

Special Address

Warfare in the 21st Century

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Introduction

This paper addresses three broad, interrelated topics. First, it explores the relationship between theory and history, and the implications of that relationship for the military profession in general, and for efforts to forecast future wars in particular. Second, it outlines elements of continuity and change in the character and conduct of war. Third, it discusses the particular challenge posed by the re-emergence of great power competition as a major feature of the international security environment.

Theory, History, and the Military Profession

Let me begin at the broadest level, by examining the relationship between theory and history and its implications for the military profession, to include the study of military history.

The military profession is a highly theoretical one. Indeed, it must be. Wars are both occasional and unique. As a result, a soldier's knowledge must be more theoretical than practical.

The military profession is thus a peculiar one. Imagine a surgeon who studies his profession diligently by reading the most up-to-date medical journals, observing others in the operating room, and practicing using training aids, but only conducts a surgical procedure a couple of times during his career, if at all. Imagine also that that surgeon learned from professors and interned under surgeons who had themselves studied and performed only a few surgical procedures. And imagine that each surgical procedure is different, on a different patient and under unique circumstances. That, metaphorically, is the military profession.

There are four reasons why it is challenging to forecast the character of future wars from the vantage point of peacetime: two have to do with the nature of interwar periods and two have to do with the nature of war itself.

First, interwar periods witness geopolitical change as states rise and fall in their power and competence. Second, interwar periods frequently also witness military-technical change as states develop new ways of war, frequently in response to existing or forecast strategic and operational challenges that defy a conventional solution. Outside the context of war, it is extremely difficult to forecast accurately the impact of such change on future wars.

Similarly, the nature of war itself makes it difficult to predict the shape of future conflicts. First, the very fact that war is the violent extension of politics can make wars difficult to forecast. Without an understanding of why actors would go to war and what they would hope to achieve by war, it is difficult to comprehend the character of a future conflict. Second, the interactive nature of war makes wars makes their course difficult to forecast, let alone predict.

Soldiers and scholars frequently refer to the "fog of war" to describe the uncertainty that surrounds the battlefield. However, as Sir Michael Howard noted four decades ago, there is also a "fog of peace" that obscures the character of future wars. As he wrote:

A soldier...in peacetime is like a sailor navigating by dead reckoning. You have left the terra firma of the last war and are extrapolating from the experiences of that war. The greater the distance from the last war, the greater become the chances of error in this extrapolation. Occasionally there is a break in the clouds: a small-scale conflict occurs somewhere and gives you a “fix” by showing whether certain weapons and techniques are effective or not; but it is a doubtful fix...For the most part you have to sail on in a fog of peace until the last moment. Then, probably when it is too late, the clouds lift and there is land immediately ahead; breakers, probably, and rocks. Then you find out rather late in the day whether your calculations have been right or not.¹

Howard nicely contrasts peace, which offers time to think and reflect but also great uncertainty, with the approach of war, which offers certainty but little time to adapt.

Indeed, the fundamental question that peacetime militaries must try to answer is, “What would be the character of a new war”? Subsumed under that overall question are five subsidiary ones:

- Who will be the adversary?
- Where will it occur?
- When will it occur?
- Why will it occur?
- How will it unfold?

The last two questions are the most intractable, as they can only be comprehended with the context of a particular conflict.

Continuity and Change

What, then, can the study of history tell us about the shape of war in the 21st century? How can the past illuminate, however imperfectly, the terrain ahead of us?

It is worth beginning with what has not changed across the history of warfare, and therefore what is unlikely to change in the future.

The first element of continuity is the nature of war. War is, and remains, “an act of force to compel our adversary to do our will” as he tries to do the same to us.² We tend to append adjectives to war, such as “irregular warfare” and “hybrid warfare”. However, at a fundamental level, war is war. Different forms of warfare have more in common with one another than war does with other related violent activities, such as criminality or piracy.

The second element of continuity is the motives that lead to war. As the Greek historian Thucydides noted more than two millennia ago, wars are brought on by “fear, honor, and interest.” This should not be surprising, given that war is a definitively human endeavor and human nature has not changed over the course of the past several millennia. Most contemporary

¹ Michael Howard, “Military Science in an Age of Peace,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies* 119, no. 1 (March 1974), 4.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

observers would feel comfortable with the notion that states go to war in pursuit of their interests. Similarly, the notion that fear, such as the fear of a dominant power for a rising challenger, can lead to war. The notion of honor, by contrast, appears out-of-date. Nonetheless, we underestimate the force of honor as a motivation at our peril.

Where there are elements of continuity, there has undoubtedly been change as well. Whereas the nature of war has remained fixed, the character of war has changed, in some ways considerably. For example, war in the air has undergone a transformation in recent decades. As recently as the Vietnam War, air warfare was a very bloody business. In recent conflicts, by contrast, air warfare has become almost risk free, at least to those in the air, even as bombing has become increasingly lethal to those on the ground. The information revolution is leading to a change in the character of war as precision is becoming ubiquitous. In addition, war is spreading to space and cyberspace.

The Re-Emergence of Great-Power Competition

History and theory can shed light on the most consequential development in the security environment: the re-emergence of great-power competition.

In recent years it has become apparent that we are living in a world characterized by peacetime competition between the United States, China, and Russia. To be clear, competition is not the same thing as conflict. Nor does competition necessarily lead to conflict. It must be admitted, however, that in addition to the reality of great-power competition, we also face an increasing possibility of great-power war. The possibility is remote, but not inconceivable, and the possibility of such a conflict is growing.

This is significant for three reasons. First, and most obviously, the consequences of great-power war could be enormous. It could be one of the most consequential events of the 21st century, with implications for world order. Second, great power competition and conflict are largely outside the professional experience of senior civilian policy makers and military leaders. Whereas historians are perfectly comfortable thinking in terms of large numbers of years or small numbers of decades, for a military, the more than a quarter-century that has passed since the end of the Cold War is a professional lifetime. Third, the armed forces that the United States and its allies possess today were developed for very different circumstances than we face today and will face in the future.

How did we get here?

The novelty of the current situation can only be fully appreciated if we look back over the past quarter century. The United States experienced a period of geopolitical dominance after the end of the Cold War rare in world history. That dominance was reinforced by the fact that the United States possessed unilateral military advantages, particularly in precision-strike and information capabilities.

This dominance was put on display during the 1991 Gulf War, during which the United States was able to assemble a large and capable multinational coalition and use its military advantages to great effect to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait.

The quarter century that followed can be divided into two parts: the 1990s, a decade marked by U.S. “hyperpower”, and the decade and a half following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, during which the United States was continuously engaged in irregular warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond.

Over time, U.S. advantages have eroded at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels as economic and military power has diffused. As a result, we now face a more level playing field, at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

Where are we going?

First today, for the first time in decades, we face the need to think seriously about great-power war. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that the requirements of great-power war should be the most important test of the adequacy of our force structure and posture.

A future great power war would literally be without precedent. It would feature adversaries armed with nuclear weapons, precision strike systems, cyber, and space capabilities. Such a war would likely look much different than recent wars. Among its likely features would be:

- High attrition, and consequently the need for social and industrial mobilization to support the war.
- Non-kinetic and potentially kinetic attacks on homelands.
- Disruption of the global economic system.

Of course, great power war is just a possibility, albeit one that is marginally more likely today than in the past. The reality that we face today is sustained great-power competition. I would argue that we are not well prepared for the situation we find ourselves in.

First, there is a need to become re-acquainted with old concepts, such as deterrence, risk, and political warfare. Second, there is the a need to adapt traditional concepts to 21st century conditions, which are characterized by interdependence, globalization, social media, and the advent of new technologies, such as unmanned and autonomous systems and artificial intelligence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to study the history of great-power competition and conflict. We need to assess thoughtfully the similarities to and differences with the past. And last, but certainly not least, we need to rebuild (and in some cases just build) intellectual capital and capabilities to deal with the era that we are in, and are likely to be in for the foreseeable future.