Interview - Mike Martin

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Dr Mike Martin is a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London. He is a former British army officer and served in Afghanistan, pioneering, designing and implementing the British Military's Cultural Advisor programme and advising several commanders of the UK's Task Force Helmand on local national population dynamics from 2008-2014. Following his career in the army, Dr Martin worked for a risk management company across several countries and later was a senior leader at Common Purpose, a global NGO. He has written several books, including *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, the publication of which was initially blocked by the Ministry of Defence, and most recently *Why We Fight*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am going to interpret 'my field' as conflict studies or the study of war, without being too hung up on what departments call themselves. In essence studying the phenomenon of war and, by extension, the Clausewitzian concept that "war is the continuation of politics by other means". For me, the exciting frontier in war studies is the bringing together of several fields and using their lenses to understand war more effectively. These fields are biology and psychology – specifically, what evolution can tell us about how and why the human brain has evolved. My argument is a simple one, which is that war is a human behaviour and as such the most powerful tools for understanding it are grounded in biology, psychology and evolution. As humans fight wars on a psychological, biological and evolutionary basis, I think it is from these fields that new insights into conflict studies will come. Particularly when we ask the biggest question in conflict studies – which is, why do we fight? Why do we go to war when on a rational level it does not make sense? To draw an analogy, economics has incorporated a huge amount of evolutionary psychology into it, and now we have behavioural economics. At first classical economists, using the rational actor model, were sceptical. But now, most people accept that behavioural economics is a more nuanced and powerful way of understanding human economic behaviour. Richard H. Thaler won the Nobel Prize in economics essentially for behavioural ideas drawn from behavioural economics.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am 36 and it is fairly typical that as people get older and gain more experience of the world, that they find themselves refining their ideas of that world. It is very easy to come up with frameworks about what the world is when you have not actually road tested them. When you have tested them you come up with a more realistic view of the world. It is always a balance between ideals, of what the world should be, and the reality of how it is. The older I get, the more I realise that there are very few grand narratives, whether good or bad, or grand conspiracies which are credible. Whilst on a macro level the world can be understood to feature trends that exist, they are actually all agglomerations of individual actions. With grand ideologies, the more they are talked about the more I realise they are being talked about for some other reason, particularly in conflict. One effect of this is that you realise people are only human and most people can adopt many different positions and do not necessarily subscribe to an ideology forever. They can shift, because they are humans trying to do their best. It is the agglomeration of all these people trying to do their best which leads to a macro outcome. An interesting question comes out of this – how far macro change is about lots of individuals 'bumbling along'?

With regards to conspiracy theories, the truth is we are just much more incompetent than we would ever accept. It is shaped by cockup rather than conspiracy. In order for conspiracy theories or grand ideologies to be true, it would require an omnipotence and omniscience about the world. Even when we meet individuals who seem supremely capable, they will only have influence or be able to act over a very small area. Looking at British politics now, the situation we find ourselves in is not because of grand ideas. It is because of the individual decisions and actions of a number of people, all of which have a lack of complete knowledge, some pig-headedness and tribal hatred, leaving it hard to accurately describe what is going on.

What were your main objectives when working as a cultural advisor for the British army in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan? What difficulties did you encounter when you decided that this would form the basis of your PhD?

My objective as a cultural advisor was to make the British army, and by extension the British government, a lot less shit at what it was trying to do in Afghanistan. Because it was incredibly shit. I did that by providing them with detailed contextualised information about the social and political environment where we were conducting operations. This enabled them to work with the grain of that social and political environment rather than smashing through it with lethal force. As a result, less Afghans and coalition soldiers died.

We were never going to change the strategic narrative around what we were doing, even if that narrative was wrong (that there was a legitimate government we were supporting and against them an organisation called the Taliban which was illegitimate, good versus bad, black versus white). That narrative could not be changed as it was set in Washington or London and we were operating in Helmand. But what we could do was take that narrative and operate within it and nuance what we were doing to the extent that less people died. I had huge problems trying to get that idea embedded within the army, because the army is an organisation which needs an enemy to fight, but the strategic narrative as just described was not what was really happening in Helmand. It was a much more complicated multi tribal civil war and we were ourselves part of the problem. It was hard to convince the army to get around to that idea. As is often the case in big organisations, the individuals came round to it, but for the organisation as a whole the narrative could not change. Nonetheless, I believe we managed to mitigate and make small changes and improvements; people are alive who would otherwise have not been.

In terms of the PhD, I had set up the cultural advisor unit and as an incentive to keep me in the army, the army agreed to fund my PhD; I was otherwise going to leave the army to pursue it. This meant that I could train lots of units and work as a consultant advising British generals which was very positive. By 2011-2012 the ball was rolling, not just because of the cultural advisors but many others, and we starting to get that more nuanced understanding than in 2008 when I started out in Helmand. With full credit to the army, they created a space for me, as quite a difficult individual, to enable me to go and research my PhD. This would deliver to them what they needed (which was detailed contextualised information) and they found ways in the system to get me out there. I am grateful to the operational army for making that happen.

The operational army was very happy with my PhD once it was published and they had even pre-published part of it, entitled *A Brief History of Helmand*. This publication was issued to intelligence staff who were going out to Helmand. However, it was when I had left the fulltime army and gone back to the reserves, that the MOD or non-operational army in Whitehall, suddenly caught on to the fact that I was publishing my PhD as a book which they were opposed to. This overlooked that as a PhD it was already in the public domain and had been on the shelf of the library for 18 month by this point. By trying to block the publication of the full book,*An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*, they turned a boring academic book into literally front page news. It was incredibly incompetent of them.

In reference to British military operations in Helmand Province during the War in Afghanistan, you have argued that "the dynamic was one of manipulation", with various armed groups misleading the British into believing that they were close to the government and painting their longstanding opponents to be the Taliban. Why did the British and their coalition partners fail to conceptualise the nature of the conflict on the ground?

This relates back to my previous comments about how there are no grand or macro phenomena, but rather individuals and the effects of their actions. While historically there were British soldiers with experience of Helmand in 1880, we should remember that people in the MOD forget things from day to day, let alone century to century. In fact, the MOD in its current form was only formed in 1964 and has no connection with the army of British India in the 19th century. Of course, they could have realised that 'we' had been to Helmand before and gone to the British Library and pulled up the records of the British India Office, as I did. I got the microfiche of the journals of political officers who had been in Helmand in the 1800s. When I was pulling these microfiche up from the stacks in the British Library, I casually asked a librarian when these were last brought out. They said 1992. This incident took place in 2011, when we had been in Afghanistan for ten years and Helmand specifically for six years, and nobody had bothered to go to the library to read the diaries of British political officers who had been in Helmand in 1880. It is only five tube stops from Westminster to Kings Cross.

So how did they not realise the nature of the conflict in Helmand or understand the long history of warring factions? I think it is because people in organisations tend to view the world through the lenses of the organisation which they inhabit. The narrative at that time was 'government versus Taliban', which was a lazy description by the media. Unfortunately, the intelligence staff imbibed this as the actual narrative of what was going on. Of course, corroboration bias was also at play. This meant looking for evidence which supported your point of view and dismissing any evidence which challenged that view as an aberration. The corroborating evidence would then add further weight to your assumptions. They would also get corroboration and aberration mixed up. For example, if an individual Afghan was in the police force but also a drug dealer, then the fact he was a policeman had precedence and it was an 'aberration' that this same person was also dealing drugs on the side. In all likelihood, the individual's primary role was actually as a drugs smuggler, only being in the police in order to protect his own business. The information is the same but the difference is in how you analyse and process it. Because the analytical frames of reference were set the by the British government and the MOD, they lacked the analytical lenses to see what the conflict was really about. There were also so few British analysts who spoke Pashtu that those few who could were unable to sway the strategic narrative. In any case, the only reason we were in Afghanistan was not to 'sort out' the country, it was to remain as ally of first choice to the Americans. Just by being there, we were achieving what needed to be achieved – we did not need to be 'successful'.

The American narrative of the war was even more black and white than the British one. However, one should not fall into the trap of thinking that Americans had less 'historical experience' than the British. We did not have any experience of Afghanistan either. It is rampant within International Relations theory to say that "X country has Y experience and therefore Z". What is a country? If we break it down, is that a unit of analysis in and of itself? This assumption underpins a lot of International Relations and I do not believe that the assumption holds. We should also remember that an American analyst could just as easily have visited the British Library to view the records from Helmand as a British analyst – and as pointed out, neither had done so until 2011.

To what extent, if any, did any armed groups in Helmand Province similarly mislead the Taliban into believing that their opponents were close to or loyal to the government?

This certainly was taking place, but in order to manipulate, you need to find someone who is ignorant about what is going on. The outsiders (the British) were far more ignorant and were therefore manipulated to a far greater degree. But the Helmandese were also frequently manipulating each other. One example, documented in *An Intimate War*, occurred in a village called Shin Kalay. One clan had built a school on the land of another clan, which gave the former much prestige at the expense of the latter, as it attracted all the children not just from the village but from the surrounding area. Petty jealousies were at play and there was an ongoing feud between these clans. The jealous clan informed the Quetta Shura in Pakistan (a militant organisation composed of the leaders of the Afghan Taliban) that this was a school teaching girls to be prostitutes. The Quetta Shura sent a group of Punjabis across the border, who then stole Afghan government digging equipment and pulled the school down. This was soon spun as a 'Taliban pulled the school down' narrative, reinforcing the notion that the Taliban oppose education for girls. But when you dig deeper, you can see these events as part of an inter-clan feud. Both the Taliban and the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) were being manipulated.

In addition to this, it is not always clear who is being referred to by the term 'Taliban'. We can define the Taliban organisationally with its cohesive structure at the level of the Quetta Shura and their links with the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) in Pakistan for funding. But beyond that, it is based on personal relationships. An individual pulling a trigger in northern Helmand might have very little in the way of links with the Taliban and may rather be fighting in a local feud or over the drug trade; it can be quite tenuous to call such individuals 'Taliban' – but they were doing all the fighting!

2019 has witnessed negotiations between the US and the Taliban, including six days of talks held in Qatar. What do you expect to be the most likely outcome of any agreement reached between the two sides? Will either or both parties be able to portray the outcome as a victory?

This is not so much a peace agreement under discussion but rather a smoke screen for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. But in so far as peace negotiations have occurred, the conversations in Qatar have now been going on for some years. In a perfect world, the Afghan government, the Americans, Pakistan and the Quetta Shura would be able to sit down and reach an agreement to bring peace to Afghanistan, with, for example, the Taliban becoming a political party. However, the conflict is not driven top-down. The people actually doing the fighting are largely doing so due to tribal feuds, in defence of drugs crops or competing for land and water. These sorts of issues drive 90% of the conflicts. In theory, you could 'turn off' outside funding for those conflicts; inevitably, without funding, some of those conflicts would dry up. But the fact of the matter is that there are lots of other sponsors who want to put money into Afghanistan – Iran, Russia, China, India and the Gulf States to name some. Therefore, individuals who are currently being sponsored by Pakistan and the ISI to fight the Afghan government, who in turn are payed for by the Americans, could just as easily source funding from other actors. Outside parties have an interest in finding and supporting proxies on the ground, as each of these players have their own aims to fulfil in Afghanistan. What will not change, with any high level peace agreement, are the micro conflicts at the bottom that are continually sucking in outside ideologies and outside funding. I perceive these drivers of conflict as being under-addressed in the narratives about Afghanistan.

The only purpose of what is happening at the moment is to provide an opportunity for both the Taliban and the US to save face. I am often asked whether it would ever have been possible for Britain and the US to have won the war in Afghanistan. I always say no, because the war which they thought they were fighting was not the war they were fighting. You cannot win a war which does not exist.

Following your career in the military, you worked in risk management across several countries, assisting clients in their understanding of different political and cultural settings. How far were you able to apply your experiences in Afghanistan to this field? Have you identified any universal lessons which organisations/individuals can apply to enhance their cultural understanding of unfamiliar environments or are they more specific to particular regions?

The lessons are not very difficult. For example, if you are running an oil company entering a new region, speak to as many people in that area as possible and gain an understanding of what is going on. Then, work with those people, give them jobs and share the benefits of your success with them. These should be overall aims, but obviously implementation is difficult, because you need people who know what they are doing. I was largely working with private sector clients like oil companies and also multilateral organisations, such as the UN or Asia Development Bank. What I noticed with many private sector organisations with some exceptions, is that when I sat down to explain to them the details of a region, for example the nature of a frozen conflict and which people they needed to speak to, there was a reluctance to invest in solving problems which had not yet arisen but which from my experience were almost certainly going to occur at some point.

A company might view a particular risk as 80% likely to happen, whereas I might view it as 99% likely. The solutions I would advocate to mitigate those risks would require spending money. I found that most private sector organisations, because they were being driven by the quarterly cycle or the need to deliver returns to investors, were unwilling to spend money on things which they could not point to as clearly doing something for them. In a couple of instances, we came across organisations which had gone into a region mob-handed and got things wrong, who would then

come to us to help them out of the mess. Often by that point it was already too late. In convincing organisations upfront to spend money on mitigating risks it would actually save them huge amounts of money. If you shut down an already operational oil rig, it can cost a company millions of dollars every day, in infrastructure costs and lost revenue. The costs which you have to spend upfront are trivial compared to what must be spent when an ill-planned operation is shutdown. Nevertheless, this was always a difficult argument to make due to the profit incentive, apart from when dealing with more enlightened CEOs. What we were essentially trying to do was to commercialise the skills we had practiced when in the army.

Working with multilateral organisations, there is an industry within an industry – of conflict experts and specialists who work with the UN, the EU and other organisations. They seem to have an unstated assumption that you can understand conflicts almost by category, by asking the same questions each time (e.g. what are the drivers), and then they will apply social science or some kind of programmatic response to alleviate different features, such as radicalisation. The belief is that once you are an expert on conflict, you can apply that trade everywhere. These assumptions underpin the whole 'conflict industry' and I call it 'conflict by spreadsheet'. Understanding conflicts without understanding countries, regions and peoples doesn't work and this is why that industry does not ever solve any conflicts.

To understand a conflict, you need to be an expert in that particular conflict, region and people. You need to speak the relevant languages and have a deep immersion in that country. The reason why I had some success in Afghanistan was not because of conflict training, but because I was based in Helmand, spoke fluent Pashtu and knew the key personalities – so we could act in a more nuanced way. Inevitably, what happens if you are a conflict expert and you set up a counter radicalisation or social inclusion programme, is that those aid programmes will get taken advantage of by those people who are most able to rather than those who need them the most. Because many consultants will not understand the divisions in that society, they often inadvertently end up fuelling the conflict and promoting jealousies. You are not able to build bridges between conflicting parties if you do not understand who those parties are. If it is two local groups in Helmand arguing over water and neither are the Taliban, or two clans in Somalia arguing over khat smuggling and neither are Al-Shabaab, you cannot resolve those divides if it is neither the conflict nor the warring parties you think it is. You get very highly paid consultants jetting around to work on different projects and deliver services such as 'conflict sensitivity training', but it is just gibberish if it does not connect with what the grain of that specific conflict is about.

To be fair, I understand why the aid industry is set up to be 'apolitical' and I do not think you could set it up any other way. However, when you start to introduce that model into a conflict zone, with the stated aim of giving out aid or conflict advice as humanitarians, irrespective of political agenda, you can end up with a situation as has happened in South Sudan in which aid is fuelling the conflict and making it last longer. Humanitarians too often enter a conflict with an apolitical lens, but of course conflict is profoundly political – conflict *is* politics. To enter a conflict apolitically and simply give out resources is madness.

How far has the importance of ideology in conflict been overstated?

The importance of ideology is massively overplayed. The West over rationalises itself. Most westerners are literate, and the chattering classes read many newspapers and are plugged into the news, which lends itself into believing that there are grand narratives at play in conflict. But very few of these people who read or discuss conflict have actually been in one. There are of course people who are willing to die for ideas, but if you have been in conflict, you see how preposterous it is to believe that they form anything more than a very tiny minority. Most people will do anything to survive, saying or doing whatever is required or betraying others if they need to for their own family to survive. The West has not for many decades had societal insecurity which reduces down to the household level, unlike places such as Afghanistan or Somalia. When you live in that constant fear of your closest neighbours or even relatives, people do not trust each other anymore. In that sort of environment, the notion of dying for an idea is more than often completely ludicrous.

The other comment I would make about ideology is that it owes much to the concept of the rational actor. The rational actor model underpins much of social science and economics – that we are rational and conscious actors who make

decisions and choices based on our utility. But there is very strong evidence in psychological research to support the view that this is not how our brains work. Our brains make emotional subconscious decisions and then our conscious brain catches up and rearranges things the facts around that already made decision. It is not that we are rational thinkers with biases – the 'biases' are our actual thinking and our rationality is something we frame around that emotional thinking. It is not ideas which are driving people to fight. Ideas are the things which enable people to justify to other people why it is that they are fighting. The actual reasons why they are fighting are some kind of emotional subconscious driver, which I argue is the pursuit of status and belonging. This does not just apply to conflict but to any action. We are driven to do things subconsciously and then, post facto, we rationalise them. We are driven to conflict by the need for status and belonging and then our conscious brain socialises those drives to the rest of society by talking about the ideologies we use to hold our groups together. Because when we are fighting a war, it is our group versus another group, therefore the easiest way to justify why we are fighting is by using the narrative which holds our group together.

In *Why We Fight* you argue that men, particularly younger men, are sometimes drawn towards military combat because in evolutionary terms they have a desire to achieve 'status'. What implications will the increased use of artificial intelligence in warfare have on this evolutionary tendency?

Artificial intelligence is going to change the character of warfare. The essence of warfare, as defined by Clausewitz or International Relations concepts of balance of power, is driven by the notion that conflict is driven by two brains that have evolved mostly on the African savannah to outcompete each other. That is why conflict includes concepts such as ruse, advance, deceive and retreat. It does not matter whether it is an international coalition or a pub fight, the same dynamics are at play – in the end, it is two evolved brains fighting with one another. These are the same brains which have evolved to survive, reproduce and source food, which in turn give warfare a particular essence. War will change with AI (I am not referring to AI which trains itself on a large dataset but rather AI neural networks training themselves in competition with each other) as it comes into decision making more and more. Suddenly we will no longer have two evolved brains trying to outcompete each other, but instead two computer systems which have trained each other to fight. It may be the case that they do not use ruse, advance, deceive and retreat. We simply do not know what warfare will look like. I explored these ideas further at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference in 2018.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations or those interested in working in unfamiliar cultural settings?

Treat everyone like they are your favourite grandfather. Be exceptionally aware of how you are being viewed in any given environment – how others view you is the most important question, not how you view them. Rather than just trying to understand others, they must always be viewed as autonomous themselves and they will have their own shifting perceptions of you.