



WHEN WILL WE EVER LEARN – THE END OF HARD POWER INTERVENTION?

A Lecture by Lord Lothian delivered to the Eisenhower Institute,

Washington DC

Monday 2nd June 2014

One of the disconcerting corollaries of a long political life is a growing sense of *déjà vu*, demonstrating how little we have learned from what has gone before. The Spanish philosopher George Santayana remarked that “those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” The question that I increasingly find myself asking is, “when will we ever learn? ” – or even “will we ever learn?”

Today in Eastern Europe, or in Moscow’s terms the Near Abroad, Russia and the West face each other in hostile confrontation. Once more Cold War rhetoric resounds. Gone the bright new dawn that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 once heralded, just as by the 1930s, the hopes that the Armistice of 1918 had signalled the end of ‘the war to end all wars’ were fast fading.

So what caused these hopes to be dashed? The answer in one word is humiliation; explicit in the case of the excessive victor's justice demanded of Germany in 1919 through reparations and implicit in the West's disinterested and almost contemptuous attitude to Russia as the USSR collapsed. In 1919, there were those who warned that a proud but humiliated Germany would eventually react strongly; and it did. Just as in 1989, when the West claimed victory in the Cold War and welcomed much of the dismantling USSR into its ambit, it was equally clear that stripping and humiliating a proud Russia in this way would also in time give rise to a strong reaction. The historic truth for those who would learn it is that humiliation leads peoples and nations often

unthinkingly and without regard to the cost to support ruthless and erratic leaders who promise to restore national pride and self esteem through military aggression.

All of this underlines the relevance in Winston Churchill's phrase of treating the vanquished 'with magnanimity' and in mine of extending the hand of friendship rather than the glove of quiet contempt. It may be late, but we need now to develop the strategy we should have devised even before the Berlin Wall came down, had we but learned the lessons.

It was all very well to rely on the uneasy equilibrium of the Cold War as a substitute for strategy but we must know that it was never more than that. The West now urgently needs a real foreign affairs strategy today. Not policy which rarely survives events, but a strategic template based on past experience within which to develop policy as we need to. In its absence what Winston Churchill as early as 1936 described so tellingly as 'adamant for drift' will continue to lull us into a state of denial in which we fail both to understand and to learn from what has gone before.

This drift over the years has led the West into a series of questionable military interventions, almost always at the start limited but then equally regularly through mission creep growing swiftly and ineffectively, until eventually ending in inevitable retreat cynically described as 'mission accomplished'. We have without ever seeking intellectually or otherwise to justify ourselves claimed an undefined moral right to intervene militarily in the affairs of other nations. Hard power, we asserted, would produce a better world. In practice however we too often failed to assess the consequences of such actions on the ground. We seemed incapable of applying past experiences. George Washington told us that "we should not look back unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors." More often than not, we failed to look back at all.

Take for a start the Vietnam War fifty years ago. It should be the leading cautionary lesson on the wisdom of military intervention in the affairs of other nations where our own national interest is not immediately at stake. The chaotic final scenes on the roof of the US Embassy in Saigon in April 1975

encapsulated the futility of waging a war whose core purpose had been lost many years before and even more so one with no credible exit strategy. It stood and should still stand as a monumental lesson for the future. Extraordinarily, it was one that was neither learned nor applied.

The West's initial intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001 was at least justifiable in its own right. Al Qaeda had used that country as a safe haven from which to direct the murderous 9/11 terrorist attack on the USA. Once the Taleban Administration refused Western requests to hand over AQ, the allied military action which followed was a legitimate reaction of self defence under UN Charter Article 51. Driving the Taleban out of Kabul was right, but it should also have been mission accomplished; and if the lessons of Vietnam had been revisited, it probably would have been. That was the moment for military disengagement, relying metaphorically thereafter on the historic British strategy of offering the warlords bags of gold to return to their valleys and keep them calm, returning only when the gold ran out.

Instead, in the absence of any strategy we took a *quasi-imperial* route. We sought further objectives to justify our continued presence and came up with a fistful: nation building, importing liberal democracy, narcotics elimination (where we presided over record levels of poppy production), social equality and equal educational rights - all laudable, but totally outwith our original purpose and mostly doomed to failure. By staying we effectively invited the Taleban to return to have a pop at us. Nowhere more so than in the 2006 so-called reconstruction deployment into Helmand Province where the British Government astonishingly announced to me in Parliament that they hoped that not a single shot would be fired. Now literally millions of shots and far too many lost lives later, we are about to get out. The Taleban are still there. The best that can be said is that allied troops have valiantly driven the insurgent water back up into the hills and largely held it there. But what will happen to that water when we leave in a few months time? If water follows its natural course it will come flooding back down again with nothing effective to stem it.

And we cannot say that the lessons were not there to be learned.

In Iraq we should never have intervened. We were assured that this was not about illegal regime change, but about WMD which might at the edge have been a threat to us, but which did not in fact exist. As we now are learning, it was in fact about regime change all along: in Tony Blair's recent words, 'the removal of a monstrous dictator'. That was swiftly and relatively painlessly accomplished. But nobody had worked out change to what? After eleven years, Iraq is now if anything a more fractured and violent society than it was before. Rather than democracy we imported extreme Islamist insurgency, ensuring that our remaining time there was spent in a rear-guard action seeking to contain if not to eliminate what we had unwittingly invited in.

That was not all. History cried out for a comprehensive plan for post-Saddam reconstruction. Arguably there was one in the State Department; but if so it was junked. Even then we should have known from previous experience the importance of using what remained of the old military and security structures to assist an orderly transition to a new administration. Instead we quite deliberately dismantled them. And rather than beginning to plan military withdrawal, we increased our force presence. Once again, mission creep; once again, to no good end.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, we constantly stated that we would stay until the job was done, but the job was never defined, largely because there was no strategy within which to define it. The much vaunted surges were a short term substitute for strategy and there was certainly no exit strategy. Once again, painful lessons still painfully unlearned.

Libya was different. A war conducted from a safe height with little risk to our own personnel. No boots on the ground except those of Special Forces. The US 'leading from behind'. NATO without Article 5 justification waging a war out of theatre and from the air. But what was it about? With the first flowering of the ill-named Arab Spring, particularly in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the West had planted its standard on the slopes of popular uprisings without any rudimentary due diligence on what lay behind them. We were mesmerised by the idea of an 'Arab Spring', naively seeing it as the birth of liberal democracy across the region with the clear Islamist influence behind it conveniently and

selectively ignored because it did not fit the narrative. Whenever the Spring sprung, we leapt in to support it.

Libya was a good example of this. No dangerous WMD, no sheltered terrorists threatening the West; just the popular protests and belatedly Gadhafi's threat to the citizens of Benghazi. We prayed in aid the newly enunciated Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in support of the people of Benghazi as we participated in the elimination of Gadhafi, regardless of the fact that there were other threatened people in Libya we did not feel the same duty to protect.

In truth the undeclared reason was again regime change which was relatively swiftly achieved, but at what cost?

We failed dismally to control on the ground the disposal of Gadhafi's considerable arsenals, significant proportions of which quickly found their way to the forces of extreme Islamism taking root across the Sahel to the south and even to Boko Haram in Nigeria. Those weapons which remained within Libya have armed the emerging militias, including that which murdered the US ambassador in Benghazi in September 2012. Once again a lack of strategy and yet more lessons unlearned, resulting today in a country run effectively by militias presiding over violence and lawlessness and potential civil war, with our vaunted aim of democracy lying in tatters in the sand.

Iran's nuclear ambitions still remain an elephant in the room, but here at least for the moment there are some tentative signs of lessons learned. After years of bellicose but ineffective rhetoric, primarily from Israel but with the US and the UK not far behind, the election of the relatively more moderate President Rouhani has seen the fierceness and immediacy of the language, other than in Israel, toned down.

In January and again at the end of May President Obama spoke of the need for diplomacy rather than force, but can he bring his fellow Western leaders with him? The West is now doing what it should have done a long time ago, entering into genuine rather than belligerent dialogue with Iran, treating her as the sophisticated country she has always been and seeking a mutually acceptable resolution. The current signs are cautiously positive. Iran seems to

want to come in from the cold and the West thankfully is less keen to contemplate a military action which would undoubtedly set the whole region alight.

This change of mood on Iran's part however, is not the result of military threats which only served to inflame anti-western feeling in Tehran, but rather because targeted economic pressure, a readiness to engage in real dialogue and the change in leadership combined together to begin to move things forward. Whether it will work remains to be seen, but maybe, just maybe we are beginning to learn.

Yet looking back to what the West very nearly did in Syria last September severely questions this. Without evaluating the wider consequences, we were within a whisker of launching ourselves into a conflict which would have swiftly mission crept into boots on the ground in an escalating war, not just against the dictator Assad, but against a rising regional tide of Islamist extremism as well, one which would have spread way beyond the confines of Syria into the wider Sunni/Shia conflict within the region. We had no entry strategy and we would have had no exit strategy either. Fortunately, at the last moment democratic pressure prevented it. And all this was against a regime which two and a half years earlier Western leaders had predicted would fall within weeks.

How could we have got it so wrong? How could we have failed to predict the rising tide of Islamist extremism, which in the end is more dangerous than any chemical weapons? Why were we not pressing the Saudis and Qataris to cease fanning the flames of regional sectarian civil war by arming and funding the Salafists, which in turn would have allowed us more credibly to press the Iranians to desist from further arming Hezbollah? And why were we not talking to Assad to see if we could broker a way out? When it has suited us, we have talked to nastier people by far.

Why were Western leaders so wrong at the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011 in predicting the imminent demise of the Assad regime? Was it because they did not want to admit that they had been naively mistaken about the Arab Spring in general? After all, we were badly wrong footed in Egypt by the initial electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood. And when we tried to welcome this, we were wrong footed again by another popular uprising, resulting almost

certainly in a reversion to military control, and in the end another military strongman.

The truth is that much of the region prefers to be ruled by strongmen rather than left to the shifting winds of what many of them see as decadent Western democracy. That is why the Assad regime, certainly weakened, is still in place and why our specious recognition of certain rebels as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people has achieved nothing. Instead Salafism has flourished, allowing the next AQ 'base' to take root, training foreign jihadists to export jihad back to their own countries. Belatedly we are getting anxious about it, but originally we sat back and let it happen.

Something similar is happening in the Sahel to the south of Libya and once again we should be more worried than we are. The lesson of all this is surely that we should never promote the overthrow of strong leaders, however nasty, until we have a clear and comfortable idea of what will emerge in their place. Russia understands this even if we do not.

There is a corollary to not learning the lessons of the past: it is the ill-considered creation of precedents which serve their purpose at the time, but then are adopted by others against our interests. Western backing for the illegal and unilateral secession of Kosovo from Serbia in 2008 is a prime example. It suited the West not only to support the secession but also to give it active military support. When the Russians argued the same in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in 2008 and more recently in relation to the Crimea the West cried 'foul'; but the precedent was there and it was we who had set it.

Which brings me finally to the Ukraine. Returning to my opening argument that the West should have developed a strategy for handling the Russian question after the ending of the Cold War, we should have done so even more after the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008. Instead we preferred to try to recreate the Great Game; and we got it badly wrong.

We overtly backed the pro-European movement in Ukraine which immediately reduced our ability to act as honest brokers. We openly supported, on the

backs of popular demonstrations in Maidan Square the movement to overthrow the (however dubiously) elected President Yanukovich and as in the Arab Spring, did not look too closely at what might take his place. We ignored the real concerns of ethnic Russians within Ukraine. It was only when the shooting began and people started dying that we sought to talk to Russia; but by that time the rhetoric was established, the conflict was in place and the die, to all intents and purposes, was cast. The real difference between the West and the East was that Putin had a strategy and the West didn't.

The West then blamed Russia for stirring up and supporting the pro-Russian elements in the East of Ukraine and in the Crimea. While almost certainly justified, this came strangely from the US and the EU who together had for some time been stirring up the anti-Yanukovich elements in Kiev and the western parts of the country. The protests in Maidan Square were encouraged and the overthrow of the elected President was greeted with acclaim in the West. It was not just lack of strategy but naivety which led then to Western support for 'sovereign Ukraine' without providing any physical aid. And when Crimea seceded with the West standing lamely by, even the rhetoric began to ring hollow.

Now we are faced with a head-on confrontation which could escalate dangerously. We still have no strategy; only some pathetic sanctions. Over the last twenty five years we have never learned when we are in danger of looking gutless and without purpose. In the meantime we have allowed the profile and capability of NATO to erode, so sending a message of weakness to those who might wish to confront us.

We now have a situation which could accidentally become one of irrational military confrontation. We need urgently and strategically to analyse what is behind the present standoff. I do not believe that Putin has imperial ambitions. Few of the remaining old Soviet Union countries, certainly not Ukraine, are economically attractive to Russia and it is unlikely that Russia wishes to re-annex them or indeed that the present Russian economy could sustain them. Russia's concern, which we in the West might well share were we in the same place, is to prevent her 'Near Abroad' with significant Russian

or Russian speaking populations being absorbed into a European Union or NATO which might then become economically or militarily aggressive. Ukraine holds a special position in the Russian mindset, which we need at least to understand. This is particularly relevant in relation to the Crimea, only part of Ukraine since 1952, with Russia's Black Sea Fleet based at Sevastopol. The 'loss' of Ukraine would be a devastating political blow for Vladimir Putin, much as the 'loss' of Scotland would be for David Cameron.

Even now this could be a matter for sympathetic discussion with Russia. We should start from the premise that the security of the current membership of NATO is non-negotiable and will be defended against aggression by whatever force or other measures are necessary. In return the West should guarantee that it will no longer seek to attract other 'near abroad' countries into joining Europe or NATO, while Russia would have to agree to non-intervention in these countries. These states would then effectively become neutral buffers between East and West trading without sanctions both ways, and in return would receive international support and aid to enable them economically to survive.

This would salvage international as well as national pride at the same time as reducing tension and easing the current slippage back into a Cold War scenario. It would be soft power underpinned by mutually respected smart power. NATO would have to deploy real forces to create real military tripwires in each of the Eastern Nato member countries and no doubt similar safety belt measures would be adopted on the other side.

This would be a grown up solution based on a clear strategy, one which should have been in place a long time ago. The only real losers would be the protagonists of an ever expanding European Union which is anyway today already too big. A longer term strategy based on reduced rivalry and increased parity of esteem on all sides would seek ever closer cooperation between Russia and the West, particularly as the emerging threat to both that will come from Islam and the growing challenge of China where joint strategic thinking should urgently be explored. Instead of which over these last weeks Western rhetoric has driven Russia closer to China.



The main lesson from the recent past is that hard power intervention no longer works for the good. Smart power should be a basic strategy for the future. Given the drastic reductions in armed forces on both sides of the Atlantic, anything greater would in any event probably be beyond capability. That is hopefully the lesson of history that we will now begin to show we have learned, however painfully. It will not mean that we will live in a world without conflict, but it could mean that we are no longer so easily sucked into unwinnable wars.

And that would be a real step forward.