Summary of Chartwell's Breakfast Discussion, No. 41

"Geopolitics in the Era of Insecurity"

Royal Automobile Club, 89-91 Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5HS
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Notes on a discussion led by General Sir Rupert Smith KCB DSO OBE QGM, who commanded 35,000 British troops in the First Gulf War (1990/91), led UNPROFOR to suppress the war in Bosnia (1995/6), served as NATO's Deputy Supreme Commander Europe (1998/2001), and published the best-selling The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World (2005); and Professor Michael Clarke, Director General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), a leading independent think tank on defence and security issues.

1. The West's strategic thinking is stuck in 1945

(i) "The 20th Century was very short": its dynamic began in 1917 (the emergence of the US as a global power, the Russian Revolution and the ideological struggle that followed, technology innovation) but by 1989 this dynamic was played out.

(ii) The West won the Cold War but it failed to adapt to the new context of the 1990s. Western powers continue to see problems through the prism of the Yalta Conference of 1945 and the institutions established after World War II. But the post-Cold War order is very different to the post-World War II order, and therefore much of the expertise and experience which informs Western decision-making is invalid.

(iii) In the 21st Century the context has continued to move away from the post-World War II system into something much more complex, interdependent and competitive. This new order is difficult to understand and predict.

2. Some features of geopolitics in the Era of Insecurity

(i) Nations can now be divided between pre-modern (poor and undeveloped), modern (industrialised and with a clear framework of political authority) and post-modern (free-trading and highly prosperous, but without a clear political structure to guide the forces of this prosperity).

(ii) The world's highly integrated economy is vulnerable to new threats such as global financial crisis. We don't understand the defence and security implications of these new threats.

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(iii) The ability of a nation state to operate and solve problems independent of other nations or global institutions is now limited.

(iv) Post-Cold War conflict no longer involves binary confrontation between nation states. It involves a much more complex array of actors across a range of environments.

3. What's driving the Era of Insecurity?

The world is living through a period of revolution - a revolution comparable with the industrial revolution or the invention of the printing press. This revolution is being driven by 4 factors:

(i) The increasing reach, range and speed of modern communications which underpins globalisation (from telecommunications to air travel and container shipping).

(ii) Demographic change which is grouping the world's population in larger and larger cities, and creating deep pools of unemployed but aspirational young men.

(iii) Competition for resources from fossil fuels to internet bandwidth and satellite capability; this competition is being complicated and sometimes intensified by climate change which is changing how we use land and sea, and produce food.

(iv) The systematic interdependence of the global economy. For example, in order to keep (say) Birmingham heated the UK government must ensure stability of supply and transportation of Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG) in the Gulf. The global system is now built in such a way that nation states are no longer independent.

4. It's not all bad

(i) Geopolitics are not necessarily more dangerous than before 1989. Arguably the world is becoming a more peaceful, more prosperous and more integrated place. But there will be losers as well and winners in this new system, as there have always been.

(ii) The key challenge for nations like the UK is to develop new forms of global governance that reflect the new global context, and can sustain a rules-based global economy.

5. The difference between 'defence' and 'security'

(i) Defence is the defeat or deterrence of a patent threat. It requires objective decision-making.

(ii) Security is the measures you take to prevent latent threats becoming patent. Security

does not necessarily require armed force. It requires subjective decision-making.

6. NATO since 1990: left behind by the changing context

(i) NATO is a defensive alliance of nation states designed - in the first instance - to counter a

Soviet attack on Western Europe. It became central to US and UK foreign policy towards Russia and Europe.

(ii) But since the end of the Cold War, NATO's main purpose - to defend Europe against the Soviet Union - has become redundant. Instead, the US and UK has increasingly used NATO for security operations. Because security is a subjective issue, and because collective security requires that different nations perceive their interests to be overlapping (something that is rare and often fleeting), this has put pressure on the alliance. The crisis came in 1998/9 when NATO intervened in Kosovo. This undermined support for NATO's security function among NATO's European members, as many opposed the Kosovo operation, and the way it was developed and executed.

(iii) NATO thus provides a good example of the West using an institution designed in the 20th Century to respond to challenges emerging at the beginning of the 21st Century.

7. How to use force in the Era of Insecurity

One thing governments will have to learn is how to use military force (a) more collectively and (b) more precisely. The role of the military (to kill and destroy) hasn't changed, nor have the skills required to be an effective soldier. What needs to change is the skills of military commanders, who must learn to be more "artisanal" in their approach, and get better at designing operations to reflect changing and complex contexts they are committing military force to:

(i) Too often governments wrongly assume the context they will be fighting in. Since 1990 it has been very difficult to prepare for the context. This is why procurement so often fails, or results in costly re-runs and re-designs: new equipment is commissioned to fit contexts which are already out of date.

(ii) Nations must be prepared to work in coalition. In this new era nations can seldom solve problems unilaterally.

(iii) Within this context, the fight has to be "nationalised" – ie. conducted as much as possible in national units. This is especially true of infantry fighting, where it is difficult and dangerous to ask troops from different nationalities to fight alongside one another. The modern commander needs to be mindful of the connection between his operation and the

mandate of his government and the consent of the men and women under his command.

(iv) It's difficult to set the level of the fight. Thus sophisticated NATO armies kit themselves out with high tech. equipment, air power and large navies but find themselves being pulled down into conflicts in pre-modern environments (Afghanistan, Mali) which require

deployments of men and women on the ground in unconventional environments.

(vi) Western governments are also in danger of "pricing themselves out of business". As military technologies become more expensive and government defence budgets remain static or decline,
nation states are having to scale down their military forces. This is reducing their ability to respond, and increasing their dependence upon technologies which may not be appropriate for future contexts.

(v) The West's difficulties over deploying drones are a case in point. Drones enable the US and UK to avoid putting manned aircraft and infantry in harm's way. But the increased use of drones has created concerns in UK and US society about the morality and legality of remote-controlled warfare. Meanwhile, using drones in such large numbers is expensive. A poor understanding of our new context, and out-of-date institutions (in this instance, our legal system) mean we are poorly equipped for this sort of conflict.

(vi) Modern military commanders are like producers of a gladiatorial contest, scripting and orchestrating conflict in the chaos and heat and dust of a Roman amphitheatre. They must conduct their display in full view of world opinion, and manipulating this opinion is critical to success. The winning commander will be the one who controls the narrative, and persuades the spectators to accept his version of events.

8. We should not have stayed in Afghanistan

(i) The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 as a punitive measure targeting those who attacked the US was a "proper" use of armed force. But we should have withdrawn after 12 - 18 months, leaving behind an intelligence operation, but no more. This approach would have treated Afghanistan – correctly – as a long-term security concern, not an immediate threat requiring defensive action.

(ii) In order to justify staying, British governments have identified the Taliban as posing a direct threat to British cities and assets outside Afghanistan. This is incorrect. In fact, the UK and the rest of ISAF is engaged in a competition with the Taliban for the will and co-operation of the Afghanistan population. The Taliban are therefore our rivals, not our enemy.

(iii) Instead we have established a large military force and used it to try and re-organise Afghan society, and influence Afghan opinion. Armed force is not suited to achieving these objectives, and unsurprisingly, we have not been successful.

9. The UK is "the centre of the world" and must be prepared to act to defend the global system it depends upon

(i) The Thames Estuary is the centre of the world in the sense that it is on the shortest route to anywhere from all corners of the globe. This proximity explains the success of the City, the universality of the English language and the fact that our principal (and already busy) international airport so badly requires additional capacity.

(ii) As a hub we are dependent upon global trade flows, and the rules-based system which directs and protects these flows. The UK must be prepared to use force to defend this system. If the IT breaks down then we will be affected within days - for example, Birmingham will go without heating fuel within days if piracy in the Gulf prevents fresh shipments of LPG reaching UK shores.

10. The UK-US relationship should be "business-like"

(i) The UK should not get stuck on the idea that its relationship with the US is 'special', but should instead build on the fact that our interests and perspectives remain very similar. President Obama's "transactional" relationship with the UK is healthier and more stable than President George W. Bush's "emotional" relationship.

(ii) The US will pay less attention to Europe, but it will remain committed to a region which remains its principal trading partner and principal military partners at times of conflict.

11. The UK must also engage with Europe...

(i) With the US's presence in Europe in decline, Continental Europe is likely to become dominated, as in the past, by Germany or Russia.

(ii) The UK should maintain its strong alliances with European powers, and also invest in its relations with Russia. NB: through history Russia has provided aid to the UK more often than the US.

(iii) The EU's anti-piracy mission in the Red Sea is evidence that the EU is prepared to use force to defend the global trading system it depends upon.

12. … and stay out of Syria

(i) The UK should resist the impulse to intervene in Syria. We would be unable to affect any change, and instead become caught up in a conflict too embedded and complicated for us to control.

13. Cyber warfare is a good example of conflict which governments can't control

(i) In one sense, cyber security is just the latest manifestation of competing states' attempts to disrupt one another's communications. This has happened for as long as there has been conflict.

(ii) What is 'new' about cyber warfare is how relatively powerless governments are to intervene. Cyber-attacks can be launched against state-owned assets by individuals and companies.

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To engage Sir Rupert Smith or Professor Clarke, or to find out more about Chartwell's services in London and around the world, please call me on +44 (0) 207 792 8000 or email me at alexh@chartwellpartners.co.uk.

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