The Inherent Tensions in Military Doctrine

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Introduction

Military doctrine is a subject that has not received the attention it deserves despite the fundamental importance it has in determining how armed forces think, what experience is carried forward, how they currently fight, train and adapt to changing operational conditions and look to the future. The purpose of doctrine is to provide a cohesive body of thinking to approach the business of war. The expression ‘military doctrine’ can also provoke a vision of intellectual rigidity where the firm foundation of experience can represent an unhelpful ossification of past military practice. Nevertheless, to ignore the past and not bring a historical perspective to military doctrine also carries the risk of replacing enduring principles of war with a mindset that marches to the drumbeat of intellectual fashion. Fashionable ‘big ideas’ may be nothing new in the history of war and neither is their impact so profound as to change its nature or character. History provides the critical reality test that separates empty jargon from revolutionary change. Doctrine must be a living intellectual body of thought that draws on the past, lives in the present, evolves, develops and, if necessary, gives way to a new thinking relevant to the present or anticipated future operational conditions and changing weapons technology.

The development of doctrine is a speculative and risky undertaking as it is dependent, to a certain extent, on trying to predict future war. To adopt doctrine not suited to the character of future conflict can lead to catastrophe and this was dramatically illustrated by the military collapse of France in 1940.¹ Nevertheless, as Colin S. Gray warned: ‘Doctrine can

be wrong. However, this powerful caveat is not a sound reason for hostility to doctrine per se.² While not losing its need to have applicability to future war, the development of doctrine rests on something more concrete once a conflict is underway. The evolution of doctrine draws on the events of the battlefield to guide change. In those circumstances the development of doctrine is dependent on the ability of armed forces to learn and apply lessons to the conflict at hand.

The subject of military doctrine is enormous. The intention in this paper is to examine two broad themes that are relevant to military doctrine in general as a cohesive body of military thinking. The first will explore the problem of defining ‘military doctrine’ and its purpose. Having a common understanding of what is meant by ‘military doctrine’ is something of fundamental importance if doctrine is to have any utility to its users. The second will consider the inherent tensions in doctrine when trying to formulate it, disseminate it or apply it. How these inherent tensions or ‘contradictions’ are resolved shapes the efficacy of the military doctrine and reflects the character of its users.

Defining Doctrine

Finding a standard and widely accepted example of military doctrine would seem a straightforward task. The Cold War period saw much standardisation in the understanding of basic concepts achieved as a result of alliances such as NATO or the Warsaw Treaty Organisation. *The United Kingdom Glossary of Joint and Multinational Terms and Definitions* describes doctrine as:

Fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application.³

The NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions contains an identical definition with the entry dated 1 March 1973. Indeed the British glossary definition originates from NATO and not the other way around.⁴ The US Department of Defence’s glossary offers a slight variation on the British and NATO definitions defining doctrine as: ‘Fundamental principles by which military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application’.⁵ The US glossary also includes separate entries for multinational, joint and multi-service doctrine. Curiously ‘multi-service’ doctrine is a cross-reference under the US glossary’s doctrine entry but is not defined anywhere in the document.⁶ None of these additional definitions of doctrine appears in the UK or NATO glossaries.

The US glossary definition of ‘joint doctrine’ does, however, take the basic definition of doctrine a bit further. The US defines ‘joint doctrine’ as:

Fundamental principles that guide the employment of US military forces in coordinated action toward a common objective. Joint doctrine contained in joint publications also includes terms,

tactics, techniques, and procedures. It is authoritative but requires judgement in application.⁷

So far, the basic definition of ‘doctrine’ only indicates that it contains ‘fundamental principles’ and that despite its authority it requires some level of interpretation. The definition of ‘joint doctrine’ introduces ‘coordinated action’ between the different armed services (presumably coordinated action within a single service is desirable) and that joint doctrine includes ‘terms, tactics, techniques, and procedures’ (as does single service doctrine).

Glossaries are not the only military sources to define military doctrine. Indeed, in doctrine itself, definitions and the purpose of doctrine is often explained although not always with a great deal of consistency. The publication of the British Army’s Design for Military Operations – The British Military Doctrine stated that ‘put most simply, doctrine is what is taught’ and introduced the NATO glossary definition.⁸ This publication is very important not only for its overall impact on the development of British military doctrine at the operational level but also because it represents one of the earliest attempts to introduce into British doctrine a basic definition of military doctrine and an elaboration of its purpose. Indeed, it divided doctrine into three levels: ‘military doctrine’ (highest level), operational (theatre level) and tactical (for fighting the battle).⁹ The idea of levels of war, as Michael Codner has pointed out, is itself a ‘doctrinal construct’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in British Army doctrine the

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⁷ Ibid., p. 245.
⁹ Ibid., pp.3-4.
bulk of the doctrine historically has been written for the tactical level
where ‘tactics, techniques, and procedures’ predominate even if
philosophy and principles underpin content that is more ‘actions on’ than
a reflective guide for action. The higher the level of doctrine, the less
prescriptive and procedural it becomes and the more theoretical in
character.\textsuperscript{11} The issue of levels in war underscores the fact that doctrine
has to be written for many different military users.

The development of British joint doctrine in the late 1990s also
brought with it further efforts to build on the definitions and purpose set
out in the 1989 \textit{Design for Military Operations}. The first edition of
\textit{British Defence Doctrine} (Joint Warfare Publication JWP 0-01)
elaborated on the purpose of doctrine in the following manner:

\textit{Doctrine is not a set of rules, which can be applied without
thought; it is, rather, a framework for understanding the nature of
armed conflict and the use of force. . . . Its purpose is to guide,
explain and educate, and to provide the basis for further study and
informed debate.}\textsuperscript{12}

The second edition of \textit{British Defence Doctrine} published in 2001
devoted less space to the definition of doctrine than its predecessor.\textsuperscript{13} The
most recent third addition published in 2008 reduced this even more.
Abandoning altogether the opening chapter devoted to doctrine, the latest
version of \textit{British Defence Doctrine} offered a modest definition that

\textsuperscript{11} Gray, \textit{The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice}, p. 79, p. 220.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{British Defence Doctrine} Joint Warfare Publication (JWP) 0-01, First Edition 1999, p. 1.2.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{British Defence Doctrine}, Joint Warfare Publication (JWP) 0-01, Second Edition October
broke no new ground in the Chief of the Defence Staff’s foreword. It seems that the capstone publication of British doctrine no longer serves the function of laying the conceptual foundation for all of British military doctrine by setting out what it is, what is its purpose and who it is for.

Looking outside the realm of the military doctrine community, definitions of military doctrine are sparser. Writing in the 1930s, Col JFC Fuller in his book *The Foundations of the Science of War*, believed that ‘the central idea of an army is known as its doctrine’. Trevor N. Dupuy’s *International Military and Defence Encyclopedia* Vol. 2 states that ‘in the military, doctrine is . . . the basis for both academic study and field exercises; and is, in some cases, the military’s forecast of future activities and events. Its most critical application is how forces will fight in combat operations’. More recently, Michael Codner argued that ‘doctrine provides the intellectual structure for the practitioners, military commanders at every level and their staffs and subordinates, to think sensibly about the application of military force and to be guided by sound reasoning’. Making matters more confusing is the idea advanced by Jim Storr that doctrine can be both explicit (written down and published) and implicit (received wisdom on the way things are done). While defining explicit doctrine in a formal process that results in a published military doctrine presents challenges enough, the informality of an implicit body of doctrine makes cohesion and a common understanding a difficult to measure and haphazard process. Nevertheless Storr concludes that ‘doctrine should contain a body of thought that is authoritative, explicit,

coherent, relevant, practical and teachable’. Finally, Colin S. Gray has defined military doctrine as ‘guidance, mandatory or discretionary, on what is believed officially to be contemporary best military practice’. Gray’s definition captures the ephemeral quality of doctrine and the varying degree in which armed forces impose it at all levels.

Hitherto ‘Military doctrine’ has been used as a general descriptor for the entire body of doctrine. Not all definitions of military doctrine, however, assign such a broad meaning. Indeed the 1989 Design for Military Operations described ‘military doctrine’ as being the ‘highest level of doctrine’ with a purpose of establishing ‘the framework of understanding of the approach to warfare in order to provide the foundation of practical application’. Design for Military Operations went on to emphasize that military doctrine was to address the questions of ‘what is the nature of war’ and ‘how does it [the Army] succeed in such a war’. Soviet thinking on military doctrine also defined it as being at the highest level in their doctrinal hierarchy. The Soviet Dictionary of Basic Military Terms published in translation defined military doctrine (Voyennaya Doktrina) as being:

A nation’s officially accepted system of scientifically founded views on the nature of modern wars and the use of the armed forces in them, and also on the requirements arising from these views regarding the country and its armed forces being made ready for war.

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20 Design for Military Operations, p. 3.  
21 Ibid.  
Military Strategy: Soviet Doctrine and Concepts edited by Marshall V.D. Sokolovsky also stressed how military doctrine looked ahead to predict the nature of future war:

_Military doctrine is an expression of the accepted views of a state regarding the political evaluation of future war, the state attitude toward war, the definition of the nature of future war, preparation of the country for war in respect to the economy and morale, the problems of forming and training the armed forces, as well as methods of warfare. Consequently, military doctrine also includes the accepted views on the fundamental nature of war._

The narrower definitions of military doctrine place far more emphasis on understanding the nature of war at present and attempting to predict it in the future. As a consequence, military doctrine has the highly speculative role of determining how armed forces will be prepared to fight and prevail in the future. This aspect will be explored in part in the subsequent sections of the paper.

What this tour of definitions reveals is that no single definition of military doctrine considered so far captures its many constituent parts. The art of writing good military doctrine, as Michael Codner suggests, ‘is essentially a simplifying process’._23_ With simplification, however, one can take the risk of losing nuance underpinned by military doctrine’s many facets and its broader and narrower interpretations. By taking the

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24 Ibid.
many elements appearing in the definitions above, military doctrine can be summarized as providing:

- Fundamental principles regarding the application of force
- Military thought for guidance rather than prescription in action
- Cohesion in military thought and action (at the most basic level through common ‘tactics, techniques, and procedures’)
- Knowledge to be reflected in training and imparted in education
- A framework for understanding the nature/character of conflict (past, present and future)
- A holistic military approach whereby the understanding of the nature/character of conflict shapes the application of force

**Inherent Tensions in Doctrine**

From the definitions of the previous section one can extrapolate some inherent tensions or ‘contradictions’ endemic to military doctrine when trying to formulate it, disseminate it or apply it. How these inherent tensions are resolved shapes the utility and relevance of military doctrine to its users.

The tensions revolve around three key problems. The first is the tension between the role of military doctrine to impart cohesion on the approach of armed forces and the ability of commanders to enjoy the freedom to be creative, adapt and exercise their own judgement tailored to the circumstances that confront them. In short what degree of conformity to the tenets of doctrine should be imposed and to what degree should a commander exercise initiative? The second tension is between the
differing doctrinal needs of those exercising command at different levels of war. How can doctrine be written to meet the needs both of the Chief Defence Staff and the platoon commander and still maintain an overall cohesion in the application of fundamental principles? The third tension is how to mix, in a balanced fashion, the past, present and future understandings of the nature/character of war. Placing too much emphasis on either the past, present or future nature/character of war carries profound risks in the formulation of military doctrine. Where then is the balance of influences?

Initiative or Conformity?

Military doctrine undoubtedly exists to provide cohesion in the application of military force. For any branch of the armed forces, a common approach that includes principles as well as common ‘tactics, techniques, and procedures’ seems a *sine qua non* to success on the battlefield. The character of war, however, is always changing. Adversaries devise new and effective approaches to war fighting and developments in technology can render established methods ineffective. This tension between the need for cohesion and initiative was the issue regarding doctrine that exercised JFC Fuller most in his *The Foundations of the Science of War*. The principal danger, in Fuller’s view, lay in making military doctrine too prescriptive:

*In itself, the danger of a doctrine is that it is apt to ossify into a dogma, and be seized upon by mental emasculates who lack virility of judgement, and who are only too grateful to rest assured that their actions, however inept, find justification in a book, which, if they think at all, is in their opinion, written in order to exonerate*
them from doing so. In the past many armies have been destroyed by internal discord, and some have been destroyed by the weapons of their antagonists, but the majority have perished through adhering to dogmas springing from their past successes – that is, self-destruction or suicide through inertia of mind.25

Historically, Fuller’s concerns have some justification as the British Army’s attachment to and application of doctrine does reflect the presence of ‘mental emasculates’ and ‘inertia in mind’. During the Second World War David French has argued that the British Army took an excessively ‘laissez faire’ attitude toward the dissemination of doctrine and the degree to which it could be ‘interpreted in practice’. Moreover, French maintains that it led to ‘the lack of a universal interpretation of the practical meaning of its doctrine’.26 Evidence of French’s analysis can be found in the memoirs of Gen Sir David Fraser, a Guards armoured officer in the Second World War. Reflecting on his experiences in training in UK pre-Normandy operations, Fraser wrote:

Any failures in concepts lay in the command of the British Army itself, which then, as earlier and later, was not at its best in matters of operational and tactical doctrine. There was an insufficient core of doctrine – general doctrine, not specifically mechanized – deriving from history as well as current experience. The result (in tactical matters) was a sense of an Army clutching at the latest reports from the only active theatre in which the British were engaged, the Western Desert, and drawing hasty lessons as if they

must have universal application. They often didn’t. It was a confusing time for those responsible for tactical leadership.\textsuperscript{27}

Fuller’s impulse to stress the importance of giving those in command the freedom to make their own judgements and interpret doctrine certainly fits the historical \textit{zeitgeist} of the British Army. Whether the balance between imparting cohesion and allowing initiative was right is doubtful as the problem in the British army has been the lassitude in disseminating and applying doctrine. Fuller understood that a balance between cohesion and freedom in interpretation was necessary:

\begin{quote}
We here obtain a dual conception of doctrine. In the first case, doctrine must be looked upon as a fixed method of procedure, so that, when an order is issued, all may understand it, and unity of action result. In the second case doctrine must be looked upon as power to formulate a correct judgement of circumstances and to devise a course of procedure which fits conditions.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

The determining factor in finding the correct balance between the role of doctrine in fostering cohesion and the requirement for commanders to exercise independence in judgement is found in military education. An army needs to trust the ability of officers employing doctrine to have the good judgement of knowing when and in what ways they can depart from the rigours of the doctrine. The capacity of officers to do this is based on the cultivation of intellectual curiosity and ability in the system of officer education. For the British Army this has been the

\textsuperscript{27} Gen Sir David Fraser, \textit{Wars and Shadows}, (London: Allen Lane, 2002), pp. 170-171.
\textsuperscript{28} Fuller, \textit{The Foundations of the Science of War}, p. 254.
enduring challenge despite a tradition in its doctrine of ‘stating principles rather than defining a prescriptive dogma’. 29

Utility at all levels of war?

Commanders operating at the different levels of war have different needs from doctrine creating a tension in the content between the theoretical and the proscriptive. The requirements of the Chief of the Defence Staff or a ‘two star’ holding theatre command are different in practice from those of the platoon commander. For those individuals in command at the strategic or operational levels, the principles embedded in doctrine are the critical analytical tools of the trade. At these levels, doctrine ‘can educate and advise the commander’ but not ‘prescribe the particulars of action’. 30 For the platoon commander, the tactical level of doctrine is more about ‘tactics, techniques, and procedures’ which are less of a guide than a drill to be applied when in contact with the enemy. The critical factor that integrates the different levels of war in military doctrine is the core concepts that provide the unifying conceptual thread. At whatever level, there must be the establishment of a common understanding of what particular core concepts mean and the way in which they can be employed. In effect a kind of military shorthand. What falls out from the role of core concepts is the importance of the writing exercise in defining clearly and effectively so that a common understanding is achieved in the doctrine.

In order to illustrate the importance of clarity in articulating core concepts in doctrine, the concept of agility provides a useful example.

30 Gray, The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice, p. 79.
This concept entered the doctrinal lexicon in the United States military in the early 1980s. The first definition of the concept is taken from US Army doctrine *Operations FM 100-5 1993*:

> Agility is the ability of friendly forces to react faster than the enemy and is a prerequisite for seizing and holding the initiative. It is as much a mental as a physical quality.\(^{31}\)

The second definition is from taken from the 2008 version of *British Defence Doctrine* that describes the principles of war:

**Flexibility**

220. *Flexibility* – the ability to change readily to meet new circumstances – comprises *agility*, responsiveness, resilience, acuity and adaptability.

221. *Flexibility* has both mental and physical dimensions. To lead to success, it needs to be associated with an organization and culture that encourages people to think creatively, and to be resourceful and imaginative, especially in the face of adversity or the unexpected. **Agility is the physical and structural ability that allows forces to adjust rapidly and decisively, especially when operating in complex situations or in the face of new or unforeseen circumstances.** Responsiveness is a measure of not only speed of action and reaction, but also how quickly a commander seizes (or regains) the initiative. Resilience is the degree to which people and their equipment remain effective under

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\(^{31}\) FM 100-5 *Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 1993, p. 2.7.
arduous conditions or in the face of hostile action. Acuity is sharpness of thought, characterized by intellectual and analytical rigour, enabling intuitive understanding of complex and changing circumstances. Adaptability embraces the need to learn quickly, to adjust to changes in a dynamic situation, and to amend plans that in the light of experience seem unlikely to lead to a suitable outcome.\(^\text{32}\)

The two definitions of agility on the surface bear considerable similarity. The origins of the concept Agility reside in the late Cold War period. From the US Army definition of the concept a number of important points can drawn out. Agility was seen in the context of ‘manoeuvre’ (air land battle) and stressed speed of decision and action. More importantly the US Army doctrine saw Agility resting on three characteristics: ‘mental’, ‘organizational’ and ‘physical’. Furthermore, the British definition sees the purpose of ‘agility’ as adjusting to ‘complex situations’ and ‘unforeseen circumstances’ rather than relating it to the problem of holding the initiative over the enemy. Each of the definitions of the concept of Agility is a product of its times and shaped by the prevalent character of the security environment. Indeed, Agility as a concept is not really extent in current US Army doctrine while its presence in British doctrine is on the ascendency.\(^\text{33}\)

However, fashionable or unfashionable a concept is in military doctrine, the clarity of its definition will determine its usefulness. In comparing the two definitions given above of Agility, it can be argued

\(^{32}\text{British Defence Doctrine, Joint Warfare Publication (JWP) 0-01, Third Edition August 2008, pp. 2-5-2-6.}\)

\(^{33}\text{FM 3-0 Operations, Department of the Army, February 2008, Appendix D, Rescinded Army Definitions, p. D-6.}\)
that the US definition is more understandable across the levels of war. Its purpose is to ‘react faster than the enemy’ in order to hold the ‘initiative’. Moreover it indicates agility ‘is as much a mental as a physical quality’. For either the theatre commander or the officer in command of a platoon, the concept offers clarity of purpose. In contrast, the British Defence Doctrine 2008 definition of ‘agility’ appears as a component of another concept in the principles of war - - flexibility. The British definition includes ‘physical and structural’ agility but curiously does not include mental agility which is treated under - - ‘acuity’ (keenness of perception) - - a separate component of the principle of flexibility. The more complex and yet vague British formulation of the concept of agility looks more like the product of an abstract theological debate rather than a coherent and clear understanding of an idea as a basis of action. Carefully crafting definitions of key concepts is the most essential prerequisite to insuring that doctrine across the levels of war has unifying conceptual threads.

**Past, Present or Future?**

Carl von Clausewitz in his *On War* endeavoured to identify principles that underpinned armed conflict as a human activity in his period of history. The Prussian military philosopher, however, also recognised that war is a ‘true chameleon’.\(^{34}\) The metaphor of the chameleon, a creature able to change its colour to blend into its environment is an appropriate one for indicating that war is in fact a constantly changing phenomenon. Clausewitz recognised this when he wrote that ‘every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting

conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions’. The challenge for each generation of military doctrine writers therefore is to visit anew the complexities of war, seeking to identify that which is unchanging in the nature of war and to come to grips with the changing character of war. Setting out a view of the character of conflict is something fundamental to the construction of any military doctrine. This is usually done in capstone, or highest level doctrine or as a separate study to provide the necessary understanding of the character of conflict in order to determine its impact on the doctrinal principles shaping the employment of armed forces. Military doctrine, however, invariably has simultaneously to examine the character of conflict by taking into account the enduring features of the past, understanding the present and predicting the future. Finding the correct balance is the source of inherent tension.

British military doctrine has grappled with the problem of understanding the character of conflict with increasing uncertainty the closer one moved to the present. The British Army’s Field Service Regulations (FSR) vol. II 1924 reflected a comprehension of the nature of conflict that was well understood: ‘The instructions laid down herein cover a war of the first magnitude, but can be modified in their application to other forms of warfare’. The only other form of warfare countenanced in the FSR 1924 was ‘in underdeveloped and semi-civilized countries’. Moving to the present sees a view of the character of conflict that is more complex and less focused as set out by the Strategic Trends Programme in the Development Concepts and Doctrine

37 Ibid., p. 212.
Centre (DCDC) of the UK Ministry of Defence in a recent publication entitled *Future Character of Conflict* (FCOC) that looks ahead to 2029:

*Future Conflict will be increasingly hybrid in character. This is not a code for insurgency or stabilisation, it is about a change in the mindset of our adversaries, who are aiming to exploit our weaknesses using a wide variety of high-end and low-end asymmetric techniques. These forms of conflict are transcending our conventional understanding of what equates to irregular and regular activity; the “conflict paradigm” has shifted and we must adapt our approaches if we are to succeed.*

The FCOC went on to emphasize that: 'In future conflict smart adversaries will present us with hybrid threats (combining conventional, irregular and high-end asymmetric threats) in the same time and space'.

The idea of ‘hybrid war’, like so many influences on British doctrinal thinking originates across the Atlantic. In the United States, two US Marine Corps officers, Lt Gen James N. Mattis and Lt Col Frank Hoffman in 2005 produced an influential article in the *Proceedings* journal arguing that the future will be characterised by ‘hybrid war’. Hoffman has since written extensively on the idea of hybrid war including a paper for the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies entitled *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. In this study, Hoffman defined hybrid war in the following way:

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Hybrid wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors. Hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.\textsuperscript{41}

Hoffman’s definition suggests revolutionary change in the character of conflict. Have Hoffman and the other exponents of hybrid war identified something new, a revolution in how wars are fought? The term ‘hybrid’ has been used before to describe the complex and multifaceted character of war. Thomas R. Mockaitas in his 1995 book \textit{British Counterinsurgency in the Post Imperial Era} described the 1960s Confrontation with Indonesia as a ‘hybrid war, combining low-intensity conventional engagements with insurgency’.\textsuperscript{42} What is more, Mockaitas went on to offer the following observation regarding the problem of hybridity in war:

\textit{Hybrid war demonstrates the extreme fluidity of categories such as “low”, “mid” and “high” intensity when applied to modern war. The conflict spectrum operates within individual wars as well as separating them from each other.}\textsuperscript{43}

When tested against the historical pattern of armed conflict, the idea of hybridity is nothing new either in terms of how wars have been


\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 38.
fought or thinking over the decades on the character of conflict. In the 1930s Mao Tse-Tung described his revolutionary war in a way that was recognisably hybrid. The ‘people’s guerrillas’ and the main (conventional) forces of the People’s Liberation Army were likened to a ‘man’s right arm and left arm’. The two forms of warfare being indispensible to the success of the other. During the Second World War, the Allies fought in a hybrid fashion arraying conventional forces against the Axis powers while employing organisations such as the Special Operations Executive (SOE) to organise resistance, conduct sabotage and attacks on enemy personnel in occupied Europe.

In a similar vein, analysis on the problem of hybridity in war punctuated Cold War debates on the character of war. In 1958, Raymond Aron described the hybrid nature of war as ‘polymorphous violence’. Andrew Mack coined the phrase ‘asymmetric’ warfare in the 1970s and at the end of the 1980s Frank Kitson described hybridity as the ‘ladder of warfare’. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a string of ideas expressing in different ways the problem of hybridity in war: ‘compound wars’, ‘three block war’, ‘beyond limits warfare’, ‘fourth generation warfare’ ‘war amongst the peoples’. All these post Cold War concepts seek, to a greater or lesser degree, to capture the complex and

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multifaceted - 'hybrid' - character of war. Of all the post Cold War studies, the monograph entitled *Unrestricted Warfare* produced by two Colonels of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army offered the most thorough and rigorous analysis of the hybrid character of war in the contemporary setting.^[49]

What this discussion leads to is that there is really nothing particularly new about the hybrid nature of war and, in fact, the problem of hybridity has long been the subject of study and analysis. Indeed, all wars are hybrid and it is only the characteristics of hybridity that change over time. For British doctrine, the implications of this historical analysis are enormous. At the very least it suggests an overdependence on American thinking and, more importantly, it indicates that the past, present and future in understanding the character of conflict is not in balance. This imbalance may in fact be part of the *modus operandi* of the British doctrine producing community. *British Defence Doctrine* second edition 2001 explicitly set out a balance between past, present and future in the construction of doctrine: ‘It is not, therefore, about the past nor is it about the medium or longer term future. It is about today and the immediate future’.^[50] This official view points to a myopic approach that is fixated on the present and future character of conflict. There is an inherent tension between past, present and future when grappling with the problem understanding the character of conflict and where to place the emphasis. However, unless past conflicts are well understood, how can the changing characteristics of war be identified? ‘HA [historical analysis] has allowed us’, argued Storr, ‘to see what is actually important

[^49]: Liang and Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*.
and to what extent'. In trying to understand the ‘true chameleon’, doctrine requires a historical context of the character of conflict if it is to make any sense of the present and future.

**Conclusions**

As stated at the opening of this paper, military doctrine has a fundamental importance in how armed forces think, what experience is carried forward, how they currently fight, train and adapt to changing operational conditions and look to the future. The purpose of doctrine is to provide a cohesive body of thinking to approach the business of war. Establishing a cohesive body of thinking is the central challenge of military doctrine.

This paper has set out to explore the obstacles to military doctrine embodying cohesive thinking by first considering the problem of defining ‘military doctrine’. The issue of defining key doctrinal concepts was also considered in relation to some of the inherent tensions in doctrine when trying to formulate it, disseminate it or apply it. Whether considering the meaning of ‘military doctrine’ itself, or subsidiary but core concepts, the establishment of a common understanding of what they mean and the way in which they can be employed is critical. For this to succeed, careful analysis has to reject vacuous jargon and adopt clear, concise and easily understood language that is underpinned by sound thinking. Moreover, definitions have to be consistently defined throughout the corpus of military doctrine.

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The second issue in relation to cohesive thought in military doctrine that was examined centred on the inherent tensions or ‘contradictions’ in doctrine. Three ‘tensions’ were considered: the role of doctrine imparting cohesion versus the need for commanders to exercise independent judgement; the differing requirements of doctrine at each level of war; and, finally, the tension between past, present and future in doctrine’s need to understand the character of war. The resolution of the tension between imparting cohesion versus commander’s initiative is very much dependent on the capacity of officers to be trusted to understand doctrine and make sound independent judgements when conditions dictate that they depart from it. Regarding the tension between doctrinal cohesion versus differing command requirements, its resolution is dependent on careful articulation of core comments as discussed above. The final tension between past, present and future in understanding the character of conflict requires more than just looking at fashionable theories of war but must be grounded firmly in the reality of historical analysis. It must be recognised, however, that the inherent tensions in military doctrine when trying to formulate it, disseminate it or apply will be enduring problems. The resolution of these tensions will determine the success or failure of doctrine as a guide to best operational practice.