11 Use of Armed Forces as an Instrument of Policy

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‘The Use of Armed Forces as an Instrument of Policy’ – when I gave the original lecture to the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) in January 1996 on which this chapter is based, I was tempted simply to utter the word ‘Chechnya’ and then go off to the pub with the Commandant! What perhaps gives that rather feeble joke an extra point is that I had used it to begin my lecture this time the previous year. There we were, 12 months on and Chechnya was still just as apposite as a dreadful warning about the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the military option. In contrast to my co-panellist, who was a distinguished international do-gooder, I am no more than a strategic historian; and it is as such that I approached the topic. All I would claim for strategic history is that it can help us to understand the dynamics of power and leverage, and in this way serve as a guide to the likely future course of particular current problems.

For instance, just over four years ago, on the same platform at the RCDS, I was contending that conflicts fuelled by religious or communal hatred or by territorial rivalry could not be solved in midstream by the liberal cure-alls of compromise and reconciliation, or outside mediation by the UN or whoever else. They could only be brought to an end by means of one party to a conflict first imposing its will militarily on the other or, in some cases, by mutual acceptance of a stalemate. In other words, I saw the then Vance-Owen mission to the former Yugoslavia and the Baker mission to Israel and the PLO as equally doomed to failure. And so it proved. Moreover, from the beginning of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia I argued against Britain or any other outside party committing a single soldier to the ground, on the score that committing that single soldier would lead us eventually and inevitably up to our necks in the mire. So it has also proved.

Study of strategic history also convinced me that outside intervention in Yugoslavia would actually prolong the civil war, by thwarting a quick Serb victory, and encouraging the Bosnians and
Croats not to accept defeat. In 1995, General Mackenzie, the UNPROFOR commander in Yugoslavia back in 1992, said exactly the same thing on television. Let me quote him: ‘The conflict would have been over a year ago, if the UN had stayed out. One side would have won, the other would have lost.’

In the event, it has taken four years of conflict and the covert arming of the Bosnians before a military stalemate at last made outside mediation practically possible. Clausewitz would not have been surprised.

In the case of Israel and the PLO, the Baker mission did indeed fail, as I predicted. There did of course subsequently take place the deal between Arafat and Rabin. But, even so far as it goes and so long as it lasts, this deal only marks in reality a belated Arab acceptance of their cumulative defeat in four wars with Israel. It also marks, if you like, the acceptance by the current Israeli government that the de facto armistice that has endured since the Yom Kippur War did not provide a firm base for Israel’s long-term security. Clausewitz (and Mao Tse-tung) were right — peace has once again grown out of the barrel of a gun.

You could say the same about the present armistice in Northern Ireland — clearly the product of a military stalemate between the IRA and the British security forces. All this by way of recommending to you so unfashionable an approach to international relations as thinking strategically; or, to put it another way, realistically appreciating the dynamics of power and conflict.

The title of this chapter is ‘The Use of Armed Forces as an Instrument of Policy’ — not ‘Armed Force’. It is a key distinction. You can use armed forces as an instrument of policy without necessarily employing armed force. To give a simple historical illustration, Hitler used armed forces as an instrument of policy very successfully in the Czechoslovakian crisis in 1938. He used armed force as an instrument of policy in the Polish crisis in 1939 with ultimately catastrophic results. Let us next consider the phrase, ‘As an instrument of policy’. Whose policy? What policy? In pursuit of what interests, or objectives? And in what world strategic environment?

To take the strategic environment first, the facts before our faces tell us that we do not live in a political ‘world community’, nor is there a ‘new world order’, as liberals in the West seem to believe. What instead does exist is a world arena for rivalry between myriad human groups — nation states certainly, but also ethnic groups,