

An applied experience at its very best

By Chris Capper - MStrat 2014-2015

When describing the MStrat to a friend or colleague the words 'applied security strategy' invite either a confused or a knowing look. Strategy is both and being able to present complex ideas in a simple format, whilst accepting inherent uncertainty, is the key objective of the course. So, how should the MStrat be described? Backwards from the strategic to the applied, leaving the best part to the end.

In the pithy words of Mike Tyson 'everyone has a plan until they are punched in the mouth'. Strategic thinking, the subtle science of combining ways and means to achieve intended ends, is a way of countering that 'punch'. Practiced to a varying extent by us all daily, it offers a check against the decisions we make, creates a narrative that supports resilience and encourages flexibility. But to what extent is the concept of 'strategy' applicable if most of us are unaware of it?

Recently a RUSI podcast entitled 'Does Strategy Matter' considered this dilemma in relation to the actions of China, Russia and Daesh. In summary the experts argued that 'strategy is absolutely necessary and it is about understanding your adversary's as much as your own'. It does not provide a complete answer but anyone, in any organisation, can benefit from understanding and reflecting on the concept.

The course begins by introducing prominent strategic thinkers, from the works of Clausewitz to the musings of Colin Gray, and examining the potential difficulties in creating strategy.

Many publications, from the Ministry of Defence's 'Strategic Trends Programme: Future Character of Conflict' to the recent 2015 National Security Strategy, view the world as becoming increasingly insecure. When the actions of a few, as seen in the recent Paris attacks, can influence the decision-making of the most powerful there is a need for those who can draft suitable responses in a pressurised environment.

To develop these individuals the course offers an unparalleled opportunity to engage with those who guide the levers of national power and learn from their experiences. Jon Day, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, discussing what keeps him awake at night and Sir Nicholas Bayne, a highly distinguished former British Diplomat, offering advice on economic diplomacy were personal highlights in the year.

The word 'applied' is the icing on this course. The trip to the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, conversations held with prominent EU policy makers and the field-trip to Bosnia takes the well-established theory and develops practical strategic capability. Interview questions can be aptly answered with a range of examples from the week long simulation exercise, the crisis watch presentation to ministers in Whitehall and the other activities led by the academic director and his capable team.

I did not take the course to sit on the sidelines in an ever-changing world, I wanted to be an active participant, and the preparation this course offered did not disappoint. In fact it was an applied experience at its very best.