**The Past and Future of War**

By Eddie Lim and Henrik Paulsson

On 23 February 2016, the Military Studies Programme (MSP) of RSIS’ Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies hosted Professor Azar Gat from Tel Aviv University as part of the MSP Strategic Studies Lecture Series.

Professor Gat began his presentation by contextualising war through the ideas of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes argued that war existed before the notion of the nation-state was conceived and that Man is naturally violent; in contrast, Rousseau believed that the inherent nature of man is one of peace. This enduring dialectic has not been corroborated by findings in various fields of study, however. While archaeological findings show that weapons have existed since ancient times, it is still unclear how exactly they were utilised. Anthropology offers better answers to this issue as studies in this field show unmistakable patterns of violence in aborigines in Australia, tribesmen in the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, and bushmen in Namibia.

But why do humans fight? According to Professor Gat, there are three paths to survival throughout history: cooperation, competition, and violence. Cooperation – either through social and/or cultural imperatives – influences the human will to fight. Competition with others – leading to prestige, shame, and victimisation – is another key instigator of conflict. Within this milieu, the defence of kin, religion and ideology is featured as part of the competitiveness of the human spirit. Although violence is not a need, like food or sex, it has been one of Man’s key means of achieving his objectives. Professor Gat also noted that war has become less common over the ages. Interestingly, the 2nd Punic Wars, the Mongol invasions of Russia and China and even the 30 Years’ War in Germany rung a higher mortality toll compared to World War I and II.

Professor Gat then postulated that inter-democratic peace, coupled with more states adopting liberal democratic norms, is making it increasingly hard to justify war. In addition, he highlighted economic pragmatism as a factor limiting conflict; as a matter of fact, peace is much more appealing than war from an economic perspective. Professor Gat next highlighted how protectionism and embargos threatened to cut off Germany and Japan from the global trading system in the years leading up to World War II. This effectively eliminated the options of cooperation and peaceful competition for the two Axis Powers, making violence a viable recourse for them. Force, therefore, becomes more attractive when cooperation and peaceful competition are not possible. Professor Gat also argued that the rise of capitalist non-democratic states such as Russia and China is stressing the liberal democratic system, as are violent non-state actors like the Islamic State. In closing, he contended that the future of war is driven by long-standing human behaviours, which are in turn shaped by complex factors. The state of men ironically, has not changed with process, democratic or otherwise.