

Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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DANIEL HARPER, JUN 14 2013

“Since 1990, US conventional military power has made it unchallengeable.” Discuss.

In this essay, I will explore US conventional military power, showing that America – despite conventional supremacy over its enemies – is challengeable. ‘New wars’ and asymmetric conflicts prevent it from playing to its strengths, but America continues to fight wars in the same way as in the past, due in part to misinterpreted military lessons from the Gulf War and the initial stages of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I will begin by discussing America’s conventional power, before outlining the vulnerabilities that asymmetric fighters can exploit, and the weaknesses in America’s military mindset, concluding that conventional supremacy does not prevent the US from being challengeable.

Today, it is virtually undisputed that US conventional military power far eclipses that of its rivals. Post-Cold War, there is no actor comparable in terms of military resources[1] – recent wars have shown that ‘the US cannot be challenged on an open battlefield’.[2] ‘Conventional military power’ concerns types of force used in traditional, interstate wars. This includes land, air and sea power[3] – but excludes weapons of mass destruction. Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons, whilst contributing to the *power* of an actor, are separate from *conventional* power.[4] The initial stages of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq showed the superiority of this American conventional military power, when challenged on a like-for-like basis against another state. Other authors go further, claiming for example that America in fact has the largest ‘absolute and relative conventional power’ in all of history.[5]

This supremacy is based heavily on the ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’, which emerged in 1989.[6] The RMA harnessed new technology, such as GPS[7], UAVs[8] and Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs)[9], which revolutionised the way in which air power could be used. This led to a dramatic shift in use and investment from ground troops to air power, which was seen as a way to achieve excellent results at low costs to human life. The most important part, however, is the information systems that link this new technology together, creating the new paradigm of ‘network centric warfare’[10]. Within this type of warfare, information is key – central command systems can gather intelligence, process it, and respond with a precision strike[11] – often hundreds or even thousands of miles from the target.

RMA technology effectively acts as a Clausewitzian ‘force multiplier’ for the United States, providing several advantages. Perhaps the most important is the dramatically reduced level of casualties – stand-off strikes replace close ground battles,[12] and aircraft equipped with PGMs have such high accuracy that they ‘can accomplish much more with fewer missions and thus greatly reduced risk’.[13] This precision is especially important, as it facilitates the target discrimination necessary for legitimate wars – reducing moral constraints on the use of force,[14] which allows the military to operate more effectively. All of this is facilitated by increasingly accurate and detailed intelligence, from sources such as UAVs and satellite imagery – giving advantages in terms of ‘situational awareness’[15]. This combination of accurate long-range weapons and intelligence means that enemies can be attacked from the air, inflicting great damage whilst sustaining minimal casualties.

The 1991 Gulf War was seen as the first test for this new paradigm of warfare, and by many accounts, it was an unprecedented success. The US suffered far fewer casualties than predicted[16] and air strikes were used to great effect, disrupting Iraqi supply lines and wiping out infrastructure.[17] All of this was underlined by impressive

Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

accuracy of so-called 'smart bombs' – 80% landed within 10 feet of their target.[18]

So America, then, is unchallengeable? The evidence above – despite outlining the strengths of the RMA that have contributed to US military supremacy – is but part of the bigger picture and there are important caveats to America's strength.

Conventional military power is designed for, and thus most useful in, conventional war. The nature and configuration of America's military suggest that it has been designed with the purpose of fighting conventional, 'old wars'. 'Old wars' take place solely between nation states[19] and their professional armies[20] according to defined rules of warfare.[21] In wars like these, the US assuredly has the upper hand, as victory is based on power[22] – the winner is whoever could inflict the most 'precise and powerful damage'[23] using conventional force.

However, post-Cold War[24], the emergence of 'New War' has undermined the position of conventional force as the key to victory. The rising importance of non-state actors[25] has meant that the intrastate wars have become more frequent than their interstate counterparts.[26] These wars are more complicated, and present a greater military challenge for states, as there is no clear military centre of gravity to attack.[27] They tend to have longer durations,[28] more complex goals[29] and involve urban conflict[30] – all of which present strategic challenges.

American experience in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars illustrates the difficulties that even a formidable power faces when confronted with unconventional conflict. Both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom began as interstate wars, against the Taliban and Ba'ath governments respectively. In the initial stages of both conflicts, coalition forces had little difficulty, using their superior military force to devastating effect[31]. However, once the initial battles had been won, both campaigns morphed into intrastate wars and insurgency,[32] which have been more difficult to combat.

Insurgency is one style of fighting that is typical of these 'new wars'. Along with terrorism and guerrilla warfare, it falls under the heading of 'asymmetric warfare' – currently one of the foremost challenges to America. Asymmetric warfare is a label for a variety of tactics that weaker actors (both state and sub-state) can employ against militarily stronger enemies. It can be described as 'fighting an opponent by using forces, tactics or strategies that are dissimilar to his'.[33] The core strategy concerns maximising your own advantages, whilst simultaneously exploiting the vulnerabilities of your enemy, thus preventing them from using their strengths to their full potential.[34]

Asymmetric warfare is therefore of particular concern to America – its great advantages in conventional power can be rendered useless, as these new wars prevent America from fighting in the style that suits it. The nature of asymmetric warfare means that no actor can ever be unchallengeable, because it targets their weaknesses[35], no matter how few or how obscure these may be. There are several strategies that asymmetric opponents can use.

For the United States, and in fact any (democratic) state, a key weakness is public opinion. Public support is crucial for a democratic state to wage war, and by attacking the motivation behind the war effort, instead of attacking their military directly,[36] it is possible to bring down an enemy much more powerful than yourself. The asymmetric warrior relies on a triad of 'protraction', 'attrition' and 'camouflage' to achieve this.[37] The aim is to raise enemy casualties to such a level that the war is seen as unwinnable by their public. With a lack of popular support[38] it is difficult for a democratic government to pursue a war. By avoiding major confrontations[39], which are unwinnable against such a conventionally strong opponent, the war can be lengthened, increasing the number of enemy casualties and chipping away at the support underpinning their war effort. Western states are particularly sensitive to long wars with many casualties, now that their wars are often 'wars of choice', which provide no direct existential threat.[40] Asymmetric warriors are usually fighting a total war, due to the existential nature of their struggle. They are thus willing to absorb much more pain, casualties and costs than their Western, nation-state opponents, who are fighting a limited war, where the goals of the conflict are often peripheral to their national interest.

An asymmetric actor is also able to exploit the moral and legal constraints[41] on the use of force by states. The West is compelled to abide by the legal norms of war that it created – even when its enemies are not.[42] Just War theory necessitates discrimination between civilian and military targets[43] and US military power can thus be rendered

Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

unusable. Asymmetric actors can render targets invulnerable, not through costly defence technology, but by making a strike morally unjustifiable. One such example was Serbia's placement of civilians next to targets that were at risk of attack.[44] Tactics such as these can render missiles and bombs unusable, regardless of their accuracy, due to the civilian loss of life involved.

In addition to limiting the opponent's *use* of their military force, asymmetric actors can also limit the *effectiveness* of this force. New wars, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, involve urban combat, which presents serious challenges for conventional forces. Combat in cities favours defence, as there is ample cover and the possibility to spring ambushes. By exploiting local knowledge, hiding amongst civilians and inside buildings, and using roadblocks to channel the enemy, asymmetric fighters can inflict heavy casualties.[45] America suffered casualty rates of up to 40% in recent urban conflicts,[46] as camouflage has meant that insurgents can inflict high damage by using relatively weak weapons such as RPGs at close range.[47] Despite US military supremacy, asymmetric fighters can construct conflict situations that prevent effective use of conventional force, and create weaknesses that can be exploited.

In addition to using urban warfare to limit the effectiveness of a US response, asymmetric fighters can undermine the foundation of America's conventional military supremacy – the RMA. Any combatant force has weaknesses, in spite of the magnitude of strengths it also has. It is possible for enemies of the United States to exploit their reliance on this new high-tech form of warfare, in a variety of ways. Despite the increased power, organisation and situational awareness that the RMA brought, it also created new vulnerabilities.[48] It has been strongly argued by a number of authors[49] that the coalition success in the Gulf War was less to do with their RMA-based strengths, but rather a result of Iraqi failure to take advantages of these new weaknesses.

For example, the increased US reliance on intelligence and information can be exploited in two ways. Firstly, through the obvious means of destroying the equipment that is used to gather intelligence – UAVs can be shot down[50], GPS signals jammed[51] and satellites attacked.[52] Attacks on information-based infrastructure, both on US soil[53] and in the field of combat with devices such as EMPs[54] can dramatically limit the effectiveness of a military that relies on instantaneous communications and intelligence. Secondly, deception can be used to implant false intelligence and undermine trust in the information that the US military relies on. Satellite imagery for example, can be successfully manipulated, a tactic that was used to great effect in Kosovo. Milošević's forces created dummy artillery installations, false bridges, and wooden MiGs[55] – even going so far as to give them false heat signatures or place jugs of burning oil on top of functioning tanks to make them seem as though they had been destroyed.[56] By exploiting the US' reliance on air-based intelligence, mistaken conclusions can be planted in the minds of their strategists – who may underestimate the power of the forces they are up against, believing them to be destroyed. These two tactics also have knock-on effects on the utility of the military's strike force – PGMs and airstrikes can only be as accurate as the intelligence that guides them.[57]

The post-RMA US' reliance on air power can also be undermined by the asymmetric warrior. Anti-aircraft missiles such as MANPADS[58] are a relatively cheap and effective way to counter air dominance, as used by Iraqi insurgents.[59] Even if no aircraft are actually hit, the threat can be enough of a deterrent for a United States with an increasingly casualty-sensitive public. In Kosovo, for example, the persistent use of anti-aircraft missiles meant that coalition aircraft had to fly at higher altitudes, which limited their ability to hit targets accurately.[60] Shooting down just one US aeroplane can have important consequences, due to the high cost of such equipment – a B-2 bomber, for example, costs \$1.3 billion[61] – as well as the fear and confidence crises that it can inspire.[62] This is particularly effective, as the RMA is based on the premise that technology can limit casualties in a war – and unravelling this assumption can weaken morale and public support.

The challenges to the US military that I have outlined do not even include other asymmetric threats such as terrorism and the use of CBRN weapons – which will not be discussed in detail due to constraints of space. Taking asymmetric warfare to its logical conclusion, the ultimate response of a US enemy could be to use WMD.[63] Here, two concepts mentioned above – the lack of restraints on the use of force by asymmetric actors, and the US casualty-sensitivity – can be combined to devastating effect. Whilst nuclear strikes seem unlikely,[64] it is possible that weak states or non-state actors could target the American public with chemical, biological or radiological weapons. Against these types

Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

of attack, which circumvent the traditional battlefield, America's conventional weapons have little utility.

Asymmetric fighters can therefore undermine both the *use* and the *effectiveness* of America's conventional military power. By attacking the public support underlying the war effort or exploiting ethical constraints on the use of force, it is possible to stop force being used. In addition, by forcing battles into urban settings or by undermining RMA equipment, the effectiveness of America's military can be reduced. These two strategies together can make it possible to bring down an adversary far mightier than oneself.

The failure of the US military thus lies in its mindset, planning and organisation. In a symmetric conflict, where both sides are fighting the same type of war and are bound by the same moral constraints, a US defeat would be highly surprising. But are such conflicts likely in the future? Democratic peace theory[65], commercial liberalism[66] and liberal institutionalism[67] all provide compelling arguments for the absence of major war between states in the future. It is almost impossible to imagine an interstate conflict on the scale of World War 2 – indeed, there have only been four interstate wars since 1945, and America has been directly involved in none of these.[68] Today, intrastate wars are the foremost threat, but the United States still appears configured to fight traditional wars. The recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan show its failure in this department, especially with regard to American public opinion, which urges for withdrawal of troops.[69]

US military capabilities, whilst strong, are not designed to combat the primary threats facing America today. The forces were not designed for these 'expeditionary' missions, and are therefore being used in unsuitable ways – fighter aircraft, for example, providing close ground support, heavy armoured vehicles in urban and mountainous areas, and warships in littoral regions.[70]

Post-RMA, the distribution of resources is skewed massively towards air power, rather than ground troops[71] – which is unsuitable for urban insurgency. These ground troops are necessary to occupy and hold areas[72] – the United States has entered into wars in the belief that they can be won through air power alone,[73] which is not the case. A lack of ground troops creates a military that is able to conquer territory, but not subsequently control it. This creates conditions conducive to insurgency, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, which gives weak fighters the ability to defeat powerful militaries, as discussed above. The utility of air power can also never be guaranteed – indeed, it has been argued that the oft-cited success of RMA warfare in the Gulf War was contingent on luck and favourable conditions. The flat desert, lack of civilians and Iraq's 'vulnerable supply routes',[74] coupled with excellent weather conditions[75] allowed the coalition to play to its strengths. Other conflicts show the opposite – the problems of reliance on air power and intelligence. Atmospheric conditions can inhibit the use of air power and UAVs, as in the 1999 Kosovo conflict.[76] Intelligence can never be 100% accurate, as evidenced by the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade,[77] and by friendly fire incidents in Afghanistan.[78]

In addition to these weaknesses in military capabilities, there are further, strategic failures. America does not have the mindset suited to asymmetric combat, having a tendency to separate military and political operations,[79] which is disastrous when fighting 'new wars'. It views these wars in purely military terms, expecting military dominance to produce surrender,[80] not realising that to fight insurgency requires political as well as military commitments. Indeed, overuse of military force can be counterproductive, creating more enemies amongst the population that the US seeks to win over.[81]

The enemies of new wars – insurgents, terrorists, and 'brands' such as Al-Qaeda – cannot be fought by military means alone. It also is necessary to tackle the problem politically, to achieve the same goal that asymmetric warriors have – undermining the opponent's public support and will for the fight.[82] By addressing 'the causes of discontent upon which extremism feeds'[83] – poverty, lack of political participation and perceived Western neo-colonialism – it is possible to displace insurgents as the providers of 'safety, stability and security',[84] winning the war. In these types of conflicts, the goals are political, and thus cannot be achieved solely through military means. When the aim of the conflict is regime change, fighting terrorism, or nation building, it is necessary to win the 'hearts and minds'[85] of the local population – which cannot be done through force alone. These goals are not as simplistic as those in old wars were – for example control of territory – and thus require socio-political solutions.

Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

The United States is the dominant world force in terms of conventional military power, outweighing other states and non-state actors. The Revolution in Military Affairs, whilst not eliminating friction or vulnerability, has allowed it to be better organised, more aware and able to respond quickly and precisely to threats, with minimal casualties. This, however, does not make it unchallengeable.

In a conventional war, the US would be far more powerful than its rivals, but such wars are now unlikely. Intrastate war creates new threats that confront America, but America still attempts to fight traditional wars. Success in the initial, interstate stages of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has been followed by drawn-out counterinsurgency campaigns, with which a casualty-sensitive public is losing patience. These campaigns and wars such as that in Kosovo show the effectiveness of asymmetric tactics. Public support for wars, moral constraints, urban warfare, and attacks on RMA-based intelligence structures and air power all present problems for the US and potential lines of attack for asymmetric opponents.

America remains vulnerable both in its overseas campaigns, as well as at home in the face of terrorist and CBRN attacks. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by its military mindset and organisation. America needs to recognise that it cannot continue to base its power around conventional conflicts, and address its failures. RMA warfare and air power have weaknesses, and cannot replace ground troops, which are required to combat insurgency. America needs to realign its forces to suit the arena in which today's battles are fought. There are also strategic failures, because America separates political and military measures when facing conflicts. America needs to rethink the way that it engages asymmetric opponents, recognizing that asymmetry is a two-way process and its enemies also have vulnerabilities to exploit. By incorporating political measures, such as engaging with the local populations and attempting to erode support for insurgency, the US may be able to succeed in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It can therefore be seen that America and its forces remain vulnerable. Due to the changing character of war, conventional military superiority is no longer the deciding force in conflict. If US supremacy is to persist, it must address these vulnerabilities, or else expect a future in which conflicts will become increasingly drawn-out, costly and damaging – and ultimately, potentially unwinnable, in spite of its conventional military power.

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Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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Has US Military Power Made it Unchallengeable?

Written by Daniel Harper

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