

The RLC CONNECT BOOK CLUB – EARLY SUMMER REVIEWS

‘Who Will Die for Donbas?’

This Connect book review title is a take on **Richard Overy’s and Michael Wheatcroft’s** introductory book chapter; ‘*Who Will Die for Danzig?*’ from their revised and updated bestselling ***The Road to War***. The parallels with what is happening in Ukraine today and what happened in Poland in 1939 are startling. While we focus on the rapidly emerging realignment of US global relationships from the 2nd April’s self-declared *Liberation Day*, it is sometimes challenging to remember what has happened before – but something similar has happened, and not just once. We all have a relatively short lived life experience, which perhaps explains why we often find the contemporary diplomatic, security and business environment unique – a study of human history tells us that it is anything but.

For most of its history the US has been an isolationist power, careful to remain at arms distance from European entanglements – so why are we surprised with the fallout of the *America First* policy? In his international bestseller, ***Paradise and Power***, **Robert Kagan** set the scene when he declared that “it is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even occupy the same world...on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus. They agree on little and understand one another less and less.”¹ Kagan wrote this over two decades ago – perhaps, with a new administration in the Whitehouse, the inconvenient penny has finally dropped on an international system that has been dominated by, and largely willing to accept US hard and soft power.

Prior to WW1 and in the inter-war period, America was at pains to remain neutral and passed a succession of Bills to protect its status. The Johnson Act of 1934 took a hard stance on war repayments from WW1, prohibiting the extension of credit to countries who owed the US on war loans – including Britain. It was one example of how transactional the Anglo-US relationship was prior to 1939. Through a succession of neutrality acts, both victims and aggressors of WW2 were banned from procuring war materials from the US. One clause within the acts however did allow for what became known as the ‘cash-and-carry’ provision. At the discretion of the President, belligerent nations were allowed to acquire non-lethal items, so long as they were paid for in full and carried in non-US flagships (not difficult as the US had a small merchant fleet). From this specific provision the Lend-Lease Act was developed and passed by Congress on 11 March 1941. You may ask why is this important today? Well, the US is reverting back to a far more transactional stance in its trade and wider security policies – akin to its isolationist position prior to 1939. The Lend-Lease Act authorised the President to sell, transfer title to, or dispose of military supplies to any foreign country whose defence was considered vital to the security of the US. The thorny issue over payments was broached by an initiative which took the form of a ‘consideration.’ This consideration was described in the Lend-Lease Act under Article 7, the long-term implications of which many countries who signed the agreement (including Russia and China) did not fully appreciate at the time. Article 7 provided the framework for a future liberalised global economic post-war order – largely based on capitalism. That same economic framework, further developed by the Bretton-Woods financial management system, is the system that we largely operate under today – and which the current administration in the White House may be about to amend. So, by looking back to 1939 you may determine that despite what the media pundits are saying, the world economic order

¹ Kagan, R. *Paradise and Power; America and Europe in the New World Order*, London, Atlantic Books, 2004, p.3.

has experienced something similar – we just chose to forget what the situation was before the Lend-Lease Act and specifically Article 7.

As for the UK, we arguably understand the US better than most of Europe. We have been at pains to stay slightly aloof from the Continent, cherish the mercurial 'special relationship' with Washington and encourage the illusion that we can facilitate some sort of economic and cultural bridge between the capitals of Europe and the temporal Washington elites. How true some of these viewpoints are is yet to be determined, but again, there are some historic parallels that we may wish to consider. The UK economy is struggling for growth, HMG has determined that there is an existential threat from Russia and, as a consequence, we need to bolster defence (spending and mobilisation). This challenging foreign and domestic situation is exasperated by unstable global markets, domestic pressures from the welfare system and a question mark over the future of NATO and Europe's collective defence. Go back to the mid-1960s, Britain was debating a withdrawal East of Suez (the US was warned of Westminster's intent in July 1967) for reasons that look familiar today. Our relationship with NATO (then only fourteen countries) was described by the then Foreign Secretary, George Brown, as 'thirteen little chaps who couldn't say "boo" to a goose, the goose being, of course, America.'² Domestically, the picture was also bleak for Britain, the pound was devalued in November 1967, the US was pressing the Wilson Government for involvement in Vietnam and the MOD was insisting that we needed to commit to buying the F-111 – all these factors were being considered against a need to curb domestic and overseas spending – sound familiar?

Internationally, any withdrawal East of Suez was likely to de-stabilise long-term relationships in the Persian Gulf, with a corresponding knock-on effect on global oil supply. The strategic problem was how to manage what was clearly going to be a global contraction without Britain losing influence – something that the current drafting of the 2025 SDR is grappling with. Perhaps to help reiterate that what we are witnessing today should not be considered as unique, is the stance taken by the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. President Lyndon Johnson telegrammed Wilson threatening retaliation for any cancellation of the F-111 contract and his outrage that Britain was considering abandoning its responsibilities East of Suez. Wilson's response to his own Cabinet was 'America is very good at looking after number one and would respect us for doing the same.'³ The end state was that Britain announced a withdrawal East of Suez by the end of 1971, the F-111 contract was cancelled, the 'special relationship' with the US continued, domestic finances improved, albeit they remained precarious, and the world moved on. Long-story-short, if you want context, look to history not the media outlets. When the media dramatize with doom cycle predictions, just check some historic facts before you reach for the fire alarm.

It could be argued that since the demise of the Soviet Union, the study of international relations has never been more important, or more interesting. Whilst the US attempts to take the lead in corralling a ceasefire in Ukraine, it is also searching for a solution to the challenges of the future of Gaza, while also exploring the aspirations for sovereign status for the Palestinians. At the core of US State Department thinking is Washington's future relationship with China – a relationship that it sees as competitive but not necessarily combative, even with China's physical and psychological manoeuvring around Taiwan. There is little doubt that hard power will still form the bedrock of US foreign policy, but the soft power discussed by **Joseph Nye in *Soft Power; The Means to Success***

² Cited in Bennett, G. *Six Moments of Crisis; Inside British Foreign Policy*, London, Oxford University Press, 2014, p.109.

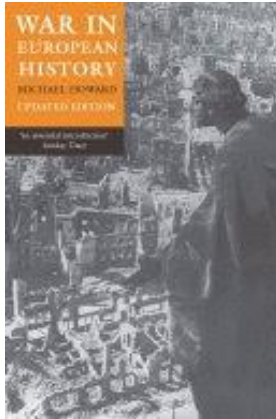
³ Ibid, p.120.

in World Politics, will no doubt also feature – the question is, to what degree will the US wield its power and will the outcome result in a situation more akin to pre-1939 or something else?

If a US global competitive advantage is to be maintained or even enhanced, China is now deemed by Washington to require a more focussed and multifaceted security and trade strategy. With the PLA Navy now the largest in the world by ship numbers, it seems inevitable that considerable US diplomatic, economic and military resource will be directed towards the same spheres where China is attempting to compete for power, both regionally and globally. With the capability to maintain a naval task force outside of the Pacific continuously for well over a decade, China's blue water fleet has been further underpinned by a comprehensive suite of maritime auxiliary support vessels, augmented by global port infrastructure contracts – Mahan theory⁴ superimposed on the modern world. The potential opening of a permanent strategic trading route through the Arctic (Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage) has triggered a security debate (one that has been simmering for some time) over how the US can guarantee favourable access on what could be a game changing global sea line of communication; hence the reason why Greenland (Denmark) and Canada have been compelled to engage in a regional security debate that has global implications.

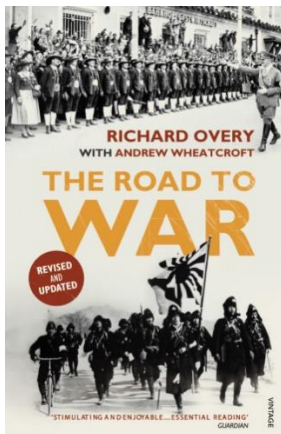
With all of these geo-political themes coalescing over the next months (and possibly years), this online Book Club review has selected a number of titles that readers might be interested in seeking out. Some are not new publications, but they have been selected nonetheless because they help provide some context to help understand the complex contemporary environment we find ourselves in. Finally, for the sake of variety, some titles have also been included to provide a less sombre opportunity for personal reading and reflection. As always, all of the titles have been selected for their wide availability and modest purchase price.

⁴ Mahan, A. T. *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*, Boston, little Brown and Company, 1890.



War in European History, Howard, M.
(Updated Edition), Oxford, Oxford
University Press, 2009

A thousand years of history in 136 pages. From the wars of the knights to the end of the European era, Howard explains why war is normal – in fact, periods without wars are increasingly abnormal. As the inside review from *The Economist* describes it, Howard “broadens and deepens our understanding of how the world we live in came to be the shape it is” – the point being made in the Book Club introduction above. Although written in 2009, Howard’s *Epilogue* stands up well and provides a scene-setter for the debates that are now taking place in Washington, Moscow, Beijing and various European capitals. What Howard explains is that while the *internationalist movement* wanted to (and believed they had) eradicated war as a tool for shaping global/regional outcomes, nothing could be further from the truth. Wars are firmly back on the agenda when it comes to international relations - Howard explains why. Worth picking up a copy just to read the eight page *epilogue* (make sure you obtain the 2009 edition).



The Road to War,

Overy, R. and Wheatcroft, A.
Third Edition. London. Vintage. 2009.

A study of the interwar period reveals how fragile nationhood was in Europe – and arguably still is. With an initial focus on Poland and Germany in the Danzig corridor, readers will start to discern parallels with Ukraine and Russia and the Donbas region. Received wisdom from 1939 often tells the story of how Britain pledged its allegiance to Polish sovereignty in the face of Hitler’s expansive policies. In fact, rather than an act of pure altruism, Britain had its own motives for opposing Germany and Poland was sceptical about Britain’s pledge. The authors present the reader with the context of the build-up to war by examining the seven major belligerents in turn and explaining the relationships between them. Considering the contemporary global environment, readers may be surprised how polarised the views were between Britain, France and the US in the interwar period (for just one specific aspect, readers may wish to consult **Christopher Hall’s book, *Britain, America and Arms Control 1921-37*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd, 1987**, which

explains, through naval arms control, how the great powers conducted themselves). Rather than allies, the nations were global rivals, forced to deal with rising Japanese Imperialism, Nazism, Fascism and Communism, as evidenced by the broadly accepted requirement for a series of treaties and arms control agreements.

The Road to War tells the story of the commencement of the second total war through a series of political, diplomatic and economic missteps, which highlights how flawed each nation's leaders could be (and still can be!). Perhaps this study of recent history may explain why we are witnessing a similar level of contemporary indiscretions and miscalculations on an almost daily basis, played out through a twenty-four hours news/social media cycle. Although perhaps offering little comfort, *The Road to War* does help debunk the supposition that we are living through a totally unique period of human history. For sure there is something new in what is happening today, but with the benefit of a longer-term view, a familiar pattern to international relations, conflicts and the brokering of power, indicates that there is arguably more of the old mannerisms than something completely new developing. A great book for context and one that, no doubt in due course, will attract the publication of a 4th Edition.



Enablement and Logistics as Critical Success Factors for Military Operations; Comparing Russian and NATO Approaches.

Sollfrank, A. and Boeke, S. RUSI Journal, Issue 7, 2024.

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/enablement-and-logistics-military-operations-comparing-russia-and-nato>

Focussing on the strategic-operational level: the authors highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches Russia and NATO have taken in enablement and logistics. The analysis is structured in three parts; C2, infrastructure and enablers. The evidence clearly shows that both Ukraine and Russia were (and still are) learning and adapting as the war was being fought but, 'contested logistics' – the desire to disrupt, deny and destroy an adversary's logistic operations, was a key tenet in the plans of the belligerents. The authors argue that Russia's central command system, which favoured a 'push-system', was ill-suited to fight and sustain a large interstate conflict in 2022. NATO by contrast operates on a broadly 'pull-system' which is arguably more flexible (and more sophisticated) but also more challenging to sustain. As the war in Ukraine became more attritional (and positional) – the article explores which approach offers the most advantage.

The examination of infrastructure includes the use of rail (something covered in the RLC Review 2025 'Special Article') which both sides have targeted. Russia's continued reliance on rail may come as a surprise to many (it still has a dedicated railway brigade with 66,000 working railcars) but NATO has its own challenges which include road restrictions and a range of associated supporting infrastructure (ports, power networks, fuel pipelines), together with significant issues over cross-border bureaucracy.

The shortage of Russian and NATO logistic enablers will, no doubt, interest readers the most. The authors argue that whilst enablement and logistics still falls under the purview of national responsibilities, the Russo-Ukrainian War has offered case studies that evidence that a broader approach to sustainment needs to be adopted in the near future. Collective enablement, burden-sharing, the use of contracts will no doubt all form a part of NATO's solution but standardisation and interoperability (always more talked about than actually delivered) will need to become a reality if advantage is to be gained. Compared to NATO, Russia, with its central command structure, may be in a better place to prioritise and direct its finite resources to maintain a higher operational tempo – at least for any of the initial engagements with NATO forces.

The authors argue that dovetailing a commercial approach into NATO logistics over the last three decades produced a logistic system best suited to sustaining out-of-area operations. This system however may not be the panacea for long-term logistic resilience when the character of the war transitions from manoeuvre to positional warfare. The article examines how NATO has had to change its enablement and sustainment planning factors. The NATO area is now much larger, and to transit across the various nations requires a complex set of permissions to be in place if tempo is to be maintained. Whilst forward stockpiling may provide some enhanced resilience, it is clear that reinforcement at speed and scale is still the preferred approach to countering any Russian aggression.

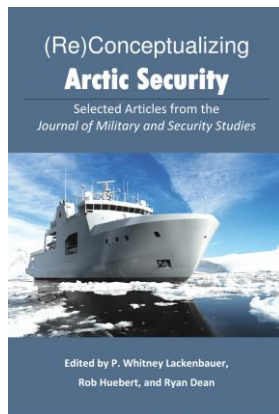


Strategic Logistics...A New Train of Thought,
Aries, H. The British Army Review, Winter 2024,
Issue 190, pp.39-42.

<https://chacr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/BAR-190.pdf>

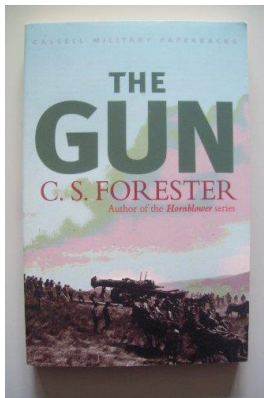
Almost a follow-on from *Enablement and Logistics* above. Focussing on two central lessons from the Russo-Ukraine War, the author argues that UK strategic thinking must change – no arguments there. Speed, agility, mobility and dispersion will be needed to offer strategic advantage – some old warhorses will point to a plethora of strategic logistic literature (including several SDRs which all identify the author's themes) which have consistently argued for change, without the benefit of the Russo-Ukrainian case study. The second lesson is a truism; logistics is the vital ingredient that allows strategic objectives to be achieved – again, nothing new here for those who have been involved in the business. What the article does say is that logistics has to be designed from the outset into the national strategy – industry, critical infrastructure, key enabling capabilities – and all of it given some form of protection. The recent past is explored to explain what effect privatisation has had on strategic UK plans and execution, but there are some inconvenient truths not mentioned. While some European countries are making some security inroads into integration to deliver agility, speed and dispersion, the author points out that a coordinated cross-government effort is required to deliver something substantial. Unfortunately, the UK has not had a strategic transport plan since the 1950s, and even then it did not identify bespoke security/defence strategic considerations. Perhaps the proof that HMG has grasped the

requirement for designing a regulatory framework (supply-side planning), into which Defence can plug-and-play with the corporate world, will be if the future SDR identifies how this is to be facilitated (and resourced). Who knows, perhaps Defence will be able to pony-on to a consolidated strategic transport strategy – then again! Worth a read for those grappling with mobilisation and enablement.



Conceptualizing Arctic Security; Selected Articles from the Journal of Military and Security Studies, Lackenbauer, P, W. Dean, R. and Heubert, R. (Eds), Centre for Military, Security, and Strategic Studies, 2017.

Although now eight years old and Canada centric, *Arctic Security* offers a series of essays which provide the background as to why the High North is globally important. Due to the Arctic amplifier effect, the region is warming faster than anywhere on earth. The result could be a functional passage (two in fact; the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage) across the Arctic providing a link between the Atlantic and Pacific by 2050. In addition to the route(s), the region is estimated to have circa 13% of the globe's oil reserves and 30% of natural gas (US Geological Survey Report 2008). Geopolitical competition is therefore inevitable and explains why Washington is now focussing on the security of the High North. China and Russia also have a vested interest in the region and Beijing's 'Polar Silk Road White Paper' is evidence of how important the region is likely to become with between 5-15% of China's trade transiting through the High North. A fascinating study of the region, *Arctic Security* provides the reader with a general understanding of the challenges by bringing together a broad range of distinct, yet related, topics. The one weakness of the book is that it has no conclusion, then again, it could be argued that a summary chapter is still being written in the various corridors of power.



The Gun, Forester, C, S. London, Cassell and Co, 2001 reprint.

Something completely different for the Book Club, *The Gun*, written by the author of the Hornblower series, is a novel based on the Peninsula War. Whilst fiction, it reveals the brutality and the deprivations of the campaigns fought with France as a group of Spanish irregulars attempt to move a 3-ton bronze cannon over a hundred miles of mountain range. For lovers of the Napoleonic Wars, *The Gun* offers a short escape from the madness of the contemporary world, who doesn't like Hornblower? Perhaps only bettered by Patrick O'Brian, this short novel (186 pages) is worth keeping in your knapsack as an emergency reading ration for that rare airport closure!