The great thing about giving a talk in the morning of the second day of a conference like this is that you get a whole night to think up elegant ways of saying ‘you’re wrong!’ to all the speakers before you. On the downside, a lot that I might have said has already been said; on the upside, hey, it’s still a pretty ‘target rich environment’.

There are two main questions posed in this session:

**Number One: Are counterinsurgencies/wars amongst the people/stability operations now the core business of armies?**

As it happens, I have some problems with this question, which aren’t merely academically pedantic in nature. In his famous treatise *On War* Carl Von Clausewitz wrote that the supreme and most far-reaching act of the statesman and commander is ‘establishing the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.’ The phrase is heard often enough nowadays as to have become something of a cliché but to my mind it is an injunction so useful and apposite as to bear such frequent repetition. If I may presume to speak with his voice, I think if Clausewitz were here today he would say that the question lacks precision. After all,

**What is this counterinsurgency/war amongst the people/stabilisation operations thing?**

It’s rather an awkward mouthful, no? It might even be worse than MOOTW, ‘Military Operations Other Than War’ its unloved and unlamented predecessor, which nonetheless it appears to be channelling. Let us hope that the acronym COINWAMPSO does not enter the military lexicon. Anyway, if you don’t like dead Prussians take the Bible instead. ‘The more the words, the less the meaning’, it says in Ecclesiastes (6:11), which moves me to suggest that it is probably worth boiling down the problem set we are dealing with here rather a lot further than ‘counterinsurgency/war amongst the people/stabilisation operations’. Because if we do that the answer to question,

**Number Two: what are the implications for force structure?**
Is a little more manageable. So let me recast the question a bit. Personally, and I hope that you will agree, the gist of what is at issue here is this:

**Will the conditions of campaigning in future wars be like those of ongoing and recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq respectively or not?**

No one with even the smallest familiarity with the contemporary defence and security debate will have missed the acrimonious fight that has surrounded this question for the last 5 or 6 years in the USA particularly. On the one hand, ‘crusaders’ argue that they will and that failing to adapt our forces accordingly will doom us to defeat, wasted lives and money, and a less safe world in which the contagion of ‘global insurgency’ will thrive in failed and failing states. On the other hand, ‘conservatives’ argue that Iraq and Afghanistan are an aberration from the norm; that adapting our forces for counterinsurgency operations is a craven bargain trading a first rate war-fighting army for a second rate COIN machine; and, worst of all, that the Western strategic mind has been clouded by the ‘strategy of tactics’ that is what COIN operations represents.

In actuality, the suppositions of both camps rest upon some sound observations. For the crusaders: that those who wish to challenge Western military power appear to have given up trying to do so head on. For the conservatives: that opponents adopt these less dangerous ‘asymmetric’ techniques because of our conventional predominance, which should not, therefore, be squandered. For the time being, policy-makers in Britain and America, and likely elsewhere, have attempted to encapsulate the two positions in a sort of composite, ‘hybrid warfare’—a theory largely driven by United States Marine Corps analyses, which holds that future wars will defy easy categorization and will employ a variety of warfare types. We may no longer assume, they say, that states will fight only ‘conventionally’, or that non-state actors will confine their efforts to the ‘irregular’ end of the conflict spectrum.

Before his retirement in 2011 Defence Secretary Robert Gates seemed to come down squarely in the hybrid middle of the crusader/conservative divide. In a widely reported speech at West Point he declared that while future challenges did not require a ‘Victorian nation-building constabulary’ designed for chasing
guerrillas and sipping tea, the prospects for major force-on-force land engagements were small because future adversaries, ‘be they terrorists, insurgents, militia groups, rogue states, or emerging powers’, would avoid America’s strengths in conventional warfare. In somewhat more earthy language Marine General James Mattis, one of America’s most able and straight talking military commanders, laid out the problem similarly:

We do not want US forces to be dominant and irrelevant in the future and we can do that. You take on the US Army in open desert in open terrain in mechanized warfare and the Army will annihilate you. That’s just taking on whatever it is that the Air Force has left untouched—which won’t be much. But the area that we are not superior in is irregular warfare...

By and large, I agree with these statements and, though I think if we’d a more mature understanding of war in its nature we’d find adding ‘hybrid’ to the front end of it to be a superfluous, even retrograde step, I can see that it has its uses as a concept in the present environment. (I also think there’s rather a lot to learn from the Victorians). And of course, as was pointed out yesterday, the reason this debate is coming to a climax is that in simple terms, the money is running out. As the implications of the 2008 global financial crisis continue to unfold in shrunken economies, slow growth, and a dreadful realization that projected levels of public and private debt are unsustainable, the minds of those who make policy and set budgets are naturally concentrated on the ‘number, size, and cost of [the Army’s] heavy formations…’ and the value for money they represent.

Actually, it’s probably wrong to say that we are coming to a climax because I strongly suspect that the climax has been passed already. The argument has been won hands down by those who reckon small wars are just bad business. All around, it seems to me, there is an increasingly post-Vietnam vibe in the air today—though, thankfully, even as the culture wars heat up again, soldiers are held in high regard and not vilified as they once were—one that consigns irregular wars, whatever you want to call them (there are dozens of options), to the lesser included contingency category.

Personally, I am far from entirely unsympathetic to this view. It seems to me the ‘main business of armed forces’, to use the terms of
the conference prospectus, is compelling the enemy to do one’s will and, that being the case, an army which strays too far from the ‘close with and destroy the enemy’ ideal has stopped being an army and become something else. Nonetheless, I’d like to spend the rest of this presentation explaining why I think ultimately it is mostly wrong: wrong in the past, wrong in the present, and for what it’s worth (and bear in mind that academic predictions are the crappiest by far of a crappy lot) wrong for the foreseeable future.

‘NASTY, BRUTISH AND SHORT...’

That was famously how Hobbes described life in the state of nature that was the past—a constant war of all against all. The answer to the problem was the Leviathan, the law-based state—representing the concentration of power (i.e., to make rules and enforce them with violence) in the hands of a government (however constituted). Once you’ve got states, to be rather crude about it, you get a bifurcation of war types into interstate war (which we have tended to regard as ‘proper war’) and intrastate war (which we have tended to regard as not ‘proper war’). From 1648, to pick a not completely arbitrary date, for a period of a couple of centuries interstate wars began to preoccupy our historical imagination.

However, intrastate wars did not go away and already by the Napoleonic Wars, and certainly by the time the 1848 revolutions rolled through Europe, irregular was becoming statistically predominant. It is a reflection of the poor state of military education and war studies more generally that Clausewitz, who was deeply impressed by the power of what latter generations would call ‘people’s war’, is typically regarded as a narrow minded apostle of conventionality. Certainly, after 1945 most wars have been ‘counterinsurgency/wars amongst the people/stability operations’ (or any one of literally dozens of other terms for wars not fitting the mould of the massive First and Second World War conventional engagements which still dominate our conception of ‘proper’ wars.

In short, the era of big, relatively well-defined interstate wars is in fact something of a historical blip occupying just a few centuries. For the most part, the past was irregular. Indeed, it’s the conception of what is regular and what is irregular that is screwed up in reverse, particularly in western military thought.
'I DO NOT THINK THAT WORD MEANS WHAT HE THINKS IT MEANS...'

That’s one of the many catchlines of the book and film *The Princess Bride*. It was said by Andre the Giant’s character Fizzik of the Sicilian mercenary and self-described genius Vezzini on account of his repeated incredulous repetition of the word ‘inconceivable’ every time The Man in Black (the hero of the story) did something incredible and unbelievable (i.e., scaling the ‘cliffs of insanity’ without a rope). It’s a terrific film and rather an astute primer on strategy. I was reminded of the line yesterday when people were speaking of the present situation that we face. Obviously, from just a few days after the September 11 attacks until today still our wars have been decidedly irregular. I won’t waste time talking about Afghanistan and Iraq—most of you in this room will know more about these wars than I do from a deeper more direct perspective.

My point, rather, is that yesterday we heard a fair bit about ‘black swans’ and the continuing prospects of major war in our world. The basic argument: let’s not go so far with this irregular war thing that we are unable to deter or defeat China, Russia, and/or Iran if that should become necessary. Now, I am very much a believer in the maxim ‘never say never’ but, in the politest way possible, I want to pour some scorn on this argument. First, I do not think that word means what you think it means. A conventional war with China, Russia, Iran would not be a ‘black swan’ (something inherently unpredictable, even unimaginable); on the contrary, it’s the whitest of white swans (predictable, though unlikely, and highly imaginable, as anyone can tell by perusing the syllabus of the average command and staff course).

Second, let’s take each of these major war peer foes in turn:

China, as we heard yesterday, has a bevy of rather large internal problems all of its own—demographics, wealth imbalance, environmental degradation and the ever present tension between economic growth and political lack of freedom. I do not doubt that they would like if it were possible to repay the West for the historical wounds and indignities inflicted upon it but that temptation is more than balanced by a desire to be rich. If it should fail in that and fall back into the chaos and poverty that prevailed there until just a generation ago... now that would be a big, big problem.
Russia is not waking giant testing its new strengths it is a decrepit Antonov on a terminal glide path. Yes, it’s full of flashy billionaires all of them eager to get there money out because there’s no genuine rule of law and if the state decides to take it there’s not much they can do about it. Fully a quarter of Russians live in effectively dead one-industry towns with no industry in conditions that make Tajikistan look good. Its demographic profile is a disaster. Its army has been a shambles for decades and is still a shambles. By no objective measure can the campaign against Georgia be regarded as a triumphant military accomplishment. The extent to which they looked good was basically a reflection of Georgian uselessness from Saakashvili on down.

Iran, similarly, has a population that endures its mullahs more than it admires them, has an ancient air force and navy, and an economy that is in the toilet. Without doubt it has caused death and injury to us through proxies and irregulars—a task in which they have been abetted by our decision to deploy to places where they can hit us—but kicking off a major war would be a very poor decision on their part, with the practically immediate and predictable result of their own annihilation.

Yesterday, Steve Metz mentioned North Korea as a truly scary and crazy opponent. I agree with that, totally. That said, South Korea has a large, well-equipped and very capable manoeuvre army of its own, which would incline me to say ‘you guys handle it. Call us when it’s cleanup time.’

Meanwhile, another problem, which pervades the present day’s decided ‘irregularity’, is the continuing fact that whereas in the developed world war has ceased to convey any meaningful economic advantage to the belligerents in much of the developing world war still pays. Warlords have not so much interest in governing spaces as they do perpetuating a state of quasi-governance in which they can thrive through smuggling, drug-running, protection rackets, human trafficking and so on.

‘I’M A GENIE IN A BOTTLE BABY, GOTTA RUB ME THE RIGHT WAY...’
That’s Christina Aguilera. She’s talking about her lady parts and not Al Qaeda and other manifestations of violent networked social movements—I probably didn’t need to point that out... But if you’ll forgive the mixed metaphor, the point I wish to make is that when it comes to the future the non-state actor genie that emerged on the scene so spectacularly with the September 11 attacks is not going back in his bottle. It is true that we have been greatly effective in rubbing out Al Qaeda’s leadership with drones and commando attacks but that’s a strategy for tamping down terrorists not eliminating them. Moreover, the trouble with these sorts of attacks is that you don’t know who might do one next or where.

The basic problem is connectivity, which on the one hand is a wonderful thing that has changed for the better the ways in which we live, work, find and maintain friendships and organise collectively for good works. But it’s also got a dark side. For one thing the rapidity and ease of communications of today’s informational paradigm means that actions initiated in one place can have practically instantaneous effects in another, regardless of their geographical separation. For another, it’s the central pillar of the ‘new wars’ thesis noted above. And the limits beyond which there are no potential attacks are disappearing as national frontiers become more permeable. Contemporary events amply illustrate this duality. On the one hand, the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements appear to show how positive social change can be enabled by connectivity. On the other hand, a world of do-it-yourself revolution is one that also enables ‘lone wolves’ Anders Breivik who on the 22nd of July 2011 raided a youth camp of the Norwegian Labour Party shooting and killing sixty-nine people, most of them teenagers: he decided what he believed and what made him angry, which he explained in laborious detail in a 1,000 page plus manifesto; he chose his ‘tribe’—one which was defined almost entirely by his solitary on-line activities; and he went out to make the world what he wanted it to be. There will be many more such instances, particularly in Europe as economic problems pour heat into a pressure cooker of divided societies.

DEPOPULATING AND REPOPULATING THE BATTLEFIELD

Let me conclude with a small reflection on the slightly inscrutable title I chose for this talk about depopulating and repopulating the battlefield. It’s supposed to encapsulate what I see, more or less, as the force structure problem. Basically it’s this:
1. Technology is driving the increasing ‘depopulation’ of the battlefield by which I mean fewer and fewer soldiers in more and more dispersed formations while generating no less, or even more, combat power than ever; while,

2. Policy has been requiring armed forces to perform tasks that require the ‘repopulation’ of the battlefield by which I mean soldiers on the ground in ‘bullet magnet’ mode while attempting to generate population security.

Logically, you might say something has got to give. My gut feeling is that something has given. Policy makers, with the encouragement of their military advisors, are saying (not for the first time, actually) let’s not do these ‘un-fun’ wars. Let the technology do its thing. We’re developing a severe case of drone dependence. But if you look a little further, I think, it’s perhaps not so black and white. Let’s not glorify small wars—history both recent and ancient tells us they are rarely worth the effort and should be avoided. That said, it is inevitable that the status quo powers of the globe will be called upon to do them nonetheless. Good luck writing them out of policy. Personally I don’t believe we can help it. When they cannot be avoided, though, those who are fighting small wars must recall that they are still wars and the ability to exert force in combined arms operations is still the key instrument of policy. And while the population is not ‘the objective’, as the population-centric COIN would have it, it is vital that in the conduct of one’s operations they not be ‘exasperated’. Better technology—intelligence, surveillance, targeting all that good stuff plus the ability to strike powerfully and precisely—is a big part of the answer too.

Smaller armies, especially land forces, are a budgetary inevitability but I don’t see why, necessarily, this means no more COIN. Sure it kicks the hell out of the population-centric orthodoxy. So what? Perhaps, again, history is a good guide. Through most of the 19th century up to the end of the Boer War the British Army policed its globe-straddling empire with an army of less than 100,000. The late Victorian British Army officer C.E. Callwell described small wars as ‘protracted, thankless, and invertebrate’. In our less elegant, more economical age we’d say they suck. Get over it. If soldiers protest this sort of war is not to their liking, and taxpayers that it represents poor value for money, they need understand that it is the only war they are likely to get and they had best dispense their illusions about it.