat team of the third-infantry division did its first thunder run into Baghdad, the commanding officer left the M113s and the soft-skinned vehicles behind which meant he achieved greater effect faster, and had far fewer casualties. That information had come out in spades from 1AD’s simulation work and was passed onto 3ID into 5 core.

My second point is that what the simulation also enables you to do is it enables you to feel unconstrained by possible failure. Let’s take the week at sea that’s done at the Flag Officer Sea Training. In an ideal world, when you designed it you’d still have the week at sea and the Thursday wars that go on, but you’d also have Thursday war in a simulated environment where the ship captain and the crew could try out new ideas, or the staff of FOST could bowl googlies and come up with more unexpected ones. In 2012, I was privileged to spend a day at the Israeli Army’s national training centre where they have probably one of the world’s best urban environments to train in. Just as importantly, they’ve got a force-on-force training centre, just like the US national training centre or the Wessex Warrior exercises the British Army does on Salisbury’s Plain. This centre is designed to take a brigade for 2 weeks and if by the middle of the second week the brigade has reached a high enough standard of training, the planned brigade-test exercise is abandoned. The brigade-test exercise is the sort of exercise you were describing, where there were a lot of hoops that had to be dropped through. If the brigade is well enough trained what they told me was that exercise was abandoned and the brigade was split in 2, and the 2 halves fought each other free play. Their very strong belief was the competitive element combined with the unpredictability of fighting 2 highly-trained organisations against (TC 00:30:00) each other was the best training you could image, and really stimulated initiative and new ideas.

Moderator: It's that experience that doesn't get discarded. The comment you made earlier on about the people in the armies who had fought since '03, those leaders were moving into senior positions and would put militaries in a better position because they had fought. Some of the things we don't have is experience in the PLA in China. They don't have admirals or generals who have fought. It doesn't seem to be doing them too much harm, but it is telling. Ben Barry, thank you very much.