

War by Network – the Modern Revolution in Military Affairs

Written by Harry Booty

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HARRY BOOTY, MAY 30 2011

Warfare today is changing. We are at a point in military theory and doctrine where the established ideas are not working, and new ones must be found. The course of conflict in the 21st century, and the problems we in the West may continue to face in the coming decades are mutating, developing and adapting in ways that make their defeat – whilst not necessarily more difficult – an entirely different prospect to face. American (and therefore Western) military power is unrivalled, sustained in a unilateral hegemony of dominance the likes of which the world has never seen before. This is fact, and yet it is less than the truth. We have all witnessed the failings in Iraq and Afghanistan, where our commitments in blood and treasure have so weakened us as a geo-political entity (to the cost of a trillion dollars so far) and caused massive damage to so many groups across the globe. It inevitably leads to the question: why? Why can't the West defeat a loose group of rag-tag Jihadists? Why is the most powerful military force in the world facing stalemate – even the possibility of defeat – to its 'inferior' enemies? And what can be done to change this situation, or at least prevent it hamstringing the West's operations in the century to come? The answers are difficult, often violating many accepted practices of war – both in the theoretical Clausewitzian sense, and in the cultural perceptions that so many hold of it. What will be attempted here is to offer a perspective on the issue of military force as it undergoes the 21st century's first Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and, as the West faces up to the limits of its own power, assess the possible impact this may have.

Firstly however we should tackle a few oft-used definitions that form the prerequisite base of much of the issues discussed. An RMA in military theory is basically a rapid and significant change in the standard practices and operational theory of one or more militaries. An example of this would be the reforms of the French Revolution – thus allowing the exponential growth of vast militaries, and putting war on its properly political footing – or the invention of nuclear weapons – thus eliminating much large scale conventional war-making due to their destructive power. In this light network centric warfare, as it is termed by the Pentagon, could be viewed as an RMA, as due to the nature of war at the moment (discussed below) it is clear to see how different military confrontations are today from their predecessors in the past.

But what is network-centric warfare (NCW)? A relatively new doctrine, NCW is by and large a reaction to the delineated and geographically dispersed threat that the West faces in the world today. These groups – such as Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Lashkar e Taiba and the Taliban in its various forms all practice a form of NCW, with relatively small amounts of combatants, engaging in small scale and for the most part tactically uncoordinated attacks against Western interests, forces and proxies over large swathes of the Middle East and beyond. If we look at their past activities this adds to what we mean. For example, Al Qaeda's war against the West has led to attacks in the 'front-lines' of Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to East Africa, Yemen, Madrid, London and of course, New York and Washington. In such a war the concept of a theatre of operations is largely obsolete, as it implies a localised form of fighting that is simply not present in the conflict against militant ideology.

Why the change to NCW? America is, as is mentioned above, the greatest military power the world has ever seen, with weapons systems and technologies that even its closest rivals can only dream of. Numbered amongst its allies are some of the highest spending militaries in the world – such as the UK and France. To simply base victory upon the vastness of kinetic power available to the US and the West however denotes a fundamental misunderstanding of

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the available usages of military.

As the prominent retired British General Rupert Smith said in his book *the Utility of Force*, military force has four abilities – ‘to ameliorate, contain, deter and destroy’. Such functions were fine when the enemy had a coherent professional force that one of these options could be used against; today however, it is not enough to ensure victory. The nature of Islamist fundamentalism, with the veneration of martyrdom as a desirable act – as well as the pervasiveness of the ideology due to its dissemination through the media – means that deterrence is difficult, amelioration and containment more so and destruction often counter-productive, due to the ‘inspirational’ effect such deaths may have in a new generation of would-be martyrs.

Also, the aforementioned globalisation in media – and the concurrent evolution of communications – means that cells and groups can coordinate and communicate much quicker than ever before – creating more problems for those trying to combat it. Iraq is a good case in point. Ostensibly begun to combat Al Qaeda’s influence in the area (amongst, of course, a wide range of other arguments), the US military and its allies were fundamentally misaligned in their perception that combating Al Qaeda in its perceived stronghold of Iraq would lead to a direct reduction in the proliferation of terrorist violence against Western targets. This violation of Arab sovereignty predictably infuriated fundamentalist opinion, and directly resulted in the atrocities of Madrid (11th March 2004, 191 dead) and London (7th July 2005, 56 dead) which were seen as acts against the Spanish and British governments respectively for the actions in Iraq. Crucially however, neither of the attacks were committed by Arabic Al Qaeda operatives, sent on a mission to conduct these attacks, but localised individuals (the London bombers were British citizens), inspired by Al Qaeda’s message to carry out mass murder through their own initiative. Such is the nature of network warfare, and the requirement on doctrine centred on these principles.

This may all seem to imply that the West is on the back foot, but there has been positive change in US and Western thinking. Terrorism is generally accepted as combatable in three ways – to directly prevent individuals from carrying out attacks using civil means (law enforcement), using military force to eliminate their bases and solving the social and political issues. NCW draws on all three of these. For instance, the first action can be seen in improved airport security and more law enforcement against terrorism at home. The second can be seen in ISAF’s continuing engagement in Afghanistan, drone strikes in Yemen against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Navy Seal strike on Osama Bin Laden. The third can be seen in the economic support given to Afghanistan, with the emphasis upon building some form of viable and progressive state, as well as other support and humanitarian initiatives in other countries such as Pakistan, Iraq and Somalia.

Doctrinal basis for this can be found in the developing stance of the Pentagon on the issue, with its establishment of four tenets of NCW:

- Tenet 1: A robustly networked force improves information sharing.
- Tenet 2: Information sharing and collaboration enhance the quality of information and shared situational awareness.
- Tenet 3: Shared situational awareness enables self-synchronization.
- Tenet 4: These, in turn, dramatically increase mission effectiveness.

This is concerned primarily with battlefield awareness, but has been increasingly practically applied to various agencies and situations, such as the sharing of large amounts of information between intelligence agencies. This shows therefore how counter-terrorism has evolved since 9/11, and is a positive step forward for the theory and practice of it.

So what is the future for NCW, and subsequently, military force? It is in many ways difficult to say. Western military might rests in their conventional power. It is not feasible however to suggest the dismantlement of this. Conventional threats still remain, and although the shadow of the nuclear deterrent resides over much of the globe’s principal state actors, there is still a need for conventional forces for limited conventional capabilities. This is accepted as truth, but does not necessarily imply that this is where we must remain. Many of the follies and farces of Iraq were more down to the inadequate application of military force rather than the contentious reasons the Coalition were there. An

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overreliance on firepower, technology and statistical success – i.e. numbers captured or killed – crucially missed the pivotal human element, and fatally alienated the Iraqi people.

Counter-insurgency, it can be justifiably argued, should become the principal function of the Western-oriented militaries, as this is where they shall continue to be used for the foreseeable future. An emphasis on small scale operations, where combat is the least desirable outcome and protecting the population is the priority is key, must be the future of progress for the armies of the West. Tied into this must be a reassessment of their strategic use. The presence of major land forces often offends any host – for example if 50,000 or more US troops were stationed in a town near London, it is unlikely this would be popular with the British people; it is not an issue of fanaticism. However, when we do add into this the fierce territorialism and religious beliefs held by many in the Middle East, it is difficult to see any major advantage to the retention of US troops in the Arab region.

Furthermore, the strike on Osama bin Laden by a select group of Navy Seals is more in keeping with NCW. The surgical application of targeted military force is the way forward for many operations against the numerically insignificant opponents that the West faces. To fight a network does not require significant weapons systems – a single bullet is enough. This of course raises a whole host of new questions, and it is reiterated that this does not intend to eradicate the usage of military power in national defence; it does however seek to streamline and restrict it. It is not necessary in large scale for the threats that we face, and quickly can cause more harm than good. Therefore, it is suggested that operations in Afghanistan are wound down to as acceptable a conclusion as possible and then subsequently military force must be husbanded as strictly as possible – there is almost always another option. A sledgehammer is unnecessary in this war. This war requires a surgeon's knife, and this is how counter-insurgents and counter-terrorists must evolve, if they wish to sustain a positive cost/benefit analysis for their usage of force.

There are many conclusions to make from this issue. Today we in the West must continue to reassess our strategic thinking. Overwhelming conventional power is the privilege of the US and its allies and yet it is nowhere near enough to resolve the current challenges we face. The doctrines have begun to change and have to continue to do so if we wish to successfully combat the threat we face. It is all very well to stand against change, but it is unforgivable to prevent evolution where it must be encouraged. Established wisdom declares that you must fight the enemy you have and not the one you want. This enemy, principal in the assessment of threat by many Western governments, comes from a loose, low-tech and highly motivated group of amateurs. There is no professional force to be deterred or destroyed – there is only the *network* of enemies. This is the foe that the West faces, regardless of whom it may wish to compete against. Currently the West is playing rugby whilst the enemy are playing football. Change is coming to the armed forces of the US and its allies, and if this change continues then success is by no means far away. This issue will continue, and the future will show the results of the theoretically hypothetical scenarios discussed here. Much rests on these issues, and it is crucial that they are given the proper attention that they deserve.

Harry Booty is currently studying a BA War Studies degree at King's College London. His areas of interest include security studies, regional post-conflict development and the development of warfare in the modern world, among others. He joined e-IR in March 2011 as War and Conflict Editor.

About the author:

Harry Booty is currently a Commissioning Editor for e-IR. He is currently studying a BA War Studies degree at King's College London.