

By Robert Crowcroft

Today, many people seem to think that war and violence are of declining importance in the international system. In British politics, we see scepticism about the relevance of force manifested in the debate on the Strategic Defence Review. The view that military power is of doubtful utility underpins the arguments of most of the people who oppose the replacement of the UK's nuclear deterrent. And it has reared its head time and again in the claim that violent conflicts – from Iraq to Georgia and the Palestinian territories – are somehow a backwards aberration. War is seen as being particularly irrelevant for Western states, apart from the odd bit of peacekeeping. When inspected closely, however, there is no reason at all to think that war is declining, or that the usage of violence has less utility than it did in the past. Instead, those who make this claim turn out to simply be the usual peacenik sorts who should never be listened to; explain away all evidence that contradicts their views – like the inconvenient fact of the major spread of disorder and violence in the last two decades; and deserve no sympathy whatsoever.

This argument that 'war' is now a thing of the past for us in the West is connected to something else in public discourse: the rise of 'security' as the key paradigm rather than 'war', 'strategy', or even 'defence'. This assumption is held to by public commentators and academics alike.

Universities offer courses in 'security studies' or 'peace studies', to match their degrees in 'development studies'. These degrees invariably subject students to courses in which 'gender' and even 'health' are identified as being major forces in international politics.

Thankfully my own university pays little attention to this nonsense, so when I recently picked up one of the major textbooks in the field, Security Studies by Paul Williams, I was surprised to be introduced to the claim that even simple exercises like war-planning – one of the core duties of the state, after all – have wicked and beastly 'gendered associations'. I will not bore readers with more of this, except to say that this consists of the usual gibberish that is now ascendant in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and makes ordinary people wonder why on earth the universities are even kept open. As a rule, those scholars obsessed with 'gender' – incidentally, nearly always female and feminist – deserve ridicule, and when they pontificate on war one wonders what Machiavelli and Clausewitz would make of their valuable 'contribution'.

But I digress. What matters is that this is a human rights-centric vision of the world in which international politics should now be about being virtuous and providing 'security' – a spectacularly nebulous concept – to our fellow human beings. The problem is that this is a vision of what a precious few Western states are willing to do – and even then, only on occasion. It is not a realistic framework for general policy action by those countries, let alone the other nations of the world. Banging on about it has only tied the hands of Western statesmen in confronting the unpleasant realities of the world, and delegitimised action in defence of national interests.

Whatever some may hope, war is not only pervasive – it also embodies something deep within the human condition. We can probably even say that to make war is a perfectly natural human activity. Man is a violent creature; and even when we cannot, or do not, engage in violence, the instinct is still there lurking in the background. It stalks the thoughts of the youngest child and the most elderly citizen alike.

Therefore force, or the threat of force, continues to underpin the international system. It is all very well for Europeans to think that their region of the world is now safe. But are there any volunteers to kick out the Americans, disarm even further, and then find out if the Germans or the Russians come racing across the border? I'd guess not, but from the arguments of many of the Guardian-reading variety you would think that war is simply old hat. Yet force is not merely the final arbiter of disputes. For many in the international system, it is the preferred arbiter as well!

The thing about force that is so attractive is that it changes the calculation of an adversary, and generates a decision, an outcome. So, when negotiation is deemed to be unproductive the use of violence becomes a viable means of furthering agendas. For instance, the US choice to invade Iraq in 2003 removed an implacable foe from a major region of the world. The decision in 1991 to cease air attack on the Iraqi forces fleeing along the 'highway of death' decided that Saddam would live to fight another day. The 1999 Kosovo war resolved whose writ would run in the province. Israel's wars with its neighbours ensured the survival of a Jewish state at the heart of the Islamic world. The outcome of the Korean War was that the peninsula could not be reunified at an acceptable cost. And while the US finally withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, American military involvement in South East Asia almost certainly created a stability throughout the region that prevented more of the 'dominos' from falling to communism. Therefore, war generates an outcome – even when it does not result in clear success or failure. And though it often leads to new problems, it says a great deal about the human condition that despite the uncertainties of war, people are, bizarrely, still quite happy to resort to it.

In generating an outcome, war – or the threat to engage in it – solves political disputes. While the losing side may be unhappy, and sometimes returns for another round, nevertheless if war is waged decisively ill-feeling will be irrelevant when an adversary is confronted with an overwhelming defeat. For instance, in the 1940s, US and Russian military power ensured that Germany and Japan would not exercise hegemony. The Israelis repeatedly weakened their enemies to the point that while they may still be raging anti-Semites, they can do little about it. And in the nineteenth century the US resolved disputes with the Native Americans, the British, the Canadians, the Mexicans, and the Spanish in its own favour. The reality is that, quite often, war is simply necessary.

And this is where the pleas of those who are horrified by violence are, unfortunately, dangerous and may only result in more bloodshed. For instance, the 1990s military interventions in the Balkans had the effect of distorting the balance of power in the region; Serbia is the strongest state and will either have to be permanently restrained or the international community accept that, sooner or later, Belgrade will assert its pre-eminence. Meanwhile the peacekeeping and diplomatic interventions in African wars often mean that the conflicts are simply temporarily halted before another round of violence. The unpleasant truth is that less people would die, and

suffer misery, if the underlying political conflicts were resolved by allowing the actors to fight it out and find their own natural equilibrium. One thing is for sure, and that is that verbal exhortation about 'peace' does absolutely nothing to address the political problems that led to violence in the first place. War would resolve these disputes, one way or another.

So, in the twenty-first century, war still retains the power of decision. And, moreover, whatever the human rights brigade, or those who see technology as a panacea, may think, it is still fundamentally an attritional activity: the enemy must be defeated and, ideally, convinced to accept his defeat by a bludgeoning. While the old Roman policy of 'maximum force' is not readily available to Western states, inflicting harm on our adversary is still the best method of persuading him to do our will. As the distinguished strategist Colin Gray wrote, 'On occasions a high body count, not entirely excluding the innocent, is the pathway to strategic effectiveness'.

In conclusion, violence remains central to international politics and there is no indication that this will ever change. The reason for my confidence in saying that is the fact that the human condition itself has never changed. Those who shape public debate need to reconcile themselves to a violent world. And they also need to realise that, as painful as it may be, war and violence solve problems.