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ROADS AND WAR

It is likely that man began to fight in ever more sophisticated ways and in ever greater areas the day he became aware of the riches available in the wider world and decided to move in to seize them. Around 1274 BC, the first known battle in human history was between the Hittites and the Egyptians at Qadesh, in what is now southern Syria. This town, situated on the northern and southern borders of these two warring empires, was a major trade route crossroads, due to its privileged location on the Orontes river and the Mediterranean coast.

The great periods of expansion, all of which were accompanied by conflict, saw the opening up of new land and sea routes. Rome conquered Gaul, part of the British Isles and the entire Mediterranean basin by developing a road network of exceptional quality for the time, covering a total length of 320,000 kilometres. By an irony of fate or a casualty of war, this road network also helped to hasten the fall of the empire by facilitating invasions by the Ostrogoths, the Huns and the Visigoths from the third century onwards.

The Silk Route that linked China to the Mediterranean *via* Central Asia and Iran, was created for political and military reasons. The Han Chinese emperors, besieged by Xiongnu nomadic barbarians, needed allies and horses. So they decided to open up the silk trade, which was a state monopoly at the time. It is not surprising, in these circumstances, that it was a general, Zhang Qian, who was entrusted with the mission of building the first section of this route in the second century BC. The Silk Route subsequently became the catalyst for the greatest geopolitical upheavals in the Middle Ages: the advent of the Khazar empire in the sixth century, the Mongolian empire in the thirteenth century and the Ottoman empire almost one hundred years later, before the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

The quest for the route to India, a direct sea route from Europe to the East Indies *via* the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal from the fifteenth century onwards, also gave rise to conflicts which have shaped our modern world. In the wake of Christopher Columbus, Vasco de Gama and Magellan, came Francisco Pizarro, Hernan Cortès and Francisco de Almeida. These conquistadors carved out the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the New World.

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, history repeated itself when the British and the French in turn established new sea routes to North America, Africa and Asia. They too built huge colonial empires

after defeating the indigenous armies as a result of the technical superiority of their expeditionary forces.

The gradual construction of a global network of land, sea and air routes has thus marked man's advancement towards the modern era. The movement of people and trade, and the spread of ideas were sources of significant technical, scientific and economic progress. But every coin has two sides. All exchanges, whether material or immaterial, are, first and foremost, a political act and therefore potentially belligerent, if we consider, as Clausewitz invites us to do, that war is no more than a particular form of political expression. For this reason, globalisation has not been, and will never be, entirely harmonious. Routes will always be a source of rivalry, tension and conflict between nations.

Thus, the new Silk Route, launched in 2013 by the Chinese government, is part of the same logic—power assertion. The Belt and Road Initiative, a set of maritime and rail links between China and Europe, is, in fact, a global project the aim of which is to enable China (the Middle Kingdom) to deploy its foreign investments in rail, road and port infrastructure projects. Following the example of Britain from the early sixteenth century onwards, the mighty Chinese state aims to set up trading posts by creating ports and platforms for civilian and military use that will provide logistic relays for the nation. China's decision to develop an overland route to Europe, in addition to a sea route, also responds to a clearly stated desire to circumvent a potential maritime embargo that could be imposed by the United States or its allies. War is always lurking in the shadows of commercial and strategic considerations and no-one should be surprised by the *sharp power* that China demonstrates towards countries that may be uncooperative with respect to the project. In this way, gunboat policy has given way to less spectacular, but equally effective, coercive means, including debt blackmail, which has enabled the Chinese to obtain a ninety-nine year concession on the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota.

Routes and roads are, therefore, part and parcel of war, insofar as they are both a political issue and a vector of power. The innumerable lines of communication that today cover the planet are as much a factor of progress as an incubator of violence, should conflict break out tomorrow. Routes, whether they be sea, land, air, space, cyber or radio, offer infinite tactical permutations that both hamper and amplify the impact of military operations.

For war is movement, and the manner in which military forces move has long conditioned tactical success in the field. Jomini reminds us that "If the art of war consists of deploying the mass of army forces at the decisive point in the theatre of operations, the choice of line

of operations, being the primary means of achieving this, can be considered to be the very foundation of a campaign plan¹.” Clausewitz noted, “When, in the middle of the last century, particularly in Frederick II’s theatre of war, troop movements began to be considered to be a specific combat tactic, and victory was achieved by means of unexpected manoeuvres, the absence of an organic order of battle made it necessary to implement extremely complex and impractical marching arrangements².”

Napoleon’s genius was precisely to establish an organic order of battle, that is, army corps capable of fighting autonomously, which then allowed him to clear the way for troop movements. In this way, he reinvented the art of war. As early as the Italian campaigns, Bonaparte subjugated Europe because he was the first to understand that his soldiers’ legs were of as much tactical value as their guns and cannons. Roads thus played a major role in Napoleonic tactics and, more generally, in the art of modern warfare.

Since then, tactical innovations have continued to be based on military movements and acceleration of the pace of operations. Frederick II was one of the artisans of the revival of war of movement at a time when siege warfare was still flourishing in the rest of Europe, because he knew that Prussia’s limited resources forced him to make swift military decisions. This political necessity turned into a strategic and tactical requirement: the control of time and, therefore, space. This explains why, in war, everything comes back to roads.

Throughout the centuries, tactics have aimed at targeting enemy lines of communication. The double envelopment tactic, attributed to Hannibal, consisting in forcing enemy forces forward in order to gain a better position to surround them, is, in the eyes of many strategists, the *nec plus ultra* of tactical manoeuvres. The battle of Cannes is considered to be a masterpiece because it is the perfect illustration of the dazzling results that can be achieved by a manoeuvre that does not focus on enemy troops themselves, but on their lines of communication. Turenne, at the battle of Turckheim in 1675, Frederick II at the battle of Leuthen in 1757, Von Manstein with the fourth version of *Case Yellow* in 1940 (the Manstein plan) all applied this tactic. Cutting the umbilical cord linking armies to their rear lines is a tactical objective that has spanned the centuries, from Alexander the Great to General Schwarzkopf.

What is the situation today? The first observation that can be made is that front and rear lines, in the sense in which they were

1. A.-H. Jomini, *Précis de l’art de la guerre*, Paris, Perrin, 2001, p. 186.

2. C. von Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, re-issue, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2006, p. 347.

understood during the two world wars and the Cold War, are not so directly observable today due to the new “wars amongst the people”, as General Rupert Smith put it. However, these two major components of the theatre of war have not disappeared, for all that. Tactical and strategic thinking, which involves identifying and destroying the foundations of the opponent’s military power and, more generally, its will to fight, still refers to the lines of communication between the front and the rear. Clausewitz recognised their importance due to their dual function as supply lines and lines of retreat. Whatever form it may take, tomorrow’s war will entail attacking these lines of communication and the routes that run through them.

This is where a second observation comes to light: roads have gained increasing importance since the second half of the twentieth century. The free movement of goods and persons, together with the advent of the information culture, have made the interlacing lines of communication that criss-cross the planet the bloodstream and nervous system of modern society. More than ever today roads are both the cause and the consequence of war. Society’s ever-increasing dependence on flows of all kinds never ceases to question the true level of resilience of its wondrous Clausewitz Trinities, and in particular, the strength of the ties linking populations to their governments and armies. What would happen tomorrow if a high-intensity conflict were to arise, pitting France or one of its allies against a state with equivalent military capabilities? How would society react if some or part of the flows that ensure our economic production resources and our communication means were interrupted? We cannot imagine the chaos into which it could be plunged.

A third observation then becomes apparent: if strategy is a struggle to preserve freedom of action, in the future, this will entail a fierce battle to control the lines of communication. This battle will be multifaceted and multidimensional according to the doctrine of “unrestricted warfare” defined by two Chinese officers, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, in their book of the same name. “If this is an established term, it suggests that all means will be deployed, that intelligence will be public and that the battlefield will be everywhere. This means that it will be possible to impose weapons and all methods at will, and that all boundaries separating the worlds of war and non-war will be totally obliterated. It also signifies that current principles of combat will have to be revised and even the doctrine of war will have to be re-defined³.”

More than ever, therefore, roads, or routes in general are an extremely pertinent concept when considering future military

3. Q. Liang, W. Xiangsui, *La Guerre hors limites*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 2003, pp. 39-40.

operations. Control of them will sanction supremacy of one side over another.

The first tactical requirement will be to control all forms of routes, because martial manoeuvres will be global. They will extend to all theatres of modern warfare—air, sea, land, cyber, exo-atmospheric, electromagnetic, plus the intelligence environment. The victor will be the side that manages to shift its forces and fight in these seven domains simultaneously and adjust its forces' effort as function of the timing of their manoeuvres.

The history of warfare demonstrates that tactical revolutions consist, first and foremost, in dominating all domains of a theatre of operation and in engaging forces in continuous movement. Alexander the Great was able to defeat Darius III's huge Persian army thanks to complementary movements by his cavalry and his phalanx of hoplites. Napoleon conquered Europe because he was able to manoeuvre his military units across the entire theatre of war. His greatest victories—Ulm, Austerlitz and Jena—were the result of a series of operational movements that allowed him to manoeuvre either “at the back of the enemy” or to separate enemy forces when they had numerical superiority in order to “beat them individually”. He was eventually defeated once he lost the decisive advantage of controlling all major routes of communication, in particular maritime routes. It was not so much the Wehrmacht's *Panzerdivisionen* that invented the *Blitzkrieg*, as the pairing of armoured vehicles and aircraft, which, for the first time, made it possible to conduct coordinated attacks in the land and air battlefield domains. The principle of omnipresence, which should be understood as the capacity to fight simultaneously in all domains of conflict, conditions the application of Foch's three great principles of war—freedom of action, economy of means and concentration of effort.

The second tactical requirement will be diametrically opposed to the first—it will involve preventing the enemy from manoeuvring in the seven military domains referred to above, and particularly in the air, exo-atmospheric and cyber domains; control of these will condition domination of the four other domains. The acquisition of air, space and cyber supremacy will be the prerequisite for any decisive action, because it will depend on decisional superiority, which is key to gaining tactical advantage.

The two Gulf wars and recent conflicts in Upper Karabakh have demonstrated the extent to which operational superiority in these three domains is fundamental. Does this mean that domination of the air, space and cyber lines of communication is enough to triumph over the opponent? No, because in the future, as now and in the past,

victory will continue to materialise on land and sea, because this is where human society exists. Conducting offensive actions to cut off the enemy's lines of communication, whilst ensuring that one's own lines are protected, is reminiscent of the strategic fencing analogy so dear to General Beaufre, where a riposte has at least as much tactical value as an attack. The principle of duality—conducting a two-stage manoeuvre with the aim of countering enemy action whilst maintaining one's own strategic objectives—reflects the highly dynamic dimension of this global and total war, where the seven domains of modern warfare offer each opponent a multitude of tactical combinations. The purpose of the strategy remains the same: “to convince the enemy that there is no point in engaging in or continuing the fight”⁴. But the way to achieve this, i.e. the tactics employed, will be different. It will no longer be a question of seeking a decisive battle according to the Clausewitzian concept of war, but to gradually stifle the enemy's freedom of movement by depriving him of access to certain critical areas of combat. Initial efforts will therefore focus on taking control of enemy air, space and cyber communication lines, as the first of the two sides that manages to do so will have a more than reasonable chance of bringing his opponent to heel.

The third tactical requirement is therefore to be able, from the onset of combat, to deliver a sufficiently intense war effort to be in a position to take the operational initiative and not lose it. Military history in the last century shows that it is increasingly difficult to re-establish a situation that has been compromised at the outset of war. In 1914, it took a month for the French army to stop the German offensive that was threatening Paris. And, as Captain Charles de Gaulle observed in 1924, it only succeeded because of “Von Kluck's disobedience”⁵.

In 1940, the French command, stunned by the power of the German onslaught, waited in vain for another miracle on the Marne. One month and fifteen days after the start of the German offensive, General Hunzinger, head of the French delegation, signed the armistice agreement in a railway carriage at Rethondes. Twenty-seven years later, from 5th to 10th June 1967, the Israeli army defeated the Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian armed forces in the Six Day War. By the end of the first day, half of the Arab air force had been destroyed and by the evening of the sixth day, the armies of the three coalition states were forced out of action. In less than a week, Israel had tripled its territorial hold: Egypt lost the Gaza strip and the Sinai peninsula, Syria was stripped of the Golan Heights and Jordan lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

4. A. Beaufre, *Introduction à la stratégie*, re-issue. Paris, Hachette, 2009, p. 35.

5. Ch. de Gaulle, *La Discorde chez l'ennemi*, re-issue. Paris, Perrin, 2018.

The pace of the *Blitzkrieg* continued to accelerate in subsequent years: in 1991, during the first Gulf War, Iraqi troops occupying Kuwait capitulated following an international coalition force offensive that barely lasted a hundred hours; in 2003, the American-British expeditionary force conquered Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in nineteen days. These lightning victories all have one thing in common—in each case, the victors took the initiative and their tactics consisted, above all, in ensuring control of the domains that gave them total operational superiority. The extremely rapid tempo they were able to set for their operations did not give the enemies time to react. They were almost spectators of their own defeat.

Continual progress in weapons accuracy and range, detection, observation, data transmission and expected progress in hypervelocity missiles, weapon system robotisation and data sorting will further reduce the fog of war and battlefield friction, thus increasing the advantage of the side that initiates combat. In this new technical and operational context, rapid reaction tactics, that is, the capability of countering extremely swiftly an enemy attempt to initiate combat, appears to be fundamental, insofar as it conditions the outcome of the conflict.

Today, the value of an army is measured not only by its ability to conduct coordinated operations in the seven domains of modern warfare, but also by its capacity to provide an intense war effort from the outset. This leads us to recognise the futility of the idea of ramping-up power in order to mitigate certain deficits of capacity. By the time the first cannon shot is fired, it will already be too late to hope to procure any human and material resources that might be lacking.

“Too late”—these were the precise words used by General Mac Arthur to define defeat. At a time when the art of war seems to be gradually declining in favour of its scientific dimension, and when the network of real and virtual routes is forming so many lines of manoeuvre, which will inevitably step up the pace of operations, it would seem that two more words could be added to that concise assessment by Mac Arthur, liberator of the Philippines and victor of Incheon — “Too slow”. ▀