

**War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first-century
Combat as Politics** by Emile Simpson, London: Hurst & Company,
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War from the Ground Up is not easy reading. The author's erudition, bolstered by a wealth of detail and historical context, makes this one of the more serious studies on contemporary military conflict. Emile Simpson has attempted to arrive at an overall understanding of war in its contemporary and traditional forms by drawing on his experience of three tours as an infantry officer with the Royal Gurkha Rifles in Afghanistan. As he explores the myriad complex strands that comprise an insurgency with an analysis of examples from Afghanistan and a number of other countries, he concurrently attempts to relate these findings to other models of war, ranging from ancient times to the Clausewitzian to the hybrid wars of West Asia. He completes his study by examining whether traditional concepts and theories of war and the necessary constructs for its prosecution still find resonance in the present era.

Two arguments, listed out in the introduction itself, dominate much of the discourse in the book. The first relates to the traditional use of armed force within a military domain to establish military conditions for a political solution. The second pertains to the use of armed force directly to seek a political outcome (armed politics, as described by the author). Drawing on experience of conditions in Afghanistan, the author explains how what was initially perceived by the West to be a straightforward military contest between two opposing poles—the British Army and the

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Taliban—turned out to be an asymmetrical fight between the British and multiple Afghan actors, thanks to the ‘politically kaleidoscopic dynamics of the conflict’—a feature neither appreciated in advance nor anticipated by the British. He discusses the singular characteristics of the Afghan conflict whose fluidity defies definition, where a Western military coalition engages with a society where tribal loyalties, rival warlords and other factions constantly jostle for predominance and attempt to manipulate the coalition to their advantage, as an illustration of the employment of force in domains other than the purely military. In the process, he arrives at the conclusion that the Afghan insurgency is more of a ‘franchise’, which, in this reviewer’s view, applies equally well to most insurgencies around the world today.

Another thread permeating Simpson’s work is the issue of a strategic audience. In today’s connected world, the fallout of any incident or operation is gauged by an audience well beyond those directly affected, and should be anticipated accordingly by policymakers and the military. Therefore, to communicate credibly with diverse audiences, it is imperative that policy, action on the ground and the interconnecting strategy are synchronous and mutually adjusting, so that the ‘strategic narrative’ which derives from these actions continues to lend credence to policy. Simpson explains that failure to do so detracts from the legitimacy of leaders, more so in the present era when the outcomes of most conflicts (including relatively conventional ones) do not conform to traditional notions of victory or defeat but are analysed on the basis of how successful they have been in achieving the protagonist’s aims, with blurring of the distinction between the political and the military. The author has also alluded to the prospect of one side not accepting defeat (or the lack of success), but interpreting the strategic narrative to its advantage for retaining its position amongst its supporters; for example, Egypt in 1973 and Hezbollah in 2006.

The discussion on strategy reveals much commonality of thought with other militaries. Making hard choices for political reasons in spite of pressing tactical considerations, an aspect that troops on the ground frequently question, is one example. In a novel departure, the author also compares fighting an insurgency with fighting elections, with some justification. The necessity for a ‘strategic dialogue’, whereby the political intent of the state and its articulation on the ground through operations are linked through a two-way continuous dialogue process, is well analysed as an imperative for strategic success. While discussing

the structures for conduct of such a dialogue, Simpson makes pertinent observations with respect to civil–military relations. He contrasts the differing views of Clausewitz and Samuel Huntington on the subject, aligning more with Clausewitz, who wanted the opinions of Generals on policy matters to be heard. Yet, he is alarmingly perceptive when he opines that ‘...what consistently comes to the surface is that personality seems to be a more powerful variable than the official state system’ in the conduct of such a dialogue, and rightly argues for this mechanism to be a continuous process, extending further down the chain of command. He invokes Clausewitz again to point out that while war, being unpredictable, might well escalate beyond desired limits, yet it has to be brought under the control of policy. However, in the twenty-first century milieu, he differs with Clausewitz’s prescription that policy must adapt with war’s evolution, considering that, in practice, today’s politicians might find it difficult to explain changing war aims to their constituencies.

Taking the debate further, Simpson acknowledges that Clausewitz’s basic concepts of strategy remain relevant in contemporary conflict, whereby the military domain remains an extension of policy. He continues the discussion by pointing out that since counter-insurgency is not a strategy by itself but only a method, it requires a strategy to function, with reference to a particular political context. To buttress the argument, he again falls back on Clausewitz, who, when presented with a purely military problem, declined to entertain it unless the political background was presented first. Further, he takes examples from Vietnam to illustrate that if military objectives are not linked to the larger political purpose, strategy is bound to fail. Interestingly, when comparing the applicability of traditional military tenets to the present day, he concludes that some of the hallowed ‘Principles of War’ still taught in the British and Commonwealth armies do not hold good in contemporary conflict—an observation that can be debated at length.

Simpson’s concluding arguments in the study pertain to the tenor of the strategic narrative which a protagonist decides to adopt prior to, during and after a conflict and how essential it is to merge conflicting sub-narratives into one coherent pattern. Quoting from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the author analyses three argumentative options available to shape such a narrative for presenting before a strategic audience: ‘ethos’ (based on character and morals); ‘pathos’ (based on emotion); and ‘logos’ (based on rationality). Discussing all three, he rightly concludes that while a rational argument can always be used to explain or justify the ‘big

picture', emotional explanations pertain more to individual experiences and are, for the most, deeply personal, dealing with privation and the loss of life and limb. However, when the emotional is moulded for fostering 'esprit de corps' at the tactical level or appealing to national pride and values, it serves a most useful function when combined with the rational. The dissonance between the two arises during periods of prolonged conflict when no amount of rational argument seems to justify the brutalities and hardships of war, and could even result in the audience losing interest in the narrative. The argument, therefore, has to first be founded on ethos and its connected values. This is probably the most important deduction in the study, and sound advice for practitioners of war in all its dimensions.

As a military professional, this reviewer has enjoyed reading and reviewing this book. It is heartening to see a professional study which encompasses various dimensions of war, including the 'grey zone of conflict', arriving at conclusions similar to those of other militaries. Despite the study being mildly repetitive, no praise can be too high for the author who has remained focused on his arguments while dissecting such a complex narrative which goes back and forth in time. His scholarship and knack of distilling various hypotheses into one comprehensive narrative should stand up as an example to follow for any aspiring military writer.