

The Changing Forms of Military Conflict

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The future development of the military art will be more the result of the changed structure of international politics than of advances in military technology. Strong states are no longer compelled to fight by great-power competition or colonial acquisition, but must constantly address situations in which only they can calm instability, contain disorder, pacify belligerents and right wrongs. As a result, the conduct of future warfare will not so much be shaped by the most substantial military powers, as conditioned by the possibility of their intervention. Traditionally, the prevailing models of warfare have been set – in anticipation if not in reality – by decisive encounters between the armed forces of the world's most important states. This focus is the result of the potentially historic importance of such encounters, affecting the lives of millions of people and the shape of the international power structure, and also their tendency to reveal the state of the military art in its most advanced form. Inter-communal violence in an urban setting, or secessionist campaigns waged by rural guerrillas against unpopular governments, rarely hold the same interest for students of military affairs. Even with conventional engagements, the major players are expected to set the standards to which the smaller will aspire.

The big players have not ruled out fighting each other again, but at the moment it is hard to see why they should. Those among the smaller players, even the smallest, who still have things to fight about must therefore set their own standards. They cannot, however, do this without regard to the major actors. They see them as potential resources, possibly available to themselves or their adversaries, which, if tapped, might turn the course of a war. Their strategies must always be formulated with this in mind.

Some historians of traditional models of warfare, such as John Keegan and Martin van Creveld, argue that these models have been invalidated by contemporary trends.¹ Since Napoleonic times, consideration of future war has taken as its starting-point the prospect of two forces each seeking an opportunity to eliminate the other in a decisive encounter. The theoretical underpinnings of this model were set by Clausewitz.² The means by which states prepare for battle, the degree of economic and social mobilisation

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required and the implications of the tendency Clausewitz identified towards absolute violence have, however, been questioned in the light of modern experience and the changing character of the international system. Even so, military planners still focus on the decisive battle, and 'principles of war' are still studied by young officers on the assumption that they will be relevant in the contingencies they can expect to face.³

The problems with this traditional model are not new. Wars are rarely confined to set-piece encounters culminating in a battlefield victory. In addition, when an encounter takes place, the actual configuration of the rival forces will be skewed in ways that ensure that practice will deviate from theory. Location, terrain and climate will be influential; outcomes can be determined by freakish accidents or inexplicable lapses of judgement. Yet such considerations do not necessarily invalidate thinking about future warfare in terms of a standard-form battle. Posing a future military challenge in its starkest form sets an appropriately demanding target for the development of new equipment and tactics, and the sizing of forces. Most importantly, if a particular view of the likely character of a future encounter takes hold, this can play an important role in political calculations. The best example of this was the strategy of nuclear deterrence, which required persuading an opponent not to initiate a ruinous war, even though it was by no means clear what could sensibly be done should deterrence fail.

The current challenge to this model is based on the changing character of warfare from the perspective of the world's major players. To be sure, extrapolating from past trends, let alone from recent events, is rarely reliable. The incidence of major war, for example, has not been constant; military activity is always spasmodic and variable. Truly large, world-shaking wars have been rare. The fact that they appeared to be the norm during the first half of the twentieth century was an unusual misfortune brought about by a combination of deep enmities caused by imperial competition, the rise of nationalism and fundamental ideological rivalries. These conflicts were given an unusually vicious character by the industrialisation of violence. This was an exceptional period, although it was feared that it would continue until the struggle between communism and capitalism ended. Precisely because those involved appreciated the trends, especially once these took in nuclear weapons, they held back from all-out war. This allowed time for the struggle to be concluded through more peaceful ideological competition. The move out of this exceptional period, confirmed by the end of the Cold War, has led to the thesis that major war is becoming obsolete.⁴

Yet war itself is hardly obsolescent. As a result of decolonisation, there are now more states than ever; as a result of the arms trade, many have been able to acquire significant military capabilities, which have often spread to sub-state groups – secessionist movements, religious organisations, criminal gangs, disaffected political parties and cultish terrorists. Some states are quite strong militarily compared to their neighbours, but not in relation to the great powers. Some have regimes oriented to the global economy and hopeful of future prosperity. Others risk being left behind because they have failed to adapt to

new post-socialist economic conditions, and because the equipment of their large military establishments is approaching obsolescence. Many are weak, lacking economic strength and dogged by deep social cleavages with which their political institutions can barely cope. Violence within, and occasionally between, states is still quite common.

So while it may not be necessary for the major powers to worry too much about how they would cope with each other in battle, it is sensible for them to focus on how they should deal with weaker powers fighting in an unorthodox way. These states may well fight among themselves as 'peer competitors'. If so, they will be drawn to the same issues that, in one way or another, have preoccupied generations of military theorists.

Sources of Victory

One such issue is whether military developments favour the offence or the defence. This question only makes sense in terms of a standardised encounter in which one force seeks to dislodge another from strategically important territory. Because few encounters are this standardised, it is unwise to attempt to generalise. This does not, however, prevent analysts from offering such judgements and attaching great importance to them.⁵ Contemporary assessments have frequently not been confirmed in practice. Thus, the pre-First World War 'cult of the offensive' has been blamed for the tactical follies of that conflict.⁶ Analyses of the impact of mechanisation on armies in the inter-war years turned on whether they would be more likely to reinforce or to undermine well dug-in defences. An intense specialist debate on whether NATO could withstand a Warsaw Pact invasion had not been concluded when the Cold War came to an end.⁷

Considering the prospects for an offensive therefore requires attention to the specifics of a particular encounter. If this results in respect for the strength of the defence, the next step is likely to be an examination of the prospects for surprise and manoeuvre, or else more indirect coercion such as a siege, a maritime blockade or aerial bombardment. If a conflict cannot be brought to a decisive end during its early stages, it is likely to degenerate into a war of attrition, with victory determined less by acts of inspired generalship and more by successful political and economic mobilisation, or else an ability to terrify and demoralise the enemy's society. The military art becomes much more interesting once it is assumed that circumstances favour the offence, so that a dashing campaign can promise a convincing victory.

A second and related issue concerns the threat that military operations pose to civil society. A tendency to push aside boundaries appears to be a natural dynamic of war, especially one that cannot be brought to a swift conclusion, as the stakes for the belligerents rise and progressively more brutal and desperate measures are used. For a war to leave civil society relatively unscathed, refined and discriminating military means must be used; a relatively unpopulated arena must be found for combat; and the belligerents must be prepared to restrict their options, even if this means conceding defeat. It is one thing to seek to avoid what has euphemistically become known as collateral damage. It is

quite another to resist targeting civil society directly as an enemy vulnerability. This sort of restraint requires a readiness to accept the verdict of a conventional battle, even if this entails defeat or stalemate. It has for some time been questionable whether issues of such existential importance that they can justify war can actually be settled through battle.

This leads to a third issue, the relationship between political aims and military means. Limited aims might be achieving a small border adjustment, complying with a treaty provision, securing an apology for a perceived insult or giving modest support to an ally. In cases such as these, only limited means need be employed. Defeat can be survived. When defeat cannot be survived, there is no incentive to use limited means. The orthodox explanation for the US failure in Vietnam is that the balance of interests that gave Hanoi a greater stake in the outcome than Washington more than compensated for the greater military resources available to the US.⁸ It should be noted that there is rarely a direct symmetry between ends and means. Wars create their own political stakes – including a reputation for staying-power and determination – that can quickly take belligerents beyond their immediate concerns. Nonetheless, a balance of resolve must be set against a balance of military power.

A fourth issue is the balance of alliance. Exploiting political connections can be as crucial as exploiting military strength. When this strength is limited, these connections can become all the more important. Alliances come in many shapes and sizes. Some are based on shared political and cultural values, others on nothing more than convenience. Some are largely tacit and distant, while others are close and even durable. Some are unequal, so that one group of commanders can effectively take over another's armed forces; others require continual negotiations between equal parties over strategy and forms of command. Key questions of alliance have in the past generally revolved around relations among major powers. Now, the key questions seem more likely to involve relations between major powers, acting alone or in concert, and weaker ones.

Western Concepts

Whether the defeated accept the verdict of a conventional battle will depend on the importance of the political consequences of doing so; on whether there is a possibility of regrouping and fighting again; and on the readiness to target the enemy's society and the possibility of securing outside help.

During the Cold War, NATO strategy was based on a refusal in advance to accept the verdict of battle if it went against the West. It was suspected that the Alliance would be unable to blunt a Warsaw Pact offensive, and so it declared itself ready to escalate to nuclear exchanges if it faced defeat.⁹ At one level, this was perfectly credible. The issues at stake in the Cold War were fundamental, and both sides devoted substantial resources to preparing for a decisive encounter. The bombers and missiles were in place and ready to go. The properties of the nuclear weapons were well known, as were the plans that would supposedly govern their use. At other levels, however, scenarios for nuclear war were far more problematic. It was not possible to imagine how established forms of social organisation could survive such a calamity, which could not be

imagined, which is why attempts to prepare for it seemed so risible.¹⁰ It was just possible to describe the political processes that might lead to nuclear war, but not those that would follow. Nonetheless, strategic analysis in the West revolved around propositions about how political leaders might respond to sequences of events starting with a grave crisis, through conventional hostilities, into the first, tentative nuclear exchanges and on to missile launches on a massive scale – producing what Herman Kahn called, in one of his more apt phrases, a ‘wargasm’.¹¹

This morbid form of analysis had a purpose in that it reinforced deterrence, though often it explained no more than how certain circumstances would be so conducive to irrationality that the most extreme acts might be authorised by otherwise civilised and rational people. Contemplation of nuclear war could never predict with confidence its likely course or consequences, but enough was known to be sure that it was best avoided. The hazy image of a mushroom cloud in the crystal ball seemed to suffice.

This sort of strategy distorted military planning. Threatening a war that would be virtually impossible to fight sensibly involved professional complicity in a gigantic bluff. It was frustrating and demoralising, and lent an air of unreality to all consideration of a standard-form battle – not because such a battle would never be fought, but because it would always be overshadowed by the prospect of escalation to nuclear war. During the latter decades of the Cold War, attempts were increasingly made to devise strategies that relied more on an operational art than on a destructive science.¹² The main focus was on an expanded role for conventional forces, although attempts were made to apply the same principles to nuclear exchanges.¹³ This thinking was prompted in part by Western envy of Soviet concepts. The opportunity never arose to discover whether Warsaw Pact plans would have worked as intended. The evidence from those who have examined Warsaw Pact documents is that the elegance of the operational concepts would not have been matched by their execution.¹⁴ The conviction that NATO defences could be left shocked and stranded by a highly mobile strike-force may have suited both Soviet generals anxious to show that defence *roubles* had been spent wisely, and American reformers determined to demonstrate that defence dollars had been wasted.

The revival of interest in the operational art encouraged NATO to shift its view of a conventional battle away from a static defence.¹⁵ Only when the Cold War constraint was removed, however, was it possible to plan for a conventional war in which the US at least would not feel compelled to bring its nuclear arsenal into play. From this point on, it would be up to others to accept or appeal against the verdict of conventional battle. The possibility of a decisive conventional victory was given unexpected credibility by the Gulf War of 1990–91. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was not alone in his apparent belief that the conflict could be made sufficiently costly for the US that Washington would be obliged to conclude hostilities without achieving its stated objectives. Since the US had not mounted an operation on this scale since Vietnam, and of this type since Korea, and because its military performance in recent times had not been particularly encouraging, there were grounds for believing that things

might again go terribly wrong. As a consequence, nothing was left to chance, and Iraqi forces were overwhelmed. *Operation Desert Storm* was planned as if the US was leading NATO against the Warsaw Pact in the standard-form battle envisaged in AirLand Battle (the American concept for the integrated battle-field developed at the start of the 1980s). The Iraqi defeat was over-determined because the allies were superior in all departments.

The experience of the Gulf validated the model, and the US military concluded, not surprisingly, that, all in all, it would prefer to fight all its wars this way. Indeed, the military wanted to develop the model further by taking advantage of breakthroughs in collecting, processing and disseminating information to produce a military force that would achieve what offensive forces have always sought to achieve – the capacity to defeat the enemy by quicker, more informed and cleverer thinking, longer reach and a more lethal punch.

A New Way of Warfare

For this reason, developing the military art in its most advanced form now appears to be the responsibility of the US. The dominant approach to this task reflects a long-standing objective to develop a military instrument capable of such sharp and efficient direction that it can mitigate war's terrors and bring hostilities to swift and relatively clean conclusions, before too much damage has been done. According to the proponents of the 'revolution in military affairs' (RMA), the technologies of the information age should allow military power to be employed to its maximum efficiency with speed, precision and minimum human cost. There is no need to target civilians intentionally, nor even to hit them inadvertently. There is no need, except for presentational purposes, to rely on allies.¹⁶

A lone superpower can push a successful winning-formula to its logical conclusion. The favoured model envisages professional forces engaging in a form of combat with a high political pay-off, yet a low human cost. It postulates battles for information advantage, with stand-off strikes reducing the need to commit too many forces to close combat, thereby keeping down the number of casualties suffered, while the precision of the attacks will limit the number imposed. Such a 'Way of Warfare' would reflect not only what is now technically possible, but also what is politically and morally tolerable.¹⁷ Western governments would find it difficult to develop a mandate for a more vicious approach, unless their societies were in mortal danger. They may have been ready in the past to threaten genocide to deter aggression, but only because the risk of actually having to implement the threat, although sufficient for the required deterrent effect, was small.

Yet the fact that relying on nuclear weapons – the most complete of all threats to civil society – was until very recently a centrepiece of Western strategy should be warning enough that this developing Western model is unlikely to be followed. It has been adopted by Western countries not because their armed forces are more in tune with technological trends, let alone can boast a more acute moral sense, but because it is hard to see how they could lose a war fought in this way, assuming that the US participates. The US now

leads the world, in quality if not always in quantity, in all types of conventional military capability. To fight on American terms is to court defeat. Western countries, or those trained and equipped to fight on Western lines, have won all of their conventional battles in recent decades, in the Middle East, the South Atlantic and the Gulf.

This unassailable superiority in regular forces means that the US and its allies would be surprised, indeed shocked, but probably not frightened if anyone took up arms against them, as long as the war focused on a conventional battle fought apart from civil society. Enemies like this are, however, hard to find. They would not only have to have acquired substantial, advanced military capabilities, but would also inhabit the same moral universe. Could the West demonise an enemy so committed to sparing civil society and keeping down casualties on all sides? A readiness to allow civilians their sanctuaries, to honour the Geneva Conventions and to target systems rather than people would not suggest a propensity to barbarism. Such approaches do not make the blood run cold: those who win wars fought in this way are bound to treat the vanquished with courtesy and respect.

This judgement does not alter if the West confronts opponents who seek to compensate for conventional weakness by developing a capacity for strategic information warfare, aiming for disorientation rather than destruction. Some analysts have argued that civil society has become excessively dependent upon information systems susceptible to enemy interference. Frequently cited examples of what an opponent might attempt are attacks on air-traffic-control or banking systems.¹⁸ Concern over the 'Millennium Bug' has brought home the growing reliance of Western societies on information systems, some of which are vulnerable to external attack.¹⁹ There are good reasons to be wary of malevolent or politically motivated hackers, malcontent employees or extortionists. Whether an opponent could coerce Western governments through threats of chaos is, however, questionable. This would seem to be the sort of attack upon which the perpetrator would be unwise to rely and from which the victim could expect to recover, especially if the precautions that most information managers now take as a matter of course – redundancy and back-up systems, for example – are in place. Military systems tend to be less vulnerable than civilian ones because they are less familiar to hackers and virus developers. There is comfort of a sort in the thought that the worst threats that we might face would be the equivalent for a teenager of being grounded or having pocket money docked.²⁰

Concern about information warfare of this nature, along with plans to conduct future wars according to the dictates of the RMA, may reflect a tendency to picture an opponent with a similar perspective to our own, one that not only appreciates the importance of information technology, but also prefers to use brains rather than brawn and is reluctant to cause too much hurt. Unfortunately, the logic of this clear Western preference for a certain way of war encourages opponents to push matters in the opposite direction. In all credible contingencies, an enemy will be significantly less well-endowed with military capabilities, except possibly manpower, and so must find compen-

sating advantages. These might lie in geography (short supply-lines and opportunities for urban warfare); a higher threshold of pain (a readiness to accept casualties); patience (leading to frustration in Western capitals); and a lack of humanitarian scruples (allowing the war to extend into civil society).²¹

New possibilities for maximising the human cost of war are emerging. The technological trend represented by nuclear-weapon and missile technologies has done more to expand the means of destruction and to extend the range over which they can be applied than it has to mitigate their effects, for example through improving anti-missile defences. There are fears that breakthroughs in biotechnology could lead to new types of weapons with unusually insidious properties. If the main business of warfare is to eliminate or paralyse an opponent's military capacity, these forms of destruction appear unnecessarily cruel and ruinous. But if its main purpose is to intimidate, coerce or simply avenge, it makes a sort of sense to target civil society.

What appears to frighten today's public most is no longer a formidably equipped fighting force that can conquer land and force people into subjugation, nor even the sophisticated information warrior. More fearful is the sort of vicious warfare that is still the norm in parts of the world where everyday life is desperate and political passions intense. This alternative model to the Western Way of Warfare tends to be crude, militia-based and timeless in its brutality and methods. David Tucker laments the common stereotype of an enemy composed of

savage warriors who respect none of the civilised constraints under which we operate, who will do anything, absolutely anything, to gain victory. Spawned amid the deprivation of anarchic, overpopulated, and environmentally ravaged wastelands or brooding on their cultural defeat in oil-rich Muslim lands, not only will these warriors commit these atrocities, they will enjoy doing so.²²

This explains why so much of the foreign-policy debate in Western countries tends to consider the possibility of insulation from this sort of warfare. In practice, Western states have often, although not invariably, been impelled to act – to extract expatriate communities, stem refugee flows, deliver humanitarian relief, punish the guilty, prevent genocide, reverse aggression, contain fighting within its current boundaries, or impose or reinforce a settlement. This intervention has usually taken a multinational form, and has been designed to rescue a conflict's most conspicuous victims and to encourage a general de-escalation. As they weigh such decisions, Western governments fear that they will become vulnerable to the savage sort of warfare with which these conflicts are associated. The fear is not only of being bogged down in a hopeless, distant struggle, but also of a nightmarish strike against one's own society undertaken by crazed terrorists or romantic nationalists, burning with indignation and bent on vengeance, or even by a dictator intent on a *Götterdämmerung* that takes all down with him.

These extreme spectres of routine brutality or arbitrary, pathological violence deserve no more credence than optimistic accounts of mild-mannered and well-behaved enemies or old anxieties about ideological zealots and

powerful aggressors intent on world domination. It is the fate of enemies to be caricatured. Attempts to look out from Western capitals into the more conflict-prone parts of the world may, however, lapse into the same sort of stereotypical images that can mark the view of the inner city from the suburban garden. Once we suppose that we are coping with an underclass – whether domestic or international – there is a tendency to adopt the mantle of police, social workers or authority figures, dealing with delinquents, inadequates, beggars and the hapless victims of abuse.

When the demands of contemporary conflict are phrased in these terms, the West becomes wary of involvement. The fact that the first requirement of intervention in a conflict is now a credible exit strategy, like a debt-collector venturing into a rough neighbourhood, is symptomatic of a lack of confidence. Another symptom is the search for ways to influence events from a safe distance, especially through air power. This fits with the notion that we are dealing with criminal elements who must be punished if they cannot be coerced.

Opponents thus become the strategic equivalents of street gangs who menace strangers and mug the helpless, louts who engage in mindless brawls or the youth described as a 'loner' and 'obsessed with guns' just after he has shot his way through a schoolyard or shopping mall. These metaphors can be suggestive, for the military attributes often now required involve the ability to confront physical intimidation, the antennae of the street-wise, the capacity to improvise with whatever is at hand and the staying-power of the survivor. But such images can also mislead because they fail to address the rationality of opponents, and the possibility that their security concerns may be real and deeply felt. Their strategic sense may be underestimated, while their propensity for mindless violence is exaggerated.

These misleading images were evident during the debate surrounding the bomb attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; the subsequent cruise-missile strikes against a terrorist camp in Afghanistan and an alleged chemical-weapons factory in Sudan; and the US government's call for a 'war on terrorism'. There are echoes of the old Vietnam War debates about the merits of 'hearts and minds' versus 'search and destroy' as counter-insurgency methods.²³ All military operations should be judged by their success in turning firepower into a more tradable political currency. As missile strikes cannot eliminate enemies of this type, especially if these attacks can only be carried out from a distance, and if the targets hit can be replaced, these tactics must be judged by their political consequences. These will be positive if the missile strikes persuade the *Taliban* in Afghanistan that Osama bin Laden should no longer use its territory to cause trouble. They will be less positive if anger at the strikes merely increases the number of recruits to the anti-American struggle, or if fear of retaliation leads to public anxieties in the West that air travel is too dangerous. During the Gulf War, transatlantic flights were virtually empty, even though no terrorist attacks were carried out against them.

In this instance, there appears to exist a broad-based movement animated by a deep hatred of the US, but not linked to a specific government, a definite location or even a single political philosophy. In some ways, it is very modern –

global in scope, beyond state control, amorphous rather than tightly organised, working through private enterprise as much as through central direction. In management parlance, bin Laden might consider himself a 'facilitator', rather than a 'leader'. If this threat is to be defeated militarily, it must lose its state backers, sources of recruits and capacity to act with stealth and secrecy.²⁴ First and foremost, this requires attention to the political context in which the militants operate. Defining the opponent simply by its obnoxious tactics trivialises this context.²⁵ The starting-point for coming to terms with contemporary conflict must be an appreciation of its origins and a grasp of its dynamics. This does not remove the sense of tragedy from these conflicts, but it does mean that they need no longer seem so mysterious or peculiar.

Forms of Intervention

This starting-point directs attention away from those wars that Western countries plan to fight, and even from those that others may plan to fight against them, and towards those that start without them. Non-Western strategy is increasingly geared to the conditions of external, possibly Western, military involvement.²⁶ Those who have the upper hand will want to persuade outsiders not to meddle; those losing will be searching for ways to draw them in.

There are many ways of intervening other than sending in military forces. Providing training, equipment and diplomatic support and imposing economic pressure can be as important, and can turn the course of a war. Nor, of course, is there anything novel about belligerents conducting their affairs with one eye on the possibilities of others joining in by seeking alliances on the one hand and declarations of neutrality on the other. The novelty may lie in the extent to which the connections between a particular conflict and the rest of the international community have now become crucial to the development of the military art.

Most wars are still largely about territory. The ability to hold on to land remains a vital test of sovereignty: even the loss of a remote, barren and underpopulated province can weaken a central government's authority. Some land is especially important because it contains political and financial centres, the hub of a communications network, sacred sites or national monuments. Some important land may be owned by another state, for example that containing water, minerals and fuel and the means to transport these resources. The key requirement for military force remains the ability to take and hold strategically important territory, or at least to control those that live there. Air and sea strategies must therefore always be assessed in terms of their impact on land strategy. This is as close to a constant as we are likely to have in the study of war.

Coercive strategies that work through threatening to hurt the opponent are the potential exception. Air power is considered to lend itself to coercion.²⁷ The success of coercion depends on the responsiveness of the target: is it stubborn, patient, able to absorb punishment or engage in counter-coercion? It also depends on the credibility of the threat. Is the coercer really prepared to edge towards genocide, or to make peoples' lives miserable to no evident purpose? Coercive threats can succeed, but their indirect quality means that they are

unreliable. In practice, air power has been most effective when closely linked with developments on the ground. This is important to Western countries because it means that if they do become involved and do not want to insert their own ground forces, they will become closely linked with – in effect, become inadvertently allied to – one of the belligerents, whose wider political aims they may not support.

Considerations of the conflict's intensity, the intractability of the underlying dispute, the extent to which the interests of potentially intervening powers are affected and how far they can agree on the appropriate form of intervention will determine the degree of external engagement. For the belligerent, the question is how to influence these considerations. For example, if the objective is to minimise the risk of intervention, it would be advisable to move swiftly and to inflict as little damage as possible on civilian life and property. The greater the humanitarian crisis generated by a conflict, the greater the pressure to meddle. Indeed, the faster the movement, the less likely it is that resistance will be faced in populated areas. The strength of the offence as against the defence therefore still requires consideration. However, to launch an effective offensive a degree of mobilisation is required, and this might provide a clue to the enemy, as well as alerting the international community. There are, of course, a variety of ways – staging manoeuvres is one – to obscure an intended offensive. Even when the evidence is clear, a military build-up might still be dismissed as bluff. For the same reasons, the victim of an attack, especially by a militarily stronger opponent, will aim simply to continue resistance in the hope that relief will come.

This line of argument can be illustrated with reference to Iraq's recent military history. In the 1980s, Iraq's objective was to internationalise a conflict that it could not win on its own.²⁸ As part of this effort, it sought US and other Western help to develop its military strength, while discouraging arms sales to Iran, and tried to ensure that Tehran was kept at a diplomatic disadvantage in the UN Security Council. Baghdad also made the war appear as dangerous as possible by launching the so-called 'tanker war' and, later, the 'war of the cities', while Iran would have been content to keep pressing forward with its ground forces.²⁹ To deal with this ground offensive, Iraq used chemical weapons. Iran's political isolation meant that Iraq's initiatives received only muted condemnation and even some understanding, illustrating that there is no automatic link between obnoxious forms of warfare and international pressure.³⁰

As Iran began to respond to the tanker war, the US warned it against closing the Strait of Hormuz and, in 1986, agreed to help Kuwait, which claimed that Iran was picking on its tankers. The US stepped up its naval effort not so much because of Iranian activity, but because of an incident in May 1987 in which two *Exocet* missiles from an Iraqi F-1 fighter hit *USS Stark* 70 miles north of Bahrain, killing 37 crewmen. Because Washington's policy was to tilt against Iran, Iraqi excuses that the attack was 'inadvertent' were accepted, as was Saddam's claim that the incident illustrated the urgent need 'for joint efforts to end the war and force the Iranian regime to agree to peace in accordance with the principles of international law and UN resolutions'.³¹ The US was soon

engaging Iranian forces, culminating in a major naval action in April 1988 in which six Iranian ships were sunk or crippled just as Iraqi forces were retaking the Fao peninsula.³² Iraqi strategy had succeeded. The war had been conducted in such a way that it could not be ignored: passive neutrality was not an option for Western states.

In the build-up to the Gulf War of 1990–91, Saddam sought to prevent Western countries from intervening by taking Kuwait quickly and demonstrating political control. He succeeded in the first of these aims, but not the second, largely because key members of the ruling Al-Sabah family escaped.³³ Iraq's crude aggression, together with the importance of Kuwait's oil reserves, led to a strong Western response. Once again, Saddam threatened to expand the conflict, but this time in order to deter Western military action, not to encourage it. Threats of retribution – high casualties in battle, the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorism, ecological vandalism and political mischief – failed, in part because of problems of implementation, but also because of the clear Western interest in Kuwait's liberation. Nonetheless, there was real apprehension in the West about the wisdom of the course being followed. This could have become an effective political veto had Iraqi threats been more credible, and Western interests more equivocal.

In 1998, Iraq was accused of obstructing UN inspection teams seeking to eliminate all its WMD. At the start of the year, the UK and US strengthened their forces in the area until a compromise was reached by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that offered some concessions to the Iraqis while allowing the inspectors to return to work. Two points were significant about this episode: first, the West was concerned to ensure that Iraq had no biological-weapons capability, in part because it could bolster future attempts to deter Western intervention; and second, Iraq's strategy during this crisis was to present itself as a victim. It did not pretend that it could resist allied air strikes, or threaten a riposte. Rather, it sought to portray London and Washington as bullies. In this it was helped by the fact that the relevant biological-weapons facilities could not be identified with confidence. Western raids were therefore liable to appear punitive and disproportionate.

For different reasons, during the wars surrounding the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, it suited both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to appear as victims given that, at least to begin with, they had few military options against superior Serb forces. It made sense in these circumstances to stress the brutality of the Serb onslaught. There were even accusations that Croatian forces had been less effective than they could have been during the 1991 siege of Vukovar to ensure that the Serbs lost the public-relations battle in the West. This may have been important in pushing Western countries towards recognising an independent Croatia, but was less effective in stimulating their intervention in the conflict. More effective in this regard was the massacre of some 68 people in Sarajevo's market square in February 1994. The incident was followed by threats of air strikes, relieving some of the pressure on the Bosnian capital. There have been suggestions that the Bosnians carried out the bombing themselves, although Serb artillery remains the most likely culprit. Reports that the

Bosnians exaggerated the number of casualties are more credible. A number of those flown out of Sarajevo to receive treatment were judged to have old wounds.³⁴

The ebb and flow of the Bosnian war was determined by the nature of Western involvement, which began as a humanitarian operation. The Serbs exploited Western fears of retaliation against UN troops and aid workers working in Bosnia but, like the Iraqis, raised the stakes by almost daring NATO aircraft to attack military assets located in populated areas for no other reason than to create the possibility of serious collateral damage. Only when UN forces on the ground were reorganised to reduce their vulnerability to counter-coercion, a Croatian offensive exerted considerable pressure, and NATO air strikes began in earnest did the Serbs buckle. The critical factor was the prospect of further setbacks on the ground at the hands of local forces, which were in effect being backed by NATO. There is no reason to suppose that NATO air power working alone would have been successful.

This explains the problem faced by NATO in designing an effective way to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Serb province of Kosovo in 1998. NATO's members did not doubt the gravity of the situation and its potentially dire consequences, including yet more Balkan instability, if no action was taken. Nonetheless, effective action was hard to organise in the fast-changing situation. These problems could be attributed to difficulties in establishing realistic political objectives and a legal basis for intervention. The real problem, however, was the role of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK). Its armed struggle and ambitious demands undermined the strategy of the established Kosovar leadership, which was based on presenting itself as a victim with modest aims. While the UCK appeared to be gaining the upper hand militarily, there was no reason for outsiders to intervene. Its amateurish efforts collapsed as Serb forces seized the initiative amid reports of UCK atrocities and NATO's refusal to align itself with its ambitious political programme. By the autumn, the Kosovar people were clearly suffering terribly again, and many had fled their homes. This time, without the UCK complicating matters, it was possible to mobilise NATO for air strikes, and even a presence on the ground, in order to coerce Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic into making the concessions necessary to create secure conditions for the return of refugees.

Two preliminary conclusions emerge from this and related experiences. First, it is much easier for NATO to define problems in terms of protecting victims from a bully, rather than interposing itself between warring factions with their own political agendas. Second, the effort required to take on opponents that would once have been considered of little consequence in even relatively minor encounters can still seem overly onerous.

The Information Advantage

This is the context in which technological changes, especially those connected with the 'information age', must be viewed. It is unlikely that disparities in information systems will compensate for great disparities in firepower and mobility. The US has not had to address this issue because it clearly has advan-

tages in all these areas. In general, high-quality information systems work best when they are linked to a physical capacity to attack enemy assets, or to defend one's own. The focus on information systems as targets misses the point that, today, information is easily stored, reproduced and accessed. The key strategic feature of these systems lies in the accessibility of information. It is becoming easier to acquire a rudimentary information infrastructure by essentially commercial means – laptop computers, a modem to the internet, a global positioning system handset, mobile phones and commercial meteorological and surveillance data can all significantly improve military capability.³⁵ Dedicated military systems will be more secure, robust and capable than civilian ones, but even relatively unsophisticated armed forces should be able to improve their capacity to gain acceptable intelligence on the enemy, a better sense of their bearings and improved communications between centre and periphery. Much depends on how the system is used: good information can be misinterpreted or lost in background noise, while stupid messages can be sent over the best communication networks. Full exploitation of the potential of information technology can markedly improve a fighting force, but it is not a substitute for good judgement.

It is therefore important not to exaggerate the West's information advantage. Modern sensors come into their own when observing a conventional order of battle, but have more trouble monitoring urban militias, rural guerrillas or crude mortars on trucks. Much can be achieved through a dedicated commitment of photographic and signals intelligence, but this will only become possible once intervention is imminent, and then it will take time to develop the analytical frameworks required to make sense of the raw data. Such frameworks require in turn basic knowledge about local culture and history, and the constellation and character of political and military forces. Despite the wonders of the information age, the fact remains that few outsiders have any notion of what is really going on in many contemporary conflicts. Local actors manipulate outside perceptions, normally by stage-managing events or feeding snippets of information to the Western media.³⁶ An independent local press, a potentially reliable source, rarely survives a civil war.

As much as anything, information wars tend to be public-relations battles for Western attention, hence the adoption of English as the universal language of protest. It is assumed that the way to Western decision-making is through the media and public opinion. To an extent, the 'CNN effect' – whereby emotive images of suffering are presumed to lead to a near-automatic public demand to 'do something' – is overstated.³⁷ Media images of distant conflicts can be varied, while a government aware that it can do nothing positive can normally stay passive. Moreover, the media is increasingly subject to budget cuts and editorial caution, resulting in spasmodic and patchy coverage. Browsing the internet for information can seem preferable to journalists on the spot, even though the most important sources are those sensitive to local culture, history and politics. As a conflict gestates, it appears complex, nuanced, speculative and probably boring – a natural loser in the competition for newspaper space, television time and even ministerial in-trays.

An upsurge in violence means that there is a story to be covered. With rumours of atrocities and pictures of refugees, the core issue soon becomes: who is doing what to whom? Once Western forces are engaged, media coverage becomes incessant, even when hard news is absent. Armed forces can no longer assume secrecy. The media now approaches wars as public spectacles to be covered from all sides. The enemy will seek to engender a sense of shame, futility or danger; the government will seek to counter this by gaining international support, demonstrating proportionality and economy in its use of force and claiming reasonable and fair objectives.

Even when the danger is clear and present, the difficulties of mobilising democracies for war or deterrence can be substantial. At the start of the Cold War, US President Harry Truman understood that he had to 'sell the threat' if he was to persuade his people that the Cold War demanded new sacrifices. In this effort he and his successors regularly drew on the lessons of the 1930s and the failures of appeasement. With limited wars, it is much harder to 'sell the threat', and attempts to do so risk demonising serious political movements and turning individuals and groups engaged in revolutionary posturing into credible opponents. The alternative tendency is to 'sell the victim', stressing the misery of the weaker side. Suffering does not, unfortunately, always make for goodness, and when former victims gain the upper hand they often seek revenge. The basic problem lies in the insistence on describing all conflicts as morality plays. The strategic case for intervention requires a grasp of complex situations and their wider implications that rarely lends itself to sound-bites.

It is here that the information age and the new international politics come together to change the forms of conflict. Precisely because military engagements have become more discretionary for Western countries, belligerents must work hard to persuade them either to stay out, or to go in. Governments must pay close attention to the quality of rationales for both intervention and non-intervention. If battle is joined, operations will be judged against political criteria relating to casualties and collateral damage, justice and fairness. If conflicts involve persuasion as much as combat, there should be no surprise that their conduct has become a branch of marketing.

There is one important qualification to this line of argument. The thesis works only if it is assumed that, in some cases, there is a serious possibility that Western countries will intervene in a conflict. On the evidence of the 1990s, this is not an unreasonable assumption, but form-books can change and different assumptions can take root. If, when they face the choice, Western governments consistently decide not to become involved – because it is too hazardous or difficult, or because the conflict is remote – the belligerents may conclude that they should no longer attempt to influence what appears to be a foregone conclusion. They will still, however, have to consider the interests of neighbours whose interests will be more directly engaged. As always, the key questions when considering the future of conflict still revolve around how the major powers define their interests. The conduct of war depends not only on their attitudes to specific conflicts, but also on their readiness to be concerned about, and accept a degree of responsibility for, the overall levels of conflict and violence in the international system.

Notes

¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993); and Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

³ The idea of 'principles of war' is normally traced to Napoleon and Jomini, a theorist of the Napoleonic Wars, who became convinced that certain principles were timeless. Contemporary efforts to clarify these principles began with J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*. Versions of Fuller's nine principles still appear in statements of doctrine by the British armed forces. Recently, the US Army has been working with two sets of principles, one a traditional version for conventional war, the other a version for 'operations other than war'. The latter, appropriately, excludes 'simplicity' and includes perseverance, legitimacy and restraint. Russell Glenn, 'No More Principles of War?', *Parameters*, vol. 28, no. 1, Spring 1998, p. 48.

⁴ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Modern War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

⁵ For claims to the potential of 'offense-defense theory', see Stephen van Evera, 'Offense, Defense and the Causes of War', *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4, Spring 1998, p. 5; and Charles Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, 'What is the Offense-Defense Balance and How Can We Measure It?', *ibid.* Van Evera defines 'offense dominance' in terms of the ease of conquest, which risks tautology. All general theories in this area are suspect; 'balance' tends to be more the feature of a historical period than a function of a specific conflict.

⁶ Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

⁷ John Mearsheimer, 'Why the Soviets

Can't Win Quickly in Central Europe', *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 1, Summer 1982, pp. 3-39.

⁸ Stephen Rosen, Vietnam and the American theory of Unlimited War', *ibid.*, vol. 7, no. 2, Autumn 1982, pp. 83-113.

⁹ One of the most informed studies of this aspect of nuclear strategy remains J. M. Legge, *Theatre Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1983).

¹⁰ This absurdity was demonstrated by T. K. Jones, the unfortunate Pentagon official who offered the following advice for surviving a nuclear war: 'Dig a hole, cover it with a couple of doors and then throw three feet of dirt on top ... It's the dirt that does it ... if there are enough shovels to go round, everybody's going to make it.' This inspired the title of Robert Scheer's book *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1982).

¹¹ Herman Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962).

¹² For a brief history of the idea of the operational art, tracing it back to Soviet military thinking during the early post-Revolution period, see Bruce Menning, 'Operational Art's Origins', *Military Review*, vol. 77, no. 5, September-October 1997, pp. 32-47. An important study of the history of the idea is Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997).

¹³ See Leon Sloss and Marc Dean Millot, 'US Nuclear Strategy in Evolution', *Strategic Review*, Winter 1984. On the incompatibility of operational plans with the requirements of deterrence, see Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Beatrice Heuser, 'Warsaw Pact Military Doctrines in the 1970s and

1980s: New Findings in the East German Archives', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 12, no. 4, October 1993, pp. 437–57.

¹⁵ See Richard Swain, 'Filling the Void', in B. J. C. McKercher and Michael Hennessy (eds), *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theory of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

¹⁶ The ambiguous US attitude towards allies engendered by the RMA can be discerned in Joseph Nye and William Owen, 'America's Information Edge', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 2, March–April 1996, pp. 20–36. For an analysis of the developing RMA concept, see Eliot Cohen, 'A Revolution in Warfare', *ibid.*, pp. 37–54.

¹⁷ These issues are discussed in Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 318 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the IISS, 1998).

¹⁸ For some customary fare, see Matthew Campbell, 'Britain fights US in Cyber Wargame', *Sunday Times*, 7 June 1998. Campbell refers to vulnerabilities in systems controlling 'airports, hospitals, traffic lights, banks and even nuclear weapons', and reports a proposed war game in London which would open with an attack by computer hackers on the UK's power grid, causing a huge blackout. Concerns such as these have led the US government to identify 'critical infrastructure' and to monitor the development of potential threats. As yet, the emphasis remains defensive; there has been no Presidential Directive allowing work on offensive systems in the US, although some is undoubtedly underway. Bradley Graham, 'In Cyberwar a Quandary over Rules and Strategy', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 July 1998, p. 1. This article noted the considerable requirements of large-scale computer attacks, including detailed intelligence on hardware and software systems, as well as how these relate to the decision-making processes of the opponent. Without this knowledge, it

may be difficult to appreciate in advance the likely consequences of an attack.

¹⁹ It is arguable that various systemic malfunctions are features of modern life. The large-scale use of animated greetings packages disabled a number of internet nodes in the run-up to Christmas 1997. In May 1998, a failure in PanAmSat's *Galaxy IV* satellite disabled 80–90% of the 45 million pagers in the US.

²⁰ For a healthily sceptical look at the current fascination with information warfare, see Michael Dornheim, 'Bombs Still Beat Bytes', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 19 January 1998, p. 60. Dornheim notes the phenomenon of 'terminology creep' – whereby 'password security' became 'computer security', then 'information systems security' and now 'information warfare' – in pursuit, he suggests, of the research funding such buzzwords can trigger. Dornheim also notes that one of the most notorious examples of a virus being introduced into a military system – Iraqi air defences in 1991 – did not in fact take place. This story first appeared in *Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 229.

²¹ Anatol Lieven has stressed that failure to understand and train for urban warfare was central to Russian reverses in Chechnya. See Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

²² David Tucker, 'Fighting Barbarians', *Parameters*, vol. 28, no. 2, Summer 1998, p. 70. This is a useful warning against taking stereotypes too seriously. See also the work of Ralph Peters, who has been particularly active in developing a grim view of the West's likely opponents, starting with 'The New Warrior Class', *ibid.*, vol. 24, no. 2, Summer 1994; and Charles J. Dunlap Jr, '21st-Century Land War: Four Dangerous Myths', *ibid.*, vol. 27, no. 3, Autumn 1997. Images of a

global underclass were given some credibility by Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 275, no. 2, February 1994.

²³ Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: US Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-Insurgency, Counter-Terrorism, 1940-1990* (New York: Pantheon, 1992).

²⁴ Recent reports suggest that *Taleban* leaders are trying to restrain bin Laden.

²⁵ On the risks of insensitivity to political context, in particular a fear that the US in Saudi Arabia is following the same practices that led to the Iranian *débâcle* in 1979, see William Pfaff, 'The US Talk of "War" Can Only Fuel Hatred', *International Herald Tribune*, 1 September 1998, p. 9.

²⁶ These strategies may also be conditioned by non-Western involvement, as the important role played by Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DROC) in 1998 demonstrates.

²⁷ Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

²⁸ On the Iran-Iraq War, see Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988); and Efraim Karsh (ed.), *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications*, London: Macmillan, 1989).

²⁹ Martin Navias and E. R. Hooton, *Tanker Wars: The Assault on Merchant Shipping During the Iran-Iraq Crisis, 1980-1988* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996).

³⁰ The problem of balancing concern about Iraqi chemical-weapons use with a basic antagonism is evident in George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1993).

³¹ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, p. 197.

³² Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham

R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

³³ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991* (London: Faber, 1993).

³⁴ See James Gow, 'Coercive Cadences: The Yugoslav War of Dissolution', in Lawrence Freedman (ed.), *Strategic Coercion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 228, 382.

³⁵ One of the most important campaigns being waged by commercial interests aims to liberalise the availability of encryption technology. Elizabeth Corcoran, 'A Bid to Unscramble Encryption Policy', *International Herald Tribune*, 13 July 1998, p. 13. For an analysis of some of the implications of the growing availability of commercial satellite imagery, see Gerald Steinberg, *Dual Use Aspects of Commercial High-Resolution Imaging Satellites* (Tel Aviv: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, February 1998). About 250,000 Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite-navigation receivers are sold each month for civil and commercial use. Glenn W. Goodman Jr, 'Hitching a Ride: DoD Seeks to Tap Commercial Space Boom, But So Will Potential Adversaries', *Armed Forces Journal International*, July 1998, vol. 135, no. 12, July 1998, pp. 39-45.

³⁶ For a first-class study of the problems of information-management in less accessible modern conflicts, see Nik Gowing, 'New Challenges and Problems for Information Management in Complex Emergencies: Ominous Lessons from the Great Lakes and Eastern Zaire in late 1996 and early 1997', paper delivered at the conference 'Dispatches from Disaster Zones; The Reporting of Humanitarian Emergencies', London, May 1998.

³⁷ Jonathan Mermin, 'Television News and American Intervention in Somalia: The Myth of a Media-Driven Foreign Policy', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 3, Autumn 1997, pp. 385-403.