BATTLE & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE HISTORY OF STRATEGY

Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman 15 May 2014

Sir Lawrence began by reminding the audience that there were various applications of strategy – military, political, revolutionary and business – which had some common features. The word *strategy* had arisen in the late eighteenth century in connection with warfare, especially in considering the activities of Napoleon I. It derived from enlightenment thinking, that reason and science could be applied to all human affairs.

The early concept of strategy was of planned action that led to a decisive battle. Such a battle having taken place, the losing side would be at the mercy of the victors and would swiftly come to terms. This concept was inadequate even during the Napoleonic wars as, for example, at Borodino where the French won the battle but were still forced to retreat, and in the Peninsular War where the role of local guerrilla forces was critical.

After 1815 the concept was examined in various studies, of which the leading authors were the Swiss Baron de Jomini and the Prussian von Clausewitz. Both had considerable experience of warfare; both had served, on opposite sides, in the French invasion of Russia in 1812. As the century wore on it became obvious that matters were ever more complicated. The great German General von Moltke beat the French several times in 1870–71, for example, but the war continued for much longer than the concept suggested; the French continued to resist. Moltke concluded that they did so because the masses were now involved in decision-making, however distantly, and warned against relying on the concept of the decisive battle.

In 1914, however, the Germans sought such an event. They did not find it and the result was attrition. After 1914 warfare changed again and was no longer confined to the battlefield. Air power was introduced and submarines also played a role. The war of 1939–45 demonstrated these changes even more forcefully.

Very few generals, having determined on a strategy, could carry it through: for example, the Germans in 1914 whose strategy lasted a very short time. The point is that other things happen. Moltke said that 'no plan survives contact with the enemy', and 1914 neatly proves it, though there have been a few exceptions. This meant a progressive disillusion with the whole idea of strategy. There were too many variables for a ruling grand strategy to succeed – not only the capacity of the enemy but public opinion, the attitudes of other countries and sheer accident. Professor Freedman added that the concept of decisive victory was not yet lost, particularly in the United States.

The military analyses were taken up by nineteenth-century revolutionaries searching for a way in which existing power structures might be replaced by something they preferred. From the 1830s there were debates about how capitalism (or 'the bourgeoisie') might be overthrown. Here again the protagonists of revolution tended to believe in a decisive battle but the only thing that happened was the debate. The revolutionaries, having failed to move the masses on whose behalf they professed to work, then concluded that the masses did not understand their true interests, and in turn this belief led to hard work among the working classes to convince them of the necessity of revolution. To do that they needed big ideas and skilled propagandists.

This is a real problem. If you are the underdog, how *can* you succeed? The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu thought that at least part of the answer lay in deception, always a large part of a clever general's repertory. The problems here, as Professor Freedman pointed out, are that while one side is planning deception so might the other, thereby leading to a changed situation on the ground; and that once a form of deception has been tried, the enemy will be on its guard against repetition.

Part of the answer lies in the creation of alliances. Professor Freedman pointed to Churchill's position in May 1940. There was no point in planning for victory; all he could do was to plan for survival, a necessary and urgent precondition for victory. To survive, Britain needed friends; and Churchill wooed the United States and then in 1941, the Soviet Union. This was geo-political strategy on a grand scale, and it worked. By the end of 1941 all three countries were in alliance, and victory was certain even if still a long way off.

All of these considerations should have characterised business strategy too, a concept only becoming fashionable from the 1960s. The problems there were analogous to those of war-makers: for the strong how to maintain their position, and for the weak how to grow to strength. The strong, of course, tend to complacency, and Professor Freedman gave as an example the American carmaker General Motors, which was unable to fend off the challenge posed by German and Japanese manufacturers. Large companies had large planning departments that failed expensively to provide flexible planning, and sensible chief executives abandoned them. Admittedly, business strategies would always be more complex than military ones because there were even more factors at work, which meant that any traditional strategy adopted was much more likely to fail. Business is now much more pragmatic, adjusting its attitudes and objectives as the market and its competitors adjusted the conditions in which it worked.

In summary, Professor Freedman suggested that strategy reflected an aspiration to control the environment of the army, or business (or other organisation) so that dominance could be assured. But plans adopted were always liable to be derailed by changed conditions, whether by intention or accident. The sensible course of action would be Churchill's: not to start with the final objective but to improve where we are now, to improvise, to get to the next stage while watching carefully for changes in the environment.

Professor Freedman then turned to the current difficulties in Ukraine. No-one outside the Kremlin knew what Putin was planning to do. Was he planning to absorb all Ukraine into the Russian-dominated version of the European Union or just those parts that were clearly pro-Russian? Would he annex any more territory, thereby creating enormous hostility in the rest of Ukraine and around the world generally; or would he simply neuter Ukraine into a sullen friendship?

He had had success with the Crimea, a territory that was undeniably and overwhelmingly pro-Russian in sentiment, but this was far from the case elsewhere in Ukraine, particularly as one moved to the west of the country. His dilemma was whether to carry on destabilising Ukraine generally or to offer more and more support to the pro-Russians of the east. His problem was that each step forward created new conditions, some of them unwelcome or unexpected, and in any case he had to bear in mind the very poor state of the Russian economy. He might now be seen as having the choice of forward movement – aggression – or backward movement – open and obvious failure. We shall see.

Members raised a number of questions, concerning the influence of cultures, the survival of the notion of outright victory and other matters. Professor Freedman emphasised that any strategy was bound to be influenced by cultural issues but the basic problem remained: moving an issue forward tended to narrow the options available to the mover. The problem in Iraq, for example, was what to do after the inevitable military victory; planning a consequent strategy was essential, just as it was for a burglar: the robbery

would not be enough. One of the main concerns must be to convince people that such a victory is in their interests, but their own cultures often differed from those of invaders, and also divisions among the population could be significant. Here he instanced the Sunni/Shia conflict within Islam. Moreover, all tactical questions have strategic implications. Killing some people may be tactically necessary but strategically disastrous because of public reaction.

Last, attention turned to non-violent strategies. Non-violence was not always possible, but Professor Freedman felt that where it succeeded it was more likely to result in a long-lasting solution if only because it engendered fewer hatreds. An underdog wishing for change was likely to lose if it adopted violence: the Palestinian Intifida was working and led to dialogue, but renewed violence led to a return to conflict and an intensification of Israeli intransigence. Nelson Mandela had reluctantly supported violence but during his years in prison he could see how violence might engulf the country. When the time was ripe he decided to offer the government negotiations. This was a discussion he took alone.

George Kiloh

General von Moltke