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The West and the return of violence

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Abstract Over the past 15 years, Western powers have been engaged in numerous battles in which technology has eventually prevailed over a patient but daring field presence. Today's adversaries, such as Islamic State, are well aware of this cultural bias: they are using our post 9/11 exhaustion to grab territories and spread offensive ideology. Western countries have no choice but to adapt partly to its adversaries' methods. Stability and peace will require cold cultural compromises as the pursuit of our interests and values requires a new tolerance threshold towards violence.

Keywords West | Warfare | Conflict responses | Courage | Resilience | Islamic State | Russia | Iran

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Introduction

One icy evening in Kabul in February 2012, as I was pacing a military base, I came across a group of US soldiers by a cosy fireplace. Most of them were young lieutenants and captains but one of them, smoking cigars, dominated the scene. He was in his seventies, had spent close to 50 years in the US Army and began a monologue that none of us interrupted:

I am about to retire in two, three days. I've been through Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia, Eastern Europe, Korea. I started in Vietnam, did two tours of 500 days each, 500 hundred days in the jungle with a lot of patrols, day and night. I did not have the equipment you boys have today, no frag jackets and we were often camping in the mud. We were bitten by mosquitos constantly, if not worse. Your sweet base life today in Afghanistan has nothing to do with that first tour . . .

It was not difficult to understand instinctively what he meant. The French lost 75,000 troops in the first Indochina War (1945–54) and the US lost close to 60,000 in the second (1965–73). The Western way of war has evolved considerably since those ultimate twentieth-century traumas. Remoteness best characterises today's *modus operandi*: 15-metre-high barricaded walls, huge quantities of food and services supplied daily via plane, the Internet available in every corner of the base, and only restricted authorisation to leave the base and actually meet people (Chandrasekaran 2012). Our tolerance for Spartan conditions, for casualties and for death in general is clearly much lower than it was after the Second World War.

Is this because the battles we engage in today are not worthy of the sacrifice of our youngest generation? French political thinker Tocqueville (1835) used to argue that democracies tend to lure themselves into comfort and private interests, only to wake up when dangers arise. Is this the moment to rise? Or have we simply lost the energy to fight?

The ways of war: Rumsfeld versus Gates

Back in 2004, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was questioned on his actions to remedy the death of US soldiers caused by increasingly sophisticated 'improvised explosive devices'. A young army specialist asked: 'Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to "uparmor" our vehicles?' Rumsfeld gave the well-known reply: 'You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time . . . [Y]ou can have all the armoury in the world and a tank can still be blown up. The goal we have is to have as many vehicles as is humanly possible' (YouTube 2004).

Rumsfeld's call for endurance and a quantitative push are particularly telling. The secretary had previously advocated a more technology-driven course: the 'revolution in

military affairs' concept. Its proponents believe that 'less is more', that new technologies are best combined with reduced infantry brigades to win quick and decisive 'zero-death' victories. Satellites; command, control and communications systems; and precision force ensure tactical dominance. Having placed his trust in this doctrine, Rumsfeld was all the more surprised in 2004 to watch it fall apart when the Iraqi insurgency mushroomed. The 'tooth to tail'¹ ratio was much more land forces driven than that envisaged by the proponents of the revolution in military affairs. Rumsfeld reacted forcefully by committing US troops to intense urban battles with insufficient local intelligence, at the cost of heavy casualties on all sides, including civilians. Combat units became vital to holding recaptured towns before friendly local forces could take over.

The intensity of those early battles could not be sustained. As of 2006, Rumsfeld's more risk-averse successor, Robert Gates, brought the troop's comfort back to the top of the priority list. His memoirs make the case:

Procurement of the heavy MRAP² vehicles may also have been delayed because they were seen to be contrary to Secretary Rumsfeld's goal of lighter, more agile forces . . . But I knew damn well that our troops were being burned and blown up in Humvees . . . and that had they been in MRAPs, many soldiers would have escaped injury or death. (Gates 2014, 121)

In the author's note, Secretary Gates confesses the limits of his sentimental spirit: 'early in my fifth year, I came to believe my determination to protect [soldiers]—in the wars they were in and from new wars—was clouding my judgement and diminishing my usefulness to the President' (Gates 2014, xiv). A lot was done to limit civilian casualties as well, both in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

Gates's armoured vehicles obviously made a difference to troop confidence while on patrols, but the secretary failed to solve the West's true operational dilemma: counter-insurgency campaigns to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population with 25 kilos of gear and 1-metre-thick walls were essentially contradictory and unsuccessful. In Kabul, one would often hear wry comments from Afghans: 'we feel overjoyed by the fact that foreign soldiers are well protected . . . because we are not!'³ Gates accused US President Obama of not believing in the Afghan operation, but the force protection regulations he approved, that is, the measures to protect troops, created an impression of detachment felt by all Afghans.

Looking back in history, today's Western armies, and that of the US most notably, are following a 'Roman curve', distancing themselves from pure combat. In the early centuries of the Roman Empire, the Romans saw intelligence as deceptive methods that would send a message of cowardice and weakness to their allies and enemies. The

¹ The ratio compares the proportion of combat troops to that of headquarters and logistics units. Combat troops fell from 75 % of all military forces during the First World War to 20–30 % on average for Western countries today.

² Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected.

³ Comment often heard in the streets of Kabul during the author's mission there in 2012.

importance the Romans attached to their reputation of loyalty, courage and force was greater than that placed on short-term tactical considerations. Rome's subsequent inability to locate and forecast Hannibal's invasion route in the third century BC profoundly affected the Empire's methods. 'Exploratores' and 'speculatores' were thus created to inform military commanders of where their troops were headed (Jeanneney 2015).

The US and Europe are also betting on their superiority in information technologies today, leaving ruthlessness and direct combat to others. In parallel, the West's declared enemies are filling that 'courage gap', unmoved by satellite tracking and human rights sermons. As every strategy is built upon the potential and methods of our adversaries, we will now take a look at them.

The other side: Iran, Islamic State and Russia

For a while, it seemed that two rules were prerequisites to rising among the community of nations: (1) a respect for commerce, and (2) non-aggression towards one's neighbours. China has certainly followed this path to rise as a global power in recent decades. Yet, over the past five years, other nations and groups have been using a more aggressive route to achieve their expansionist goals. They are doing so on the common assumption that the West has become weak.

The first obvious example is Islamic State (IS). The group's jihadist songs are particularly revealing. Below are some excerpts, without the sweet melody:

*The era of decline has ended,
With loyal men who do not fear war,*

Who have forged an eternal glory that shall not end or fade . . .

*Today the world is stuck with astonishment, including America and Obama, the dog
of the Romans.*

*We broke America in two
And crushed the European dogs.
We fed them gall in Iraq,*

And filled buckets upon buckets [with gall] . . .

*Life is nothing unless lived in the shadow of death.
We shall die honourably, standing tall,*

For there is no benefit in a life of slavery. (Shemesh 2015)

A few years earlier, Al Qaeda was singing the same tune. Osama Bin Laden was convinced that after having 'beaten' the most brutal army in the world—the USSR in Afghanistan in the 1980s—his group could now take the US Army that he ridiculed as 'a feminised and weak band of soldiers'. One of the masterminds of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, paraphrased his late leader in Guantanamo: 'hundreds of American

crusaders join the US Army, wear the latest military gear, eat the best food in Iraq and Afghanistan and play with their Playstations, while their enemies, the poor Muslim, can't find their daily bread . . . but at the end, the American soldiers go back home and commit suicide' (Mohammad 2014).

Interestingly, IS has learned from Al Qaeda's mistake of making the US a top priority for terrorist attacks. Bin Laden thought that his epic intellectual stand against the West's main 'imperial nation' would raise thousands of supporters. Instead his movement was eventually decimated by US and Western military invasions, drone attacks, and Special Forces operations. Moving forward, IS now views Europe as a more fitting target, 'the underbelly of the West', and the best chance of recruiting supporters, without which the 'Caliphate' will not be able to grow politically or economically.

Iran's regional rise stems from an identical conclusion. The Islamic Republic was initially scared of former US President George W. Bush's unpredictability and talk of regime change in the Middle East (Filkins 2013). However, as the US bowed out of the Middle East, Iran was the first to fill the void and expand. Its leaders feed Western media with schizophrenic messages, alternating between brutality and sour grapes. On the one hand, the West is compared to an impatient and unreliable child, a traitor to its friends that can be manipulated and eventually beaten. Israel, its incarnation, will be annihilated. On the other hand, the West is accused of imperial plots and condemned for its colonial past. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader/authoritarian ruler sums it up for the 'Youth in Europe and North America':

The histories of the United States and Europe are ashamed of slavery, embarrassed by the colonial period and chagrined at the oppression of people of colour and non-Christians. Your researchers and historians are deeply ashamed of the bloodsheds wrought in the name of religion between Catholics and Protestants or in the name of nationality and ethnicity during the First and Second World Wars. This approach is admirable. (Khamenei 2015)

The Ayatollah obviously admires a West, when it is subdued by shame and guilt, that refuses to react when he spreads his militias across the Middle East. The same 'blame ploy' is used by Russia: according to it, either NATO lied to the traumatised nation about expanding into Eastern Europe in the 1990s, or, alternatively, NATO is responsible for the return to the Cold War. Russian President Putin plays on the West's dread of having an enemy: 'We don't understand the difficulty of finding *win/win* solutions with Russia. We are surprised that they only practice a *kto/kogo* diplomacy, best translated by the formula: "getting the other one first"' (Besançon 2015, 21). Intellectuals praised by Putin today, such as philosopher Ivan Ilyin or ultra-nationalist Alexander Dugin, promote antagonistic patriotic values and the readiness to sacrifice oneself for a higher cause.

In many cases, this pride found in violence is the result of a refusal and/or failure to adapt to today's globalised system. The traditions of certain communities or tribes are fragile in the face of twenty-first century dynamics and power plays. Before the 1980s, Afghans were living on a quiet rural planet in a society built upon a code of honour and

horizontal relationships. That edifice brutally collapsed when the modern USSR invaded the country in 1979. Anthropologist David Edwards described the cultural scars induced by the clash:

The disparity between poetic images of ancient battles fought with swords and rifles and the realities of high tech modern warfare was dramatic. Perhaps even more destabilising was the indiscriminate manner and scale with which the new style of combat annihilated people. References to heroic combat were no longer appropriate or resonant in this setting. Islam helped fill this void, but the Islam that came to the fore was not the charismatic saints who turned enemy bullets into water . . . Miracles and saints were no more plausible or relevant in the context of modern warfare than heroic ancestors. What did resonate was the promise of immortality and eternal paradise. (Edwards 1998, 719)

Suicide attacks, one of the few options available to ‘freedom fighters’, had found their religious stamp.

Jihad became a form of mental escape from an asymmetrical tension in which foreigners could punch without receiving any knocks themselves and in which the relationship between central governments and peripheral tribal societies was increasingly broken. It is the revenge of traditional societies, lost in the margins, against the implants of free markets and nation-state institutions. Russia’s mentality is also about digging into a fantastical past in order to sustain a system that is presenting the structural, political and demographic signs of exhaustion. Brute force is also a valid option for Russia, not just because of its disdain for the Western way of life but also because it senses that its society copes with crude violence better than ours.

Sloth and the fear of death

Contemplating the newly created steam vessels in harbours in the 1900s, Polish novelist Joseph Conrad feared that the industrialised world would lose its soul. How could notions of honour and sacrifice prevail in the absence of any physical effort, when everything was given to you by machines instead of hard silent labour? He goes even further in this romantic passage:

I have always dreamed of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity—that’s what I would have liked to see. (Conrad 1907, 34)

Conrad would risk apoplexy if he lived today: pity and pessimism have almost become brands in some Western countries. It seems we are scared and even passively fascinated by Western adversaries, as philosopher Allan Bloom remarked:

There is something of this in the current sympathy for terrorists, because they ‘care’. I have seen young people, and older people too, who are good democratic liberals,

lovers of peace and gentleness, struck dumb with admiration for individuals threatening or using the most terrible violence for the slightest and tawdriest reason. They have a sneaking suspicion that they are face to face with men of real commitment, which they themselves lack. (Bloom 1987, 221)

Is the Chicago professor correct? Say, if there was a war involving our country, would we be willing to fight for it?⁴ Fortunately here, WIN/Gallup pollsters have asked the exact same question in more than 60 countries since the 1970s. The 2014 results are displayed below (Table 1).

On average, only 25 % of Europeans respond that they are willing to fight for their country. The number of volunteers tends to increase when income and level of education rise, as well as among younger people (18–34 years old). However, some trends are worrying: while 44 % of Americans are willing to defend their country, only 30 % of young Americans (18–24) respond likewise. In contrast, 75 % of the same age group in Russia would risk their lives for their flag. This is clearly a comparative advantage, which Putin is bearing in mind at the moment.

So what is it? Have Western imagination and stamina gone elsewhere, off on spatial adventures or high-tech projects? Have we lost faith in ourselves, in who we are as a political group?

Julien Freund identified the gap between religious and non-religious societies as having deeper features than simple differences in spatial observation or personal cosmic beliefs. For him, the West's point of no return with its religious self was reached when it ceased to pine for salvation and venerate death, to embrace a 'collective project that is its own redeemer'. Man can be saved on earth by leaving nature behind and following organisational and technical innovations, potentially leading him to satiety and happiness. The problematic consequence of that logic is that 'men become happy because they do not meet any obstacles or resistance any longer . . . while experience insists on the importance of the struggle, on life as a collection of forces resisting death'. As we aim for 'frictionless experiences'—a key digital neologism—'men turn into a mortal god for whom death is the absurd punishment of a wrong that does not exist' (Freund 1975, 36).

In a way, the violence emerging from the Middle East and Russia has the merit of forcing us to introspection. In the West today, everything should be easy, safe and insured: do not hit our children, provide a smooth path for new immigrants, don't sacrifice this generation of taxpayers to repay our national debts and so on. Our post-Second War World 'collective project' has lost steam and is becoming increasingly hypocritical. The intrusion of violence is transforming that equation: one can afford the luxury

⁴ The question itself is flawed: what would 'involve' mean here? Are we talking about military intervention? Joining the army in general? Is it an outright invasion? Nevertheless, these data are welcome as we believe that the last part of the question bears little ambiguity: would you fight for your country? This poll is about instincts, a quick emotional 'yes' or 'no'.

Table 1 If there was a war involving your country, would you be willing to fight for it?

Countries	Yes (total, %)	No (total, %)	Yes (18–24 years old, %)	No (18–24 years old, %)
Australia	30	43	14	65
Belgium	19	56	26	51
Brazil	48	44	56	37
Czech Republic	23	64	33	52
France	29	44	31	46
Germany	18	62	21	66
Israel	66	13	68	10
Italy	20	68	30	60
Japan	10	43	6	38
The Netherlands	15	64	19	61
Portugal	28	47	32	43
Russia	59	20	75	10
Turkey	73	21	77	19
Spain	21	49	13	66
United Kingdom	27	51	29	55
United States	44	31	30	43

Source: WIN/Gallup 2014.

of procrastination with public debt or juvenile misconduct, but not with physical aggression. Enemies appear of their own accord, without asking permission, pointing at past mistakes and inventing new ones, or blaming us for the structural global imbalances at the centre of capitalism. If dialogue is not possible, then authority and violence are vital to keep our values afloat.

How we should fight back

Frankness is required when discussing our current reactions to IS or Putin's Russia: we are afraid. We are afraid of its brutality in the case of IS and we are afraid of Moscow's unpredictability. There is no shame in admitting this when it allows us to move in the right direction.

Focusing on mentalities, we see a paralysed West that still cannot forgive itself for the First and Second World Wars or the Holocaust. We see a global project that allowed relative stability and has lifted millions out of poverty, yet is insufficiently defended. Our confidence is constantly eroded by black swan reasoning. While staying true to ourselves, I want to show what embracing risks for better strategies would mean in several examples:

- *Ensure free rules of engagement for our military.* As terrorist organisations use civilians as shields, tragic mistakes will have to be made for the sake of ending conflicts and ensuring long-term stability. Soldiers sent out on the ground to guide airstrikes—forward air controllers—should ideally share their targeting mission with local partners while being backed by their Western superiors. To root out IS, villages and towns will have to be partly damaged. As the Center for Strategic and International Studies rightly said in a recent report, ‘the US cannot afford to make avoiding civilian casualties a strategic objective’ (Cordesman 2015). There is, indeed, nothing moral about prolonging wars.
- *Beware the tempting ‘two armies’ model.* There is no question that special forces and, in general, our best trained units will be decisive on the ground. But this should not affect the level of equipment and training provided to the extent that only 20 % of our militaries are fit for duty and 80 % feel marginalised. Our armies are much more than foreign expeditionary tools: they are models for our society whose vow of commitment to the security of our nations should be respected. Courage should not become the monopoly of the military elite.
- *Forget technology for the present and embrace mobility and austerity.* Drones and fighter jets are useful, but a war is won through attitude as much as through achievement. The 2013 French operation in Mali provided important lessons in that regard:

The French use relatively lightly armoured wheeled vehicles, which have smaller sustainment requirements compared with heavier, tracked vehicles; [they] prefer mobility over protection, a choice that reflects their cultural and doctrinal emphasis on manoeuvre; [they] draw on an expeditionary culture, which reportedly makes coping with austerity a point of pride and also reinforces certain approaches toward operating among local populations. (Shurkin 2014)
- *Cut humanitarian supplies when they help our enemies.* As 30 % of the Middle East and North Africa has become inaccessible to aid workers and diplomats, humanitarian programmes can do more harm than good. The UN and EU attach great importance to the ‘neutrality’ principle—that help should go to all in need—yet this implies providing supplies to villages held by IS, or President Bashar al-Assad in the case of Syria. If the West is serious about shaping events in the long run, aid and development should fall under the realm of political strategy. Again, putting an end to a conflict by making tough choices is worth more than feeding the same conflict.
- *Civic service for the young and beyond.* Familiarising all generations, including the youngest, with the contents of a first-aid kit in case there is a terrorist attack, with the right reflexes when injured persons are conscious or unconscious, and with basic self-defence moves could form the basis of a national civic service. This civic service would not be a sequel to mandatory military service but an educative break—of say, between 3 and 6 months—during which teenagers from all regions and all social classes would mingle with associations and civil society, learning from the professional experience of adults while acquiring practical skills. How many times has the infamous ‘Generation Y’ heard of the combative spirit acquired from long walks in forests and team activities in harsh conditions?

A mental shift is needed. Without denying our love of life, the West needs to overcome the perils of comfortable saintliness. French essayist Senancour's collection of letters, *Obermann*, provides an admirable impetus for the disenchanting agnosticism hidden in most of us:

'L'homme est périssable.—Il se peut, mais périssons en résistant, et, si le néant nous est réservé, ne faisons pas que ce soit une justice.' ['Man is ephemeral. That may be; but let us perish while resisting and, if nothingness awaits us, let it not be justice']. (Senancour 1804, author's translation)

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