

THE UTILITY OF GEOPOLITICS AND GEOSTRATEGY: A COMMANDER'S VIEW FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

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Introduction

War is no picnic, as Major General Julian Thompson, Royal Marines, the decisive General in one of my wars, the Falkland's War, later wrote. So true. Friction. Fog. Fear. These three permeate any battlefield and any successful commander must find ways to defeat and to cope with each better than the enemy. It is for this reason that we train, often in ways that civilians find ridiculous because in peacetime we are like swimmers who exercise our strokes only on dry land to prepare to swim against the omnipresent resistance of water.

Carl von Clausewitz, the soldier's soldier, famously captured this conundrum: "Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war." Friction, he wrote, distinguishes real war from war on paper. My purpose is to explain how at the rising levels of command in battle that have formed my career, one needs something else on top of the ability to overcome friction and to pierce the fog and fear of war. That extra resource I have found is geopolitical insight, with its operational partner, geostrategy.

Essentially, geopolitics and geostrategy provide the battlefield commander with the tools to conduct two essential high-level tasks. Geopolitics provides a synthetic approach to assess strategic problems and to understand geographical patterns of political history and their contemporary pertinence. And as the post 9/11 wars have shown, it is geography that drives cultures, and it is only with geopolitical considerations that the commander will understand the cultural landscape within which he is operating. Geostrategy enables the commander to identify the geographical (physical and cultural) features that will facilitate or impede the projection of military power to a particular location. The relationships encompassed

by this have been summarised by General Sir Rupert Smith:” Geography shapes the strategy, and politics shapes the execution of that strategy within the geography”¹. The commander does not require a granular knowledge of the flora fauna, terrain, and climate of a particular location. Instead, he needs to identify and assess those geographical and cultural configurations and features that will both facilitate and potentially impede the tactical and operational objectives he has been given. As the Sandhurst academic John Keegan wrote, ‘geography is the most important of all factors that impinge on war -making’.

Sun Tzu and the Art of War

If there is one text that enables me to relate coherently to my battlefield experience as a commander in war, it is Sun Tzu’s Art of War. Written around 400 BC the military historian ²Basil Liddell Hart described it as ‘the concentrated essence of wisdom on the conduct of war’. There are two chapters that focus on military geography as it is sometimes called: ‘Terrain’ and ‘Nine Varieties of Ground’. It is the latter which has the greatest utility for my purposes. I believe that the five operational environments of modern warfare (land, sea, air, cyber and space) and the three simultaneous modes of modern conflict (hot, cold, and grey) are tractable to the typology of the varieties of ground Sun Tzu developed. He stated that in respect to the employment of troops, ground may be classified in the following way: dispersive, frontier, key, communicating, local, serious, difficult, encircled, and death. I will use this to frame my experiences of the utility of geostrategy as a field commander in many different campaigns and personal roles over the years.

For modern soldiers there can be no avoiding the realities of geography any more than there was for Sun Tzu or Clausewitz, although the dimensions of relevance now extend from outer space above the battle to underground, and to the depths of adjacent sea-areas through which core strategic assets now pass – communications cables, pipelines and the like. These facts make all warfare now joint and combined all-arms conflicts.

¹ General Sir Rupert Smith dated 24th September 2012.

² Sun Tzu, The Art of war, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

The physical terrain of a theatre in which the operation is taking place means that geography will always get due attention from a land commander irrespective of how junior he is. All soldiers are subject to the tyranny of distance, even when, as Halford Mackinder argued presciently in his 1904 'Pivot' paper, technologies can compress and diminish it. My experience has been seeing that tyranny translates from one dimension that might be conquered by railways in Mackinder's day, for example, to many others as I will illustrate below.

Sun Tzu's first category was 'dispersive', (often translated as accessible) and it applied throughout the Iraq campaign. The vast desert distances meant that routes were vulnerable. While we, the Coalition forces, could access where and when we wanted, it was the opposition that had real freedom of movement:

While our US allies did admit that their inability to close their border with Mexico showed the scale of the challenge, our inability to seal the Iran/Iraq border through Maysan province in MND(SE) was a constant irritant to the US Corps trying to protect Baghdad, because it allowed opposition resupply from Iran into Baghdad.

The challenge of fighting a counter-insurgency campaign that included a porous international boundary such as we faced in Iraq was painfully familiar to any British soldier who had served in Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. The Army's after-action report written in 2006 stated candidly:" In the mid -1980s PIRA was organized into 16 principal ASUs of which ten were based South of the Border."³ Not for nothing was South Armagh known as 'Bandit Country'. For the Provisional IRA this was what Sun Tzu described as 'key ground'. It was advantageous for them as it was adjacent to, and they could draw support from, the active sanctuary that was the Irish Republic.

In the Falklands War where I was a platoon commander in the Parachute Regiment, I encountered and had to deal with three varieties of Sun Tzu's typology simultaneously. The ground was dispersive to both sides, but we realized quickly that the conscript Argentines had no appetite for patrolling near us or away from

³ Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland, Army Code 71842 2006 p3-2.

their encampments: so the land was open to the Royal Marines and the Parachute Regiment for whom this terrain exactly replicated the Dartmoor and Brecon training areas we were used to training on at home.

After landing at San Carlos – the perilous but triumphant foundational success of the campaign, master-minded by Brigadier General Julian Thompson of 3 Cdo Bde - we had to march and traverse over a barren ground with little cover where the going was hard, and where there was little protection from the elements. This was what the Marines called yomping; a logistical march with full kit. We Paras called it TABing – a Tactical Advance to Battle. We marched with fighting order only, treating the march as an advance to contact. This was difficult ground. We had to keep steady on the march which we did. The tactical battles we fought were fought with the knowledge that we had to win back the islands before the Argentines sank our resupply lines. It was as simple as that: a point starkly made by the sinking of the Atlantic Conveyor by an Exocet missile, which took with it all but one of our Chinook helicopters upon which the planned crossing of the island from San Carlos to near Port Stanley depended. Hence the TAB/yomp. Classic Clausewitzian friction. Slow though our march might have been we still outpaced our logistics, delaying the final attack on Stanley by days. The absence of helicopter lift either for supply or medivac also meant that in the battle for Mount Longdon we knew we would only survive if we fought with what Sun Tzu called 'the courage of desperation' over ground that he labelled 'death'.

In both types of terrain, the distance of the Falklands Islands from the United Kingdom created a sense of vulnerability that in turn generated a huge sense of fighting purpose in our troops. The courage of desperation made my soldiers fight harder. A critical aspect of Sun Tzu's typology - and you must experience this at first hand to realize it - is the effect on the psychology of the troops, and how they came to terms with it. Such pressure can break or raise morale. In our case, thanks to the moral conviction of our troops and the depth of their training, it raised it.

Sun Tzu's next category posits that when an army had penetrated hostile territory it enters "serious ground". 'This is ground difficult to return from'. In short, it can be

abandoned but would be hard to re-occupy. It has also been translated as 'entangling' but that is too pejorative for 'serious ground' as full of advantage as risk if properly exploited. It can be interpreted as geostrategically 'sticky'. It encapsulates the United Kingdom's current strategic stance on the defense of the Falkland Islands. The shift since the 1982 war has been to a defensive posture that prevents an Argentinian capture, rather than retaining the capability to retake the islands if they were seized again. But in other modern theatres, the Ukrainian counter-offensive into the Kursk salient, first in summer 2024, then re-energized in mid-winter, in January 2025, for recent example, shows that "serious ground" is geostrategically sticky and can be spun into major geopolitical advantage at the interface of kinetic warfare and diplomacy as war by other means. But the balance between success and failure is delicate and the outcome is rarely self-evident upon entry.

In the Iraq war, on my deployment as a Divisional commander my Headquarters inherited the order to move from occupying the city of Basra to one of Operational Overwatch over the city but from the airbase outside with greatly reduced troop numbers yet undiminished responsibility to be capable of two missions. First, intervene militarily should matters dictate. Second, to sustain an intelligence process and produce an intelligence picture to make possible any future intervention. These orders showed dangerous ignorance of the qualities of 'serious ground' for they were internally self-contradictory. Yet any objections from my Headquarters to the order to abandon Basra and to relocate to the Coalition Operating Base at the airfield were ignored. I was given a recipe for failure because, lacking the depth and range of local intelligence from sympathetic locals, it was beyond the capacities of our intelligence assets to obtain.

This was ground difficult to return from. As Sun Tzu explained, in our situation, once physically out of Basra city, we lost access to local intelligence capability and in direct consequence lacked the assets to retake the town if necessary.

So it proved. Following the withdrawal of Coalition troops from Basra city in 2007, the Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki ordered the Iraqi Charge of the Knights in early 2008, with truly calamitous results. The faltering operation had to be rescued by sheer

mass and firepower of United States troops – and with the connivance of the Iranians.

This was highly embarrassing for the United Kingdom government. Operational Overwatch had been endorsed by four- and three-star commanders and at Cabinet level. It was a classic example of the failure of what Colin Gray called the ‘challenge of currency conversion, when a strategy proves to be incapable of giving legitimacy or guidance at the operational or tactical levels. Geopolitical insight made this clear to me as the field Commander, but I was over-ruled by a High Command and a British policy which ignored the elementary implications of geostrategy.

The strategic post-failure analysis that emerged ignored completely the implications of not paying attention to Sun Tzu’s commentary on ‘serious ground’. The Iraqi and United States narratives blamed the United Kingdom for the debacle. However, the real winners of Charge of the Knights were the Iranians, for it was they who allowed the operation to succeed (they had no wish to see Prime Minister Maliki humiliated). They ensured that henceforth any Iraqi Prime Minister would be beholden to them for their ultimate security and thereby they reached what Edward Luttwak describes as a ‘culminating point of success’ which, once passed, is very hard to retrieve: the essential quality of contesting ‘serious ground’.

Overall, the failure of both British and American decision-making to respect the lessons of geostrategy drove an important nail into the coffin of the United States’ objectives for invading the country in the first place. Today these omissions rank as a sin against Sun Tzu’s timeless insights into military geography.

GEOPOLITICAL THINKING AND GEOSTRATEGIC ANALYSIS SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The changes in the character of armed conflict since 1945 have been well documented but the changed geopolitical realities have received less comment. I suggest our understanding of these realities was inevitably obscured by the long goodbye of the British Empire and the formation of the NATO alliance in 1949. With respect to the latter the British Army, in a strategic sense, found itself again in what

Sun Tzu called serious ground. This ground was difficult to return from for over forty years. The army's operational focus was the Inner German Border. Because of the political sensitivity of ceding ground in the event of an attack by the Warsaw Pact, the strategy of forward defense was adopted. The focus of military planning became operational, the strategic plan a given, which was beyond question.

Geopolitically, Britain's Cold War deployment in what was then West Germany represented a continuity that Mackinder would have recognized. From 1904 onwards he tried to convey the vital link between British maritime supremacy and the European balance of power. This was a strategic synthesis not a binary choice. While RN naval supremacy had gone by 1945, Britain's 'continental commitment' of 55,000 troops and RAF Germany endured to the beginning of the 1990s.

When the United Kingdom began the withdrawal from the strategically serious ground in a now united Germany, atrophy in terms of geopolitical thinking and geostrategic analysis had embedded itself in both military and political institutions of the realm. To their credit the Heads of Defence Studies for the Army, Royal Navy, and Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre under Rear Admiral Chris Parry and Major General Paul Newton sponsored the Mackinder Forum, for ten years between 2000 and 2010. Based at the University of Reading, it had research and the dissemination of geopolitics at its core. By contrast the academic leadership of the Defense Academy determined that geopolitics and geostrategic analysis were never in the curriculum. Consequently, we have produced a generation of officers whose ignorance of these matters is total or at best self-taught. This was compounded by little requirement for the British Army's high command, and the policy elite who framed the orders, to think geopolitically and understand geostrategic constraints and opportunities, sheltering under the US/NATO decision making umbrella.

This was clearly illustrated by the first line of my orders after being posted to Basra in 2007: "work within the tolerances of the US". It is as close as I have ever felt to being in the 51st state., Challenging United States geostrategic analysis was career limiting, and meant many of us complied against our better judgement. This required subordination had a corrosive effect on our ability and incentives to think in

a world where the certainties of the Cold War had disappeared. The real goal in Iraq and Afghanistan was to remain loyal to the US, as I was often reminded. Strategic coherence was of decreasing concern to the government of the United Kingdom, and a sense of our responsibility for the outcomes waned. We simply supplied (ever shrinking) numbers of assets.

As head of Cyber Security at the MoD, I became aware of the relationship between cyber and geographical location and configuration. I recall watching a global map at GCHQ showing how computer usage and hence virus spreading follows the daily passage of the sun and our human rhythms. An American colleague encapsulated what the United States values about the United Kingdom in terms of our material contribution to the 'special relationship': our nuclear deterrent, special forces, and GCHQ, enabled by our residual overseas territories to give a coverage that no other state can rival.

THE CURSE OF JOINT COMMAND

A critical nail in the coffin of geopolitical thinking in the United Kingdom's armed forces was the over-zealous application of a joint command for the United Kingdom's armed forces, operational effectiveness being sacrificed on the altar of cost. The man responsible for this was the former Conservative Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Portillo. Geography will always be important for the three armed forces, and warfare today is fought simultaneously in environments that are linked. Yet the geographical domain each armed service must train and fight in is radically different. As previously stated, an abstract geography fused with an understanding of Sun Tzu's varieties of ground goes far to explain the army's domain.

The geography of sea warfare could not be more different. Accessibility and mobility are the key, except in those instances of a planned amphibious landing. Relative movement dominates a war at sea. For this reason, speed of advance and radius of action have been the vital considerations in naval operations. New weapons technology has added the range of target identification and range of fire to this list. Furthermore, these factors depend to a degree on land support and bases. In one sense they form the skeletal framework of any naval strategy. Their geographical

location reveals something of the geopolitical priorities of the state that maintains them. Our withdrawal from Malta, Singapore, and Simonstown, during the post 1945 period, clearly signaled the United Kingdom's geopolitical priorities. Today the Chinese Navy's acquisition of land support and naval bases indicates a geopolitical ambition on a global scale.

The geography of air warfare encapsulates both the geography of land and sea warfare. The geographical aspects of air warfare depend on the unique functions of air forces within the medium of both air and space. It can perform the following functions: raids, controlling air space, reconnaissance and surveillance, tactical support and rapid transportation. It is important to remember that: "because of the critical factor of range and accessibility in the efficiency and effectiveness of air operations, advanced bases become of great import"⁴.

Enforced joint command has diluted our understanding of these three geographical domains. The assumption was the existence of a joint officer who understood these three domains of war. This replaced a system whereby each service had its own Headquarters ready to command operations as appropriate. Under such a system the Army ran Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. The Royal Navy ran the Falklands War and the Armilla patrols in the Persian Gulf through the 1980s and 1990s. The Royal Air Force ran an air cap over Iraq through the 1990s. All of these operations were successful. It meant that environmental specialists were running operations in their geographical domain. Under the regime of joint command at the PJHQ in Northwood, jobs are largely filled by joint officers on an equal share for all.

When I was in land locked Kosovo in 2003, my supporting staff chain back in PJHQ comprised of a submariner and a high-altitude jet jockey, both bright and technically astute but neither understanding the overridingly important human terrain of Kosovo. Iraq and Afghanistan were fundamentally land operations supported by RN and RAF assets yet were run by joint officers. It was common experience for deployed army officers to have to dig down into the PJHQ chain of command to find someone, an Army or Royal Marine officer, who might understand what was going on. I recall

⁴ .C. Peltier and G. Etzel Percy, *Military Geography*, New York: Van Nostrand ,1966,p59

being debriefed after my Iraq tour by an RAF intelligence officer whose questioning was all about hard metrics. My response was:” have you not understood a word I have written these last seven months? It’s all about the human beings not hard metrics”.

Another unintended consequence of joint command is that single service chiefs are not in the operational chain of command but are asset providers to the Central staff. Devoid of any responsibility for outcomes, the temptation grew for the service chiefs to see operations as a resource cash cow.

UNDERSTANDING WAR AND STRATEGY IN A NEW ERA

In one sense the era that emerged after 9/11 and before the Russian ground invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 presented the West in general ,and the United Kingdom in particular, with the challenge of answering perhaps the most important question Clausewitz posed in his book *On War*: ”The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander must make is to establish...the kind of war upon which they are embarking.”⁸

One approach has been to argue that we had entered a new era which had no precedent “War has lost its meaning as it was understood up to 50 years ago. Now small groups - corpuscles - that hate us can launch weapons at us from thousands of miles. It is no longer a business of state against state.”

So commented Professor Sir Michael Howard on the BBC in 2012. His observation was based on the events of 9/11 and begged the question of how our understanding of war needed to change, and how governments responded to this premier question.

War is a manifestation of state power. In the western tradition it is firmly linked to the armed forces; World Wars I and II are exemplars of this. This depiction of war owes much to Clausewitz, as he explained it as :” nothing but a duel on a larger scale - each using force to compel the other to do our will.....Physical force is thus the *means* of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its *objective*.¹ This assumption of a *necessary* connection between the military and ‘war’ was starkly brought home to

me in 2003 when I was in the Pentagon discussing the global campaign against Islamic terrorism. The United Kingdom and the United States were working closely together in this campaign. My United States interlocutor and I agreed that an intelligence led, global counter terrorist campaign was required. We agreed that the term Global *War* on Terror was unfortunate as this was not a ‘war’ as traditionally conceived. But I was told firmly, “it has to be called a war otherwise the State Department gets the money”.

The nature of armed force has encouraged the idea that it can resolve any challenge put to it; the comforting idea being when all else fails, deploying the armed forces will be decisive in resolving a political conflict. In my lifetime, there have been three uses by the United Kingdom of its armed forces that proved to be decisive: the Falklands campaign, Sierra Leone and Op GRANBY/Iraq 1991. In all three, the political structure the United Kingdom supported had been overthrown or threatened by armed force. Consequently Britain’s armed forces both alone or as part of a coalition defeated a military force and restored the political status quo ante. The reason these actions proved decisive was that the military were given a task for which they were trained and equipped and in which they succeeded.

¹ Von Clausewitz, C.P.G 1832, *On War*, translated and edited by M Howard and P Paret, 1989. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The alternative answer to this premier question is to underline the need for a better understanding of the nature of irregular war. It does **not** have a different strategic logic from that of regular wars, using military force to achieve a strategic effect sufficient to modify the enemy's will. The key point is this kind of conflict takes place in a very different context. This challenge was illustrated by the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. In both, British arms were initially successful in the task for which they were trained and equipped – the overthrow of the Taliban and the Saddam governments. Thereafter, the Western idea of its own rationality caused friction. The strategic objective was to create a new political and social settlement in both countries. This was attempted in the face of a violent insurgency fuelled by tribalism and religion.

The cultures of these two countries were defined by a cluster of beliefs we struggled to understand. As one Chief of Staff of a British Division in Basra commented in his haul down report: "it was only in the last month of our [6 month] tour that we realized how little we understood the cultural context".

In this new cultural context operational experience from Northern Ireland was of limited and often overstated help. As General Petraeus used to remind us at MNF(I) conferences, "Its all about the politics"; and that we never really fathomed. President Bush's 'mission accomplished' speech aboard USS Abraham Lincoln on 1 May 2003 was accurate about the military success of toppling Saddam, but blind to the far harder political reconstruction challenge that lay ahead and for which the United States (and hence the UK) quite consciously had failed to plan for.

The net effect of this lack of understanding of the cultural context (our own assumptions as well as those of our local target population) was to mirror our mindsets onto the local population, with decisions made on that basis. People who questioned whether Iraq or Afghanistan were ready for the democracy we were attempting to impose on them risked being accused of racism. This was nonsensical and flew in the face of our historical knowledge. It is symptomatic of the challenge we face in our own multicultural society of how to reconcile diversity with differences of value judgements. For cultural differences exist and decisions need to be taken accordingly, not swept under the carpet as too difficult. The simplicity of the initial

military task masked the difficulty of the cultural change required for long term success. That culture was not addressed, any new structure overlain on it was gradually eroded and the original culture reasserted itself. This is exactly what has happened in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In these campaigns it was often stated that 'we are not trying to recreate Guildford here'. What was good enough in Iraq and Afghanistan was never consistently defined or applied.

As the Commanding Officer of 2 PARA, I had a company of Gurkhas attached, ie 100 Nepalese inserted into 400 largely British soldiers. In preparation, I had a briefing from the senior Gurkha colonel about the cultural differences of Gurkhas and Paras. He predicted bloodshed; how wrong he was. The Gurkhas went down a storm in the battalion but as CO, following the leadership mantra to exploit people for their strengths and protect them from their weaknesses, I used them very differently as they were culturally geared to deliver results and operate in different ways to the British. A hill tribesman from the foothills of Kanchenjunga is bound to have different attitudes and skills to a paratrooper from Bootle - what matters is to respect their strengths and weaknesses and get the best out of them all and the situations.

I am sure most military commanders will have tried to do the same in operations. While trying hard to work within local cultural parameters, we were not sufficiently anthropologically aware to get it right all the time. This was particularly difficult when dealing with a culture that differs from our own in its concept of time or truth. It was only by reading Sir Mark Allen's excellent book *Arabs*¹⁴ that I learnt the Arabic language has no future tense; just two tenses – past complete and present continuous. I was told, the Iraqis had ways of talking about the future but nonetheless I was not alone in finding many manifestations of their culture challenging such as their reluctance to plan and a lack of durability to any plans they came up with. They felt comfortable taking entirely different positions days after stating the opposite.

¹⁴ M. Allen “Arabs”, London: Continuum Books., 2006

The most striking example I experienced was being a witness to the entire Basra security committee sign up enthusiastically to 3 Divisional plan to blow up the Jameat police station on Christmas Day 2006 – which they promptly denied when it happened. Working with local cultures needs to be an exercise in anthropology not colonialism if we are to get into the minds of our allies, let alone our enemies.

Another challenge was the absence of clear leadership of the mission. I recall talking in Kabul to a Foreign Office official charged with Britain’s commitment to eradicate the drug trade in Afghanistan. He said to me:”

I don’t know why I am in charge of this, I don’t want to be in charge, I’m not interested in this. It’s not what I joined for and I’m completely untrained for it.” This underlined to me a lack of motivation or capability in the FCO to fulfil executive responsibilities.

In Iraq control was often contested between the political, military and development agencies. In my military HQ, we identified our task as being to enable a political outcome, thus settling the inherited dispute about who was departmentally in charge between DFID, FCO and the MoD by declaring this political objective being a FCO preserve so they were in charge. The consul was delighted but confessed there was no political plan for me to enable in a military sense. We offered to write one, and this was gratefully accepted. (Although DfID insisted on their institutional independence, which is another sorry saga). .

THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGE OF CHINA

I do not have operational experience of fighting the People’s Liberation Army of China. The only people who do are British and American veterans who fought in the Korean War and are now in their 80s. However, I want to use my practitioner’s view of the battlefields to evaluate China’s strategy and try to understand the challenge it poses to both the United States, and the United Kingdom.

What has gone largely unacknowledged is that on the 1st April 2023 China declared war against the United States. However surprising this may sound, we need to understand what this means from their perspective not yours. The war that has been declared is a 'People's War'. It has parameters that are very different from our Western interpretations of what happens when a war is declared.

The book which gives us the best route into this cultural paradigm was written in 1999. It is titled: 'Unrestricted Warfare'. The authors were two Chinese Colonels Qiao Jiang and Wang Xiangsui.⁵ They argue China must change the context of its competition with the United States. China's ability to win this People's War is predicated on expanding the scope of the conflict in a way that to Western perspectives seems counterintuitive. The core thesis is the imperative of expanding the opportunities for offensive action to other aspects of what Mackinder would have termed the 'Going Concern' of the United States. This would include the battlefields of diplomacy, economics, technology, and information. China's ability to harness AI technology in the form of Deep Seek, and market it by making it free is a graphic example of this. Furthermore, the company claimed to have used only 2,048 older and slower Nvidia chips, a necessity imposed by US sanctions.

In chapter eight of this book the essential principles were set out. Critically there is no longer any distinction between what we now regard as a battlefield encompassing the terrain, the seas, the air, and outer space, and what could be termed social spaces such as politics, economics, culture, and the psyche. These two Colonels summarized their strategic doctrine in the following way: "Warfare can be military, or it can be quasi-military, or it can be non-military.

This strategic doctrine has a clear resonance with the wisdom of Sun Tzu. In chapter three of the Art of War we get a clue to the origins of the 'People's War': "Generally in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this".⁶ Sun Tzu's interlocuter Li Chuan counsels, 'Do not put a premium on killing'. This is further

⁵Col Qiao Liang and Col Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare, China's Masterplan to Destroy America*, Pan American Publishing Company, ©2002.

⁶ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963 p77

expanded by Sun Tzu when he stated:” to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill”⁷ Central to Sun Tzu’s thinking is the importance of minimizing force on force conflict. He identifies another approach that encapsulates the People’s War, ‘what is of supreme importance in war is to attack their strategy’. This strategic doctrine needs to be understood in the context of an emerging geopolitical reality which is not yet fully discernible.

The starting point was the catastrophic strategic decision the West made to admit China to membership of the World Trade Organisation on the 11th December 2001. Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister at the time, claimed:” China’s road to parliamentary democracy is now unstoppable”.⁸ His surreal assumption being that China would be assimilated economically into Western liberal institutions. This was a strategic error from which there was and will be no redemption. Its membership has been contentious in terms of the substantial political and economic shocks that have been visited on other countries. The changing geopolitical reality, which this decision accelerated, did not automatically translate into political power until China developed the ability to influence events in particular geographical locations. This has been symbolised by the Belt and Road Initiative which now includes 140 countries and was incorporated into the Chinese constitution in 2013.⁹ It is often referred to as the ‘Silk Road’. This was a phrase coined in 1877 by a Prussian geographer, Baron von Richthofen, to describe a fantasy railway route from Berlin to Beijing. By invoking this historical geography of a Silk Road of exchange and connection, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping has sought to soften China’s expansionism.

An emblematic example of this expansion has been the construction of the port of Gwadar. Located in the Baluchistan region of south-west Pakistan, it is 533km from the city of Karachi and 120km from the Iranian border. It is also

⁷ Ibid p77.

⁸ The Times 10th February 2024.

⁹

located close to the Straits of Hormuz, the key choke point at the bottom of the Persian Gulf. The narrative of its development is a compelling one:"

Construction of the port began in 2002 and the Chinese government provided \$198 million of finance. The port was officially opened on 20th March 2007.

Present at the ceremony was the Chinese Minister for Communications Li Shenglin. The port became officially fully operational when the first commercial ship 'Pos Glory' docked on 15th March 2008. In May 2011 Pakistan announced that China had agreed to its request to take over the running of the port".¹⁰

The strategic and geopolitical challenge of China needs to be juxtaposed to the British Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office continuing to define itself by reference to globalized objectives, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In my experience of dealing with them, playing by global rules always took priority over the pursuit of national interest. To admit on the world stage we were doing things for our own national reasons seemed an embarrassment – even though that is precisely what our competitors are doing all the time. The arrival of the Trump administration in Washington may force a return of the United Kingdom promoting its own national interests.

CONCLUSIONS

During the twentieth century the geographical scope of the United Kingdom's foreign policy and subsequent strategy both expanded and contracted. Furthermore, this experience is by no means unique. Many European states have had similar experiences. Geographical location is self-evidently unchanging, but the interpretation of it evolves according to policy preferences. These produce assumptions that can turn out to be adequate or inadequate and may or may not contribute to a desired political outcome. Geography does set certain parameters within which these preferences will be played out:"

¹⁰ G, Sloan, *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History*, (London; Routledge)2017p211.

Britain as an island was at different times an expansionist, imperialist power and a defensive balancer.”¹¹ Emblematic of our past imperial power was a visit I made on the 11th November 2010 to the Commonwealth War Graves at Hargeza in what was British Somaliland.¹² There was a Memorial to those lost in the First World War protecting the port of Berbera, a coal resupply port on the route out to India, and a source of meat for the British port of Aden located on the opposite side of the Gulf of Aden.

Britain’s geopolitical evolution to a defensive balancer on the European continent was a gradual one. It was a combination of the unforced errors of the Suez crisis of 1956, and the subsequent decision on east of Suez base reductions in 1967 that were completed by 1972. Prior to the Falklands War in 1982, the United Kingdom’s capability to mount operations outside of Europe was described as the ‘half pillar’ of a four and a half pillar construct. The other four had a focus on nuclear deterrence, the defence of the eastern Atlantic, West Germany and the United Kingdom.

Twenty-five years into the twenty-first century a new geographical perspective is emerging. It is animated by China’s global ambitions, Russia’s unbridled assertion of sovereignty, and a United States questioning its commitment to the defence of Europe. For the soldier the task of geopolitics will be the same as it was in the past - to give, as Halford Mackinder would have put it, judgement in practical conduct’.

¹¹ A.I. Johnson Cultural Realism, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p10-11.

¹² It gained independence in 1960.