By James Clinch

A child taking its first steps as the Soviet empire was breaking apart would barely have reached school age when MP Tony Blair charged the UK Defence Forum with 'thinking the unthinkable' on defence and security. Yet in that short space of time the pace of change was such that his radical appeal already had the ring of pragmatism. Verities that had guided strategic thinking for decades were, in the post-Cold War context and amidst contending images of the future, increasingly suspected of being outmoded. After the dramatic events of 2001 they were, it seemed, potentially even dangerous.

The drive to transcend conventional wisdom has only intensified since. U.S. General Martin E. Dempsey used this year's Kermit Roosevelt Lecture to warn against 'the failure of imagination' in respect of defence issues, and just last year respected analyst Joshua Cooper Ramo, managing director of Kissinger Associates, released a book declaring ours nothing less than the 'Age of the Unthinkable', urging a degree of mental dexterity commensurate to the bewildering complexity that he argues now defines the strategic realm. Ramo's work is merely the culmination of a trend: drop a line into any stream of the literature on defence and security over the past fifteen years and one is almost certain to catch a reference to the need to radically revise our thinking. But if the revelation of fresh ideas is now a commonplace, if the search for unorthodoxy is itself becoming orthodox, exactly what 'thinking the unthinkable' means is becoming increasingly hard to determine.

As it is for others who write in this register, Ramo's call to scrutinise and move beyond received wisdom is premised on the notion that in a radically changed world old ideas are losing their utility. New scenarios, it follows, call for entirely new mindsets, the less connected to our existing store of knowledge the better. But when we interrogate some of the issues that lie at the heart of current dilemmas in defence and security, it turns out that some of our older ideas are worthy of more attention that the present enthusiasm for intellectual novelty would have us believe. More precisely, it may be just as plausible that our disconnection from traditional ideas about how the world works, and our place within it, is as much implicated in some of our present security quandaries as our alleged reluctance to embrace the unorthodox. With this in mind, this essay attempts to probe some of the ways in which, in our present milieu, 'thinking the unthinkable' may somewhat paradoxically mean attempting to think through what has already been thought. Specifically, it argues that by reconnecting with some of the older insights buried in Western thought we may be able to better transcend the problems associated with the universalist outlooks that shape current approaches and which undermine many of our attempts

to make ourselves safer.

The nub of this line of thinking is that while the pace and degree of change that has been experienced over recent decades, not least in geopolitical terms, is clearly undeniable, certain facets of the key challenges presently faced by NATO countries are not in fact altogether new. Nowhere is this more apparent in the realm of counter-insurgency, 'stabilisation', or 'state-building' operations—the choice of buzzword is often a question of institutional preference—which essentially involve deploying forces within a framework of shoring up or even 'building' functional state entities where these are lacking. In recent times this method of establishing international security has seen UK forces deployed not only to Iraq and Afghanistan, but also Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Kosovo. Of course, the question of whether resources should be redirected from conventional warfighting capabilities toward these newer concerns provokes heated debates in defence communities on both sides of the Atlantic, and in the shadow of austerity cuts is particularly vexing. Nonetheless, it is no longer controversial to assert that since the end of the Cold War, the emergent worry, alongside the Eastward drift of power and nuclear proliferation, has been 'instability'—the somewhat anodyne term encapsulating everything from terrorism to refugee flows—more than it has been war in the post-Napoleonic sense.

A flourishing literature now charts the coincidence of a highly networked global system of exchange and an unstable frontier, and the sobering vulnerability of Western interests that exists as a result. The idea that instability 'there' means insecurity 'here' was over-played in the years following 9/11, but cliché or not, the fact is that many contemporary security priorities boil down to one basic imperative: somehow preventing members of other societies, rather than their leaders, from attacking us or our interests, (or critically undermining them, even inadvertently). Whether policy takes the form of public diplomacy, development assistance, quiet pressure, lethal secret-ops, or assuming complete albeit temporary control of foreign societies, the underlying problems have a common dimension: dealing with other peoples, in other places, who are pursuing other interests, possess other histories, and operate according to other conceptions of the good life.

Put another way, insofar as the threat of instability has become a defence and security priority, the dazzling changes that have characterised recent times have not so much produced a suite of entirely novel problems as they have increased the intensity with which we must contend with a much older one—that of cajoling, coercing and persuading, in service of our desired political outcomes, across the boundaries of dramatically different types of communities. Certainly, the tactical realm is awash with novelty—from low metal content, mobile phone-detonated IEDs to

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) that are piloted thousands of miles from theatre—and this has serious procurement and operational implications. But at the level of strategy, where the decisions about what political aims are feasible and how to achieve them are taken, the territory is not so unfamiliar.

So what would 'thinking through the already thought' mean in this context? In sum, it means rejecting the notion that only contemporary ideas have bearing on contemporary problems, and instead draws attention to the stockpile of insights contained in the rich heritage of Western thought, accrued through centuries of experiences, many of which are not too dissimilar to our own.

This approach reflects the observation that history does not always progress in a straight line. When the entire globe was split between two camps defined by their opposing ideological responses to the advent of industrial society, and between them held the power to destroy us all, a novel set of strategic responses was appropriate, (and was indeed provided by the neat if morally arid game theory models that gave us the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction). But just because we have advanced further through the Gregorian calendar, and the security realm has become more technologically complex, it does not mean our defence concerns have necessarily progressed (holistically) to a higher plane of novelty. In the year 2010 we find ourselves confronting problems that at their core are less 'modern' than the superpower rivalry of 1962. (It was 1859, for example, when J.S Mill began pondering whether it was prudent or ethical for an outside power to 'impose on a country any particular government or institutions, either as being best for the country itself, or as necessary for the security of its neighbours'. ) If the near-incomprehensible changes of recent decades have made security increasingly about the West becoming an effective, influential or even transformative actor in other societies, it seems reasonable to ask what relevant intellectual resources it already possesses.

When seeking to redesign foreign societies, we might, for instance, turn to Edmund Bourke, who argued in 1790 that 'it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.' Or for someone less prone to conservative polemic, to Tocqueville, who, describing the reforms enacted by the Louis XVI in the period leading up to 1789, and which inadvertently helped bring on the revolution, wrote that '[i]t was easy then to see how large a part is played by habit in the functioning of political institutions and how much more easily a nation can cope with complicated, well-nigh unintelligible laws to which it is accustomed than with a simpler legal system that is new.'

The old favourite of political realists, Thucydides, might also have been useful in recent years, for the words he put into the mouth of Nicias, during his failed attempt to persuade the Athenian assembly to abandon plans for the Sicilian expedition: 'It is senseless to go against people who, even if conquered, could not be controlled, while failure would leave us much worse off than before we made the attempt.' Or for another thinker in the genre, the relentlessly pragmatic Niccolo Machiavelli, who was particularly attuned to the problem of seeking political outcomes in 'a province that is not similar in language, customs and laws'. 'It is here', he wrote, 'that difficulties arise'. In an era of short-term deployments, his view that for such situations to be managed effectively one has 'to go and live there' is the very example of unorthodoxy. Just these fragments from well-known thinkers, musing on concerns not thematically divorced from our own, offer a decidedly 'radical' impression of the viability of some of our current security policies in the Third World.

The idea of drawing parallels between ours and earlier eras is, of course, nothing new. A version of this exact mentality was behind the renewed interest in imperialism that emerged—in the works of commentators such as Robert Cooper, Niall Ferguson and Michael Ignatieff —in the middle part of the decade. This argument has lost steam now, and rightly so; a return to imperial politics is a rather implausible lesson to draw from earlier epochs, not least because it was the late colonial period that witnessed consolidation of the universalist outlook that now hampers our ability to conduct defence and security policy with the social fact of difference sufficiently in mind. Rather than invalidate the method, however, this merely sounds a caution, highlighting how an interrogation of our existing knowledge store is no more a panacea than conscientiously ignoring it. Americans in particular have long been suspicious of what they call 'wisdom literature', preferring instead the scientific certainty of positivistic knowledge. Defence Secretary McNamara's success in implementing this sort of thinking in Indochina aside, there is certainly something to be taken from this American scepticism. Bringing our historical record into play merely extends the field of evidence and argument available to test and construct our reactions to defence and security dilemmas. But in an environment when conventional wisdom is generally out of sympathy, even this modest role needs to be argued for.

Nor, it should be added, does reconnecting with our pre-universalist mentalities commit us to some version of moral relativism. To become more conscious of our particularity when attempting to convince others, possibly by force, to be at peace with us does not mean giving up on freedom as a universal good, nor on democracy as about as good as politics can get. Rather, it makes us look again at how contextualised these developments are, and thus at the possibility that handled the wrong way, promoting such things may in fact be counter-productive in security terms. Over the last nine years a mere newspaper subscription would reveal that seeking security in reforming foreign societies is hard work; but by being more conscious of continuity and less fixated on novelty, there would be less excuses for being surprised.

If we succumb to the idea that tactical-level novelty obviates the knowledge stored in our cultural databank, we are closed off from innumerable insights that may aid us in confronting what at a deeper level is a very old problem. The irony of the changes that have prompted the search for unorthodox approaches is that they have accentuated the all-to-familiar dilemma of seeking security outcomes in the context of social and cultural difference. Behind the question of How do we prevent terrorist sanctuaries emerging in Somalia? or, How do we limit the regional disruption caused by refugees pouring out of failed states? are more basic questions about how we operate effectively and develop strategy in radically different human environments. If we want a free and democratic world, acknowledging this is a good first step, and trying to work out what we already know about it may be just as fruitful as tapping the most fecund imaginations. It is not at heart an unthinkable idea, but in the context of many discussions about defence and security, it seems unthinkable enough.