

# CHACR HISTORICAL ANALYSIS PROGRAMME

## Historical Insights Series

April 2020



### ***Threshold, Sub-Threshold...We Have Been Here Before or 'New Wine in old Bottles'***

CIRCULATION: **Public**  
**About CHACR and Historical Analysis Programme**

The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research conducts and sponsors research and analysis into the enduring nature and changing character of conflict on land and is the active hub of scholarship and debate within the British Army, in order to sustain and develop the conceptual component of fighting power. The Historical Analysis Programme (HAP) draws lessons from history to inform how we fight today and get ready for conflict in the future.

The aim of the Historical Insight Series is to provide a platform for researchers and experts to offer their views on critical issues in the land domain. The views expressed in the articles are those of the authors, and **not of the CHACR or the wider British Army.**

This document must not be reproduced or used in part or whole without the permission of the CHACR.

### **Author of the Briefing**

Professor Matthias Strohn is the head of historical analysis at CHACR, Visiting Professor of Military Studies at the University of Buckingham, and a faculty member of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a member of the British Commission for Military History. He was educated at the University of Münster (Germany) and the University of Oxford, from which he received his M.St. and his DPhil. He is a specialist in the history of war in the 20th century, with a special interest in the World Wars, command and leadership, the development of doctrine, and the application of military history in the current military and strategic contexts. In total, Professor Strohn has written and edited seventeen books and numerous articles. Professor Strohn acted as the academic adviser to German and British government bodies for the First World War centenary commemorations. He is a keen battlefield tour guide and has led tours in Europe from Madrid to Stalingrad. He has also worked on television and radio as both historical adviser and interviewee. Professor Strohn holds a commission in the German Army and, as Lieutenant-Colonel, is a member of the military attaché reserve, having served on the attaché staffs in Madrid, London and Paris. In a previous role he served as the staff officer for military history at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College in Hamburg. There he also received his initial training as a staff officer, which was augmented by the successful completion of the Advanced Command and Staff Course (R) at the Joint Services Command and Staff College in Shrivenham. He deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan with both the British Army (in his role as civil servant) and the German Bundeswehr.

The discussion around thresholds, how to define them, and how to counter adversaries in the 'grey-zone' has occupied security experts, academics and military thinkers around the globe for quite some time. In Britain, the Integrated Review, which sets the strategic agenda for the future, has once again made clear that adversaries operate successfully in the sub-threshold domain and that we need to enhance our capabilities to counter these threats (for a discussion of this topic see Andrew Sharpe's piece *War and Peace – The Thresholds*, available on the CHACR website).

The discussions are centred around the argument that our binary understanding of war and peace is outdated and that we are facing a new threat; one that is difficult to counter for states that have been built exactly on this binary understanding of conflict and have organised themselves accordingly. Sub-threshold and 'grey-zone' activity, so the argument runs, is the new battle space and we need to invest more in this new threat scenario. And yet, a lot of uncertainty remains in how to do this and how to deal with such previously unknown threats and scenarios. As is so often the case, a look back into history can help us to find some relevant answers.

The first question is what we really understand by these terms. I do not wish to dwell on this too much and regurgitate the different definitions that are widely available, but rather give you, the reader, a definition that you can find in a US document. It is worth quoting the document at length, so please bear with me (and note that the author uses the term 'political warfare' rather than 'grey zone' or sub-threshold):

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.

The author of this document then acknowledges the fact that the US has not been particularly effective and successful in this area:

We have been handicapped however by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war, by a tendency to view war as sort of a sporting contest outside of all political context, by a national tendency to seek a political cure-all, and by a reluctance to recognize the realities of international relations - the perpetual rhythms of struggle, in and out of war.

It is probably fair to say that this description mirrors the views held by many western thinkers today. So, if 'we' are bad at this, who is good at conducting such 'political warfare'? One of the answers in the document is perhaps obvious and takes our eyes to the east: 'Lenin so synthesized the teaching of Marx and Clausewitz that the Kremlin's conduct of political warfare has become the most refined and effective of any in history'. But even before mentioning the Russian Bear, the author of the document mentions

another nation which he regards as one of the masters in this area: 'The creation, success, and survival of the British Empire has been due in part to the British understanding and application of the principles of political warfare.' In the context of our discussions today, such a statement might surprise us, and it is now time to let the cat out of the bag: this document was written in the early days of the Cold War and is dated 30 April 1948. It was written for the US National Security Council by George F. Kennan, the State Department's policy planning director and prominent advocate of a policy of containment of Soviet expansion. In the document, Kennan argues for 'political warfare' activities behind the Iron Curtain and the establishment of a Directorate of Political Warfare Operations.<sup>1</sup>

This document provides an interesting insight into the mind of one of the most influential US political thinkers in the time of the Cold War, including providing some examples of US involvement in overt and covert operations after the Second World War. But this document is not only of interest to the historian of the Cold War. It raises some fundamental questions about our understanding of sub-threshold activities (to return to our modern term). Perhaps most importantly, it also demands the question as to why some people think that these actions and operations are so fundamentally new, so that we are still trying to understand how we can counter them when they are directed against us. Let us not forget, according to Kennan, there were two masters of the 'black art of political warfare': The Russians/Soviets and the British. So, with a long history of sub-threshold experience, why are we so surprised by what is happening now? A few immediate answers spring to mind (and you, the reader, are invited to add to this list!): first, we need to analyse the analytical gap: why have militaries (and other organisations) lost the edge and the understanding of 'political warfare' (and it is important to point out that the Army, even though this paper concentrates on it, is only one member of the sub-threshold team)? This leads us to wider questions of society and our acceptance of activities at the sub-threshold level. In the context of Kennan's text, we also need to understand that the British Empire (just like the Russian / Soviet one) was won and ruled on different principles to those we adopt today.

So, let's drill in a bit deeper and look at these factors in some more detail and see how and why they matter to the Army. Perhaps the strongest factor for our current lack of understanding of 'political warfare' is an institutional intellectual issue, one between 'gown and green', so to speak. All militaries tend to concentrate on the tasks at hand while time for contemplation is often scarce. This is simply the nature of Army business. The broad notion found in all armies that military personnel should be generalists rather than experts in a niche area is a consequence of this. It is understandable in a fast-moving environment that requires quick and decisive decisions, but it often negates a wider understanding of underlying issues. Thinking about 'stuff' and identifying long-term trends and continuities requires time; time that is often simply not available within rapidly changing environments such as the Army often faces. It also means that armies tend to put all their intellectual eggs into one basket, which means that, once a wheel has come full circle, we re-invent

---

<sup>1</sup> The originally Top Secret document has been declassified and is available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/208714> (accessed 02/04/2021).

this wheel rather than looking at what had happened before. Or is it, to play devil's advocate for a moment, often the culture of the can-do and proactive Army rather than a real shortness of time? You might have heard of the four categories of officers as defined by Hammerstein-Equord, the German Chief of the General Staff between 1930 and 1933. He said:

I distinguish four types. There are clever, hardworking, stupid, and lazy officers. Usually, two characteristics are combined. Some are clever and hardworking; their place is the General Staff. The next ones are stupid and lazy; they make up 90 percent of every army and are suited to routine duties. Anyone who is both clever and lazy is qualified for the highest leadership duties, because he possesses the mental clarity and strength of nerve necessary for difficult decisions. One must beware of anyone who is both stupid and hardworking; he must not be entrusted with any responsibility because he will always only cause damage.<sup>2</sup>

Now, we should not understand 'laziness' here as a lack of drive, but the ability to stay calm and stand back from a situation and assess it before springing into action. This is difficult in ever-shrinking armies where there is often simply not enough manpower to allow for such 'laziness', even during peace-time. And yet, adopting some of Hammerstein's 'laziness' might result in a better understanding of the world around us and might save us from having to re-learn the lessons of the past, which immediately puts us on an intellectual and doctrinal back foot, meaning that, in the physics of international competition, we run the danger of becoming an object rather than being a subject. I remember talking to a local in Afghanistan. Amongst other things, I asked him why he thought that the British were in the country as part of ISAF. Without hesitation he answered, 'to take revenge for the first Anglo-Afghan War'. Now, using this war, which lasted from 1839 to 1842 and saw a humiliating defeat of British troops during the withdrawal from Kabul, as an explanation for military engagement in Afghanistan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century surprised me somewhat. The point here is not that we can agree or disagree with this statement, but that we have to understand that this was one view held in the country at the time. I am sure that nobody in ISAF would have come up with the same reason, although some of the Brits might have read Flashman and were possibly familiar with his not-so-glorious deeds during the retreat from Kabul. Or to use another example: when I started my professional career, all armies were still full of Cold War warriors. The expectation that we would see large conventional battles being fought out in the north-German plain if the Cold War ever turned hot (prior to the war going nuclear) formed peoples' minds and thinking. This was the reason why most armies found it difficult to adapt to COIN operations like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their mindset was just differently calibrated and it took most armies a considerable amount of time, and thus blood, to adapt. The fact that we were facing an asymmetric threat confused people and we struggled to find answers. To put it simply, the Taliban is not the Soviet 3rd Shock Army

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Horst Poller, *Bewältigte Vergangenheit. Das 20. Jahrhundert, erlebt, erlitten, gestaltet*, Munich 2010, p. 140.

that might role across the plain towards you in your pre-prepared defensive positions in northern Germany. And yet, the enemy simply did what our doctrine demands from us: to put our strengths against the enemy's weakness. So, why did armies struggle? Possibly because of a certain intellectual inflexibility within the armed forces and certain expectations at the political level, which had, again, often been based on an incorrect and inadequate analysis of the situation. Despite 'political warfare within the Empire and Northern Ireland, 'the gold standard for British doctrine remained the conduct of major war, not the waging of counter-insurgency campaigns'.<sup>3</sup> It is thus not astonishing that the memory of the abundance of 'small wars', COIN and other operations in the Empire or Northern Ireland faded within the main-stream Army.

Then the pendulum swung back and the memory of large-scale conventional operations faded into oblivion. With the new threat scenario post-Crimea and the developments in the Ukraine all NATO armies have tried to blow life again into the corpse of operational art - and it has proved difficult. An example really made this clear to me: during an Operation Reflect (the British Army's commemoration of the First World War) battlefield study we analysed a Corps attack. When the British and international participants, most of them officers with considerable operational experience, were asked questions about operations at this level, we faced a tumbleweed moment. Hand on heart, does anybody know what the length of a battalion or regimental march column is on one, two or three routes? Or how long it would take such a unit to cross a particular point? Or what the anticipated rate of march is? We have forgotten these things and the institutional memory disappeared when the Cold War warriors retired. Now, you cannot expect everybody to be an expert in everything. But you should maintain an institutional memory that can be used when necessary. This institutional memory will enable the Army to adapt more quickly to seemingly new threats and will thus, in essence, save blood. But this in itself is not enough and an institutional memory can only do so much. Every person in uniform should have the professional interest to widen the horizon beyond the desk or the rifle muzzle. When Erwin Rommel inspected the Atlantic Wall in 1944 and his soldiers complained that they were working too hard, he is alleged to have replied: "shed sweat, not blood". In the modern world, this must include shedding 'intellectual sweat', not because it will earn everybody a PhD, but because it will make the Army more effective, flexible and adaptable as a fighting force. Intellectual complacency cannot be a characteristic of the modern Army, and neither can the idealised professional amateur. The British Army has come a long way in this journey already, but more remains to be done. In this context, it is reassuring that the British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, said the new Ranger Regiment will be the 'vanguard of the Army's global footprint', adding that it will be 'matching brainpower with firepower'.<sup>4</sup>

Another core problem is one of wider questions of society, which, in turn, impacts upon the military. In most western countries, we have got used to a comfortable existence and

---

<sup>3</sup> Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War. Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge 2013, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.forces.net/news/new-army-ranger-regiment-what-we-know-so-far> (accessed 05/04/2021).

we do not perceive a tangible threat to our way of life. Our western societies place most value on the individual and the individual's needs and rights. This is beneficial for the individual, but it can become a problem when you are facing an adversary whose ideology places the state and society as a whole in the centre of attention. This was part of the ideological struggle of the Second World War, and it is not surprising that the two states that clearly fell into the latter category, Germany and the Soviet Union, fought the hardest and suffered the most losses. Go to the Merville Battery in Normandy, which was attacked by British forces on D-Day. In one of the open gun-placements you will find words that a German soldier wrote into the wet concrete when the placement was being built: *Germany must live even if we die*. It would be hard to imagine that you would find similar slogans written today. This does, naturally, not mean that we should all turn into fanatics, but we need to understand that other nations (in both place and time) are organised differently, which might create a problem for us in the future. This is a wider issue of society, but it also affects the military, directly and indirectly. Directly through the people who join and who have been socialised outside of the Army before they join it, and indirectly by the political context within which the Army operates. Now, you might ask, why does this rather philosophical excursion matter in the context of sub-threshold threats? It matters, because this context decides what is seen as acceptable both within wider society (and this includes the political level) and also the military. This can hamper the effectiveness of sub-threshold operations, both overt and covert, because some actions could be seen as ethically not viable. Just imagine, for a second, that British state organisations were found to have sent operatives to a foreign country to poison critics of the state. The nation would just not accept this if they learnt about it. A perceived cultural superiority made it acceptable to use methods of 'political warfare' in the colonial context that might seem unacceptable to us today. Blunt racism or even a paternalistic approach towards the peoples of the Empire was perhaps acceptable in the days of old; it is no longer so.

The British Empire also understood that politics and the military are not binary, a point made clear by Kennan, and it was willing to engage the military above and below our perceived thresholds to achieve success in other areas, including the economic sphere; just think about the Opium Wars in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were fought predominately for economic reasons. The British approach to the Empire and colonies has been described as 'trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary'<sup>5</sup>. Informal control, when analysed, shows many characteristics of Kennan's 'political warfare', including the use of soft power and the creation of indigenous elites, which absorbed British culture and acted as links or arbitrators between the 'motherland' and the colonies. This is a system that worked well and continues to work today in its modern form. But the means and the will to establish direct rule if necessary were the underlying bedrock on which informal rule could develop. You might also characterise this as a carrot and stick approach, and it might be useful to think about what carrots and sticks are available to us today and ponder in which scenarios we would be willing to use these sticks. History thus tells us that sub-threshold activities can achieve a lot, but that it is really useful to have

---

<sup>5</sup>See, on this, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', in *Economic History Review*, 6, 1, 1953, pp. 1-15.

other means at our disposal if these activities do not result in the outcome that we wish. Just think about Kennan's era for a moment. Despite his talk about 'political warfare' he did not for one second suggest that the US should disarm in order to appease the Soviet Union. When Winston Churchill suggested at the 1943 Tehran conference that the Pope should be included in some of the decisions on how to continue the Second World War and the post-war European order, Stalin is alleged to have replied: 'The Pope? How many divisions has he got?' The soft power of the Holy See obviously did not leave a lasting impression on the (atheist) communist leader. We need to understand that, in the long run, only the combination of soft and hard power will do in the international context.

Now, it has to be said that such an approach of informal control was not a feature of the British Empire alone, although most other colonial empires put a greater emphasis on direct rule than Britain. In particular the use of force, not only in a colonial context, was a constant theme. 'Ultima ratio regis', the final argument of the king, was inscribed on French canons under Louis XIV., and it points to the fact that the use of military force, across the entire spectrum of war, used to be an accepted tool in the tool-box of the politician on the international stage. It took the horrors of the World Wars to change this view in the west and turn armies into 'forces for good', whose actions are often characterised less by pure military achievement, but are measured by other factors, such as humanitarian support and involvement in 'white political warfare' activities as described by Kennan. According to the western definition of a state, one of the defining factors is the monopoly of the use of force. The armed forces are the tool for the external use of this force and for force projection beyond one's own borders. Or, as a British General once said 'An army is there to inflict pain'. This is the essence of the Army, and it seems that we sometimes lose sight of this a little – less so in the Army itself, but probably more in the wider understanding of what the *raison d'être* of an army is. An army can do lots of things and we have seen the valuable contribution in the struggle against COVID. But this is not what you maintain an army for. In this context, slogans like 'the Army is a force for good' can potentially do more harm than good. An army might be fighting for a good cause, but it will still have to inflict pain and to protect the interests of the nation, and this potentially above and below a perceived threshold.

The last point is particularly important in the context of the new 'global Britain': in the days of the Empire, Britain possessed an arguably unrivalled general understanding and knowledge of the world. Military personnel would spend large parts of their careers abroad. The East India Company or the Colonial Office would send its members into the colonies where they stayed for long periods of time. This gave them the chance to understand the cultures that they were exposed to, to widen their horizons and to learn foreign languages – all absolute prerequisites if you wish to engage in 'political warfare'. The end of Empire put a stop to all this. The last remnants of this could perhaps be seen in the British 'sub-threshold' engagement in Dhofar in the 1970s. The British focus changed from Africa and India to Europe and, most recently, has become even more insular. We need to face up the cold facts here: Britain has lost an advantage in international affairs and it will demand a lot of effort, time, and resource to lift Britain's understanding up again to where it once stood. This is a prerequisite for making 'global Britain' a success.



Now, people will say, that this might all be true, but our world is changing so rapidly that we see new activities at the sub-threshold level and things have changed for good. It is correct that things are changing at a pace formerly unknown, and the relevance of this in the context of thresholds is hotly debated in many circles. The author confesses that he sits firmly in the camp of the traditionalist: the means are changing, but the underlying ways and ends remain the same. Take the internet, for example. It offers a myriad of ways to carry out sub-threshold activities such as misinformation, or (to use the fashionable term) 'fake news', or attacks on the vital infrastructure of a country through viruses, Trojan Horses, etc. This is not a theoretical idea; we have seen this in action. But this does not mean that the underlying concepts are new, far from it. 'Fake news' is as old as the history of mankind and struggles between peoples. It has been argued that an early example of 'fake news' has been found in the 3000-year-old Babylonian story of Noah and the Ark, which is widely believed to have inspired the Biblical tale.<sup>6</sup> Or to give you a somewhat more recent example: the official reason for the outbreak of the Franco-German War in 1870 was a telegram that the French Emperor had sent to the Prussian king. A heavily edited version was published in the German newspapers, which the French Emperor regarded as dishonourable and untrue and caused the French to declare war.

The difference that we see today is twofold. First, the speed with which news and other information travel. However, in the context of conflict in whatever shape or form, relative speed between two opponents is more important than absolute speed. This applies throughout the history of conflict, whether two armies march into battle, ride on horseback, drive in AFVs or use the internet. The complicating factor today seems to be the increasing technical and specialised character of conflict. This comes, in some areas at least, with increasingly hefty bills attached to them. The result of this is that smaller nations will drop out of this race. But, again, this is not a new phenomenon - think, for example, of the British-German naval arms race prior to the First World War. In Germany, this technological arms-race was partly funded by the introduction of new taxation, the rather famous indirect tax on sparkling wine. In addition, most activities at the sub-threshold level are comparatively cheap compared to other, more conventional methods that can be used to impose your will on the enemy. The second difference that we see today is the democratisation of information. Every form of information is available at a touch of your smartphone. Naturally, this makes it easier to spread fake news, to stay with this example. Having said this, this brings me back to an earlier point. Our philosophy of life demands this freedom of access to every scrap of 'information', but it is not a given: other nations heavily restrict their citizens' access to the internet. This is not what we want, but it shows that it can be done if the (perceived) reasons of state demand it.

So, to sum up. Already in 1948, Kennan identified what we today describe as sub-threshold and grey-zone activities. They are not new and are arguably as old as the history of human competition. Naturally, the means have changed, but the ways are largely the same and the ends definitely so. Or, to say it with Clausewitz (who, as you have seen, was also

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/trickster-god-used-fake-news-in-babylonian-noah-story> (accessed 05/04/2021).

mentioned by Kennan), the character of war changes, but the nature remains the same. We might do well to remember this, and we need to overcome our intellectual inertia when dealing with the concepts of thresholds. If we do this, we will prevail. If we don't, prevailing will become much harder. As the current slogan of the British Army runs, we need to become 'leaner and more agile', and this most definitely includes a mental agility both below and above the perceived thresholds that are being talked about so much today. We also need to understand that the concept of thresholds is an artificial one and that competition and conflict constantly occur above and below this line. The cosmos of competition is like an iceberg: as the Titanic showed us, you need to be aware of the dangers both above and below the waterline, and the waterline might change in accordance with the size of the iceberg. We have to understand that other nations think about competition and conflict differently than we might do and we need to be able to adapt to this. This means, lastly, that we might need a rather big stick if the means of 'political warfare' prove unsatisfactory for protecting our interests. Just like the establishment of thresholds is artificial, so is the binary vision of conflict, which has the effect of pulling armies apart, not providing coherence.<sup>7</sup> It really is all about the 'perpetual rhythms of struggle' that Kennan identified in 1948, which can manifest itself in many different shapes and forms but are, eventually, all part of continuous struggle in international relations. Creating artificial boundaries between so-called thresholds might be attractive for a number of reasons, but it is intellectually lazy and potentially harmful to both the Army and the nation.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of this see Strachan, pp. 193-209.