

# The Counterrevolution in Strategic Affairs

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*Abstract: Claims from the 1990s about a revolution or transformation in military affairs are assessed in light of the experience of the 2000s in Iraq and Afghanistan. The importance of considering political as well as military affairs is stressed. Though the United States developed evident predominance in capabilities for regular war, it was caught out when drawn into irregular forms of warfare, such as terrorism and insurgency. The United States significantly improved its counterinsurgency capabilities. It does not follow, however, that the United States will now engage more in irregular conflicts. Indeed, the military circumstances of the past decade were in many ways unique and led to an exaggeration of the strategic value of irregular forms and the need for the United States to respond. Meanwhile, the political legacy of the experience is likely to be a more limited engagement with the problems associated with “failed” and “rogue” states.*

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War, as Carl von Clausewitz reminds us, is governed by politics, which provides its purpose, passion, and accounting. Yet politics is often treated in military theory as an awkward exogenous factor, at best a necessary inconvenience and at worst a source of weakness and constraint—a disruptive influence interfering with the proper conduct of war. This outlook has featured prominently in American military thought. There has long been a clear preference, reflected in force structure and doctrine, for big, regular wars against serious great-power competition. With the end of the Cold War, this preference came under pressure. The United States had no obvious “peer competitor,” and many in the military apparently felt that the sort of operations coming into vogue—tellingly described as “operations other than war”—were beneath them. There was an evident lack of enthusiasm as the United States was drawn into the series of conflicts connected with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, culminating in the 1999 campaign against Serbia over Kosovo. The withdrawal from Somalia in 1994, like that from Beirut a decade earlier, was taken as a cautionary tale about

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the folly of such involvements. In these conflicts, the military could not simply take political direction and then get on with the fighting; rather, it found every move full of political sensitivity and its freedom of action restrained at each turn.

As a symptom of the attitude toward operations of this type, the proposition that shaped high-level thinking in the U.S. defense establishment during the 1990s and into the 2000s disregarded them entirely. The proposition held that a “Revolution in Military Affairs” was under way, involving a step change in the nature of war. It gained sufficient acceptance for the acronym RMA to become familiar shorthand for what appeared to be an irreversible trend, an inexorable phenomenon to which all military establishments must respond. Those which mastered the RMA most effectively would have a sure route to victory.

The roots of the revolution were assumed to be technological rather than political. Thus, the United States, which was demonstrably to the fore in the relevant information and communication technologies, would be in the vanguard. Even better, the logic of the revolution anticipated that the conduct of military affairs would be pushed in a direction that most suited the United States: one favoring high-tempo conventional warfare. These predictions further reinforced the presumption that the United States could maintain its “hyperpower” status for decades to come. The effect was to play down the importance of the political dimension in shaping contemporary conflict. Making sense of what has changed over the past decade, therefore, requires looking not only at the lessons of warfare but also at the changing geopolitical environment.

This essay is concerned with “strategic” rather than purely “military” affairs. First, I consider political changes and, in

particular, the shifting relationship between the United States and the states that used to be known collectively as the third world. Next, I address the problems with the RMA and the asymmetrical responses that promotion of the strategy naturally encouraged. As these reactions included forms of irregular warfare, notably terrorism and insurgency over the last ten years, I then explore whether the intervention in Afghanistan set a pattern for the future in terms of both its objective and its conduct. (The specific origins of the Iraq intervention render that conflict almost *sui generis*, although the conduct there reinforces the lessons of Afghanistan.) I argue that, on balance, Afghanistan does not set a precedent. Combined with the political changes discussed in the first section of the essay, the situation in Afghanistan suggests a much more limited engagement with the problems associated with “failed” and “rogue” states. I conclude by hedging my bets, in part through an examination of the operation in Libya that began in March 2011.

The term *third world* was coined in France in the early 1950s to describe countries that were economically underdeveloped, politically unaligned, and therefore at a distance from the liberal capitalist first world and the state socialist second world. The long-forgotten inspirational model for the term was the “third estate” of French commoners, who eventually, in 1789, revolted against the first and second estates of priests and nobles. The term therefore captured an idea of a coherent group, a coalition of the disadvantaged, that might one day overthrow the established order. It came to include many states that gained independence as a result of post-World War II decolonization.

The sheer diversity in shape, size, and status of this group prevented member

states from ever coming together as a coherent whole (or geopolitical force). Moreover, while many such states affirmed the principle of non-alignment, joining the “non-aligned movement” founded in 1961, they did so largely as a means of keeping their options open. In practice, they often seemed to lean toward one bloc or the other, typically in return for arms sales and diplomatic support. Both Washington and Moscow assumed that the newly independent states would need to make their ideological choices, for either liberal capitalism or state socialism, and that their political allegiances would follow. In a number of cases, the superpowers were drawn into civil wars on the assumption (often mistaken) that the local contest had real links with their global ideological confrontation. The shifting allegiances in the Horn of Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, as Ethiopia and Somalia swapped camps, illustrate the point.

Even before the end of the Cold War, it had become apparent that while conflicts in the third world might be reshaped as a result of superpower interference, they were ignited by distinctive local factors. Ideological affinity did not seem to produce political harmony. In Asia, shared Marxism-Leninism did not prevent the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, and Vietnam from clashing with each other. Moreover, the general appeal of state socialism declined as a result of its evident failure in the Soviet bloc. A number of the former leaders of the non-aligned camp that had once exhibited socialist inclinations – such as Indonesia and Egypt – ultimately moved into the Western camp, though they were not exactly liberal in their internal practices. After the implosion of European communism, a general continental realignment formed on the basis of the core Western institutions of NATO and the EU.

This was the moment when liberal capitalism peaked. As an ideology, capitalism had always contained many strands and was often contradictory, yet its core themes – with regard to free markets and human rights – had been continually influential for more than two centuries. The collapse of state socialism meant that capitalism emerged from the Cold War a clear winner. In this narrative, the West’s victory was not simply a matter of deterrence and political cohesion but also a result of intellectual vitality and entrepreneurial drive. After the Cold War, liberal capitalism was promoted as the model to emulate if states wanted to get ahead in a globalized world. The idea of “globalization” stressed the breaking down of boundaries, particularly with regard to capital, goods, and services, but also ideas and people.

For a while, this vision suggested that under the influence of free markets, countries around the world – including former adversaries – would adopt first the economic and then the political forms of liberal capitalism. The embrace of democracy was considered particularly important, not only because it meant that a larger proportion of the world’s population would enjoy political rights, but also because of the assumption that democracies do not fight one another. Those with regimes resistant to this path, and likely to pose threats to their neighbors, were described as “rogue.” Iraq, Iran, and North Korea fell into this category. Those unable to cope, often because they were torn apart by internal violence, such as Somalia, Congo, and Yugoslavia, were described as “failing.”

It was always likely that many states would go their own way, rather than follow a liberal democratic model, without becoming evidently roguish or failing. The main problem was the uncertain relationship between relatively free econ-

omies, with active participation in global trade and financial markets, and relatively free polities, with support for human rights and democratic elections. As the example of China vividly illustrates, it is possible, at least for a substantial period of time, to combine a strong capitalist ethos with an authoritarian political system. Even governments responsive to public opinion and subject to democratic accountability would not always wish to align themselves with the United States, especially as the American brand became more toxic during the 2000s. Liberalism, capitalism, and alignment with the United States turned out not to be inextricably linked. Furthermore, the particular capitalist model practiced by the West suffered a loss of credibility as a result of the financial crisis that began in 2008. As a more practical consequence, the crisis ushered in a more austere age, thereby reducing the appetite for expensive military interventions and possibly causing greater reluctance in the provision of economic assistance.

The U.S. appetite for military operations and foreign economic aid was already declining as a result of the cost and disappointing results of the interventions of the past two decades. Humanitarian intervention developed as a response to failing states, providing a methodology for the assertion of liberal values in areas marked by severe strife. Bosnia, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone were cited as evidence of how harm could be mitigated by timely intervention; Rwanda was the prime example of the consequences of abandoning a country in crisis. Intervention on humanitarian grounds implied a direct challenge to the post-Westphalian norms of international behavior by threatening to subvert sovereignty through the expressed readiness to interfere in the internal affairs of others. Challenges to sovereignty were always controversial, espe-

cially with states, including Russia and China, that wanted no interference in their more dissident and troublesome regions.

Humanitarian interventions also generated long-term and expensive responsibilities to those places where intervention took place. Initially, the action might have been prompted by evidence of acute but short-term humanitarian distress, but once engaged, the interveners felt obliged to undertake wholesale reconstruction of the target countries by setting them on the road to democracy. The same impulse was evident in Iraq and Afghanistan. But as the United States became bogged down in Iraq, it let its own liberal standards drop in the conduct of interrogations and counterinsurgency operations. At the same time it demonstrated an inability to reshape local political structures according to its own preferences. Unless a functioning democracy was created, it was argued, there could be no guarantee that the conditions that created the problem in the first place would not recur. Why costly military exertions should be used to reestablish an authoritarian regime was hard to explain. The only way out was to work with the local political grain, which was not necessarily a natural support for the practices and norms on which liberal democracy depends and which would be under additional strain as a result of the internal violence that had prompted the intervention. On the one hand, walking away from a country still in recovery would have been difficult; on the other, an extended stay risked creating a local dependency culture and increasing resistance and hostility toward the United States and its allies.

This shifting political context moved U.S. military strategy a long way from the promise of the RMA. At the start of the

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2000s, hope had been very much alive. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's "transformation" agenda was intended to demonstrate the potential of forces that were high on quality and relatively low on quantity. Iraq, at least in its first stage, was taken as proof of those precepts. This new "dominant" form of combat involved moving with greater speed and precision, and over longer ranges, than was possible for the enemy; disorienting as much as destroying; attacking only what was necessary; and avoiding unnecessary collateral damage to civilian life and property. In the more enthusiastic versions, the prospect was to lift the fog of war. On land, where the fog was always the greatest, the RMA promised to dispel the inherent confusion caused by fighting in and around uneven terrain – woods, rivers, towns, and cities – day and night, in all weather, with the location of friends as much a mystery as that of enemies.

This form of warfare suited the United States because it played to U.S. strengths: it could be capital rather than labor intensive; it reflected a preference for outsmarting opponents; it avoided excessive casualties both received and inflicted; and it conveyed an aura of almost effortless superiority.

Those ideas were deeply comforting, and not entirely wrong. Information and communication technologies were bound to make a difference in military practice. Perhaps the RMA agenda understated the extent to which American predominance was dependent on not only the sophistication of its technology but also the sheer amount of firepower – particularly air-delivered – it had at its disposal. Nonetheless, the formidable cumulative impact was impressive. Furthermore, while the United States' evident military superiority in a particular type of war was likely to encourage others to fight in different ways, that military capacity would

also constrain opponents' ambitions. As a regular conventional war against the United States appeared to be an increasingly foolish proposition, especially after its convincing performance in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, one form of potential challenge to American predominance was removed, just as the prospect of mutual assured destruction (MAD) had earlier removed nuclear war as a serious policy option.

But there was an important difference. With MAD, everybody would lose once nuclear exchanges began, which meant that, in principle, the side stronger in conventional forces could incur an advantage. The Warsaw Pact countries were believed to be in this position during the Cold War, thus putting the onus on NATO to escalate to nuclear use if its members were losing the battle. Once the NATO countries gained conventional superiority, deterrence was complete – at least against other great powers. If an aspirant superpower could in no way expect to fight and win (in any meaningful sense) a massive conflict along the lines of the two world wars, then not only was America's position more secure, but the risk of another catastrophic global conflagration was diminished. As with nuclear forces (whose mid-century arrival had also been described at the time as a "revolution in military affairs"), the RMA agenda required maintaining substantial conventional forces designed for a form of conflict that the very existence of those forces rendered unlikely. The challenge was to explain the need to pay for expensive forces that might never be used.

Yet the RMA model was deeply flawed. Far from representing a real revolution in military affairs, it harked back to an earlier, idealized prototype of modern warfare in which a decisive military victory can settle the fate of nations and, indeed, of whole civilizations. Once its forces have



been defeated, an enemy government will have no choice but to hand over sovereignty to the victor. If war is accepted as the arbiter, politicians can set objectives and hold the commanders accountable, but the military must be allowed to conduct the campaign according to its professional judgment with a minimum role for civilians – preferably not as victims and certainly not as strategists. Under the most idealized version of this model, the victory comes quickly. The longer the war drags on, the more uncertain the situation becomes, as both sides increasingly depend on the performance of allies; the test becomes one of social and economic endurance more than military skill; morale suffers; and politicians become impatient. Thus, for military innovators, the acme of success is a new route to a swift and politically decisive military victory. This was the claim made for the RMA.

However, the lack of a political context was problematic. It fixed on trends in military capabilities and neglected the types of conflict that might need to be addressed through force of arms. The new doctrine recognized that armed force could have a range of purposes other than regular war but tended to set these possibilities to one side, imagining such cases either would be smaller in scale and easily supported by capabilities designed for regular war or would involve goals that could be picked up by lesser powers, such as peacekeeping duties.

A further problem was the assumption that, because the new technologies fit so well with American strategic preferences, they would not serve different and opposed objectives. If the capabilities had been purely military in character, this outcome might have been more likely. In practice, however, these technologies encouraged a progressive overlap between the civilian and military spheres. High-quality surveillance and intelli-

gence, communications, and navigation became widely available as consumer gadgets could be exploited by otherwise crude, small organizations with limited budgets. Precision intelligence, instantaneously communicated and combined with precision guidance, made it possible to concentrate fire accurately on solely military targets in order to cause maximum disruption to the enemy military effort. But it did not mandate such attacks. It could support concepts less dependent on discriminate targeting. Indeed, the same systems that made it possible to limit damage to civil society could also be used to ensure that attacks on civil society were more effective. Even on the American model there were always dual-use facilities that served both military and civilian purposes – for example, power and transportation. They might be targeted as part of a military purpose but still led to the disruption of civilian life.

By the end of the 1990s, the challenge to the RMA was recognized to lie in what was described as “asymmetrical warfare.” Enemies would refuse to fight on America’s terms, attempting to turn warfare toward civil society rather than away. The approach most feared was the direct targeting of large population centers with chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons (of which nuclear are in a category all their own, although they are lumped together with other weapons of mass destruction [WMD]). The approach that was actually largely followed was to adopt the various forms of irregular warfare: that is, to rely on the support of a section of the civilian population as well as on guerrilla and terrorist tactics. A degree of overlap between the two approaches manifested when terrorists found ways of causing mass casualties, particularly using vulnerabilities in transport. The 9/11 attacks, the most spectacular example of this type of warfare, raised the specter of

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terrorist access to WMD, perhaps aided by “rogue” states. The event significantly affected U.S. priorities in the subsequent decade, shaping the two main U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In both these operations, enemy regular forces were unable to offer much resistance to U.S. strength. (The Taliban was already battling the Northern Alliance, and U.S. airpower and special forces tipped the balance.) Both conventional campaigns could be considered a vindication of RMA-type concepts in that quality defeated quantity with remarkable speed. Thereafter, however, the United States was stuck dealing with resourceful and determined irregular opponents while it desperately sought to construct sustainable indigenous state structures and forces. The experience underlined the danger of operating against the local political grain.

To say that, during the course of the 2000s, the United States mastered counterinsurgency operations would be an overstatement, yet after the severe initial setbacks in Iraq, the United States adapted. The group associated with General David Petraeus took some of the technologies associated with the RMA, accepted that numbers still made a difference, and then brought in a more street-wise grasp of the political circumstances in which the military was operating. The strategy emphasized that military actions must be evaluated by reference to their political effects, not simply by traditional metrics geared toward eliminating enemy forces, and stressed the importance of reinforcing these effects through what are now called “information operations.” This approach has required not only tenacity but also a commitment of resources and a tolerance of casualties that would have been considered excessive, even prohibitive, as the campaigns were first planned in the aftermath of 9/11. The

situation demonstrates how much worse it is to lose a fight than to walk away from a fight before it has begun. Doctrine and tactics have been changed to deal with novel, and in some respects unique, situations. The enemy is unlikely to win in Afghanistan or Iraq in the sense that it will not be able to seize the state. But it is also true that in neither case can it be said that the United States’ side clearly won. Both U.S. occupied countries remain unstable and have suffered very high costs in lives and depressed social and economic development. Their long-term political prospects are unclear. With one naturally centralized and oil-rich and the other fragmented and poor, their circumstances are very different. In their own ways, both provide telling reminders that defeating insurgencies depends on the quality of government as much as, if not more than, military technique.

Can we assume that recent military engagements will set the pattern for the future? The military history of the 2000s was nothing like that of the 1990s, which in turn was quite different from the 1980s. Why should we expect to be able to predict the 2010s? Indeed, this decade has already begun with a reluctant intervention in Libya. The combination of high ambition and self-imposed restraints that characterize this engagement is unlike any that has come before.

The main continuity in the post-Cold War period, in addition to the reduced risk of a great-power confrontation, has been in the shift of focus from preparing to deal with challenges from strong states to engaging with weak and failed states, at first under the guise of peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention and then under the capacious umbrella of the “war on terror.”

Unlike the large-scale great-power wars of the past, in which the stakes were

clear, the consequences of defeat grim, involving the mobilization of whole societies and international alliances, the strategic imperatives behind the operations of the past two decades have been more controversial. The reason, however, is not the level of casualties. Those who fight are largely volunteer regulars. Losses have not approached the industrial scale of the great wars, though in some respects, that difference has made individual sacrifices more personal and poignant. Politically, the main issue is whether these lives are being sacrificed to any good purpose. Questions are constantly asked about why and how a war is being fought and the probability of success.

An attempt was made, notably by the Bush administration, to distinguish the “wars of choice” of the 1990s from the “wars of necessity” of the 2000s. This distinction, for which I take some responsibility, is misleading. There is always a choice, even if it is a terrible one. Undoubtedly different was how the stakes were perceived. With the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, the choice was first about whether to pay attention, and only then to decide what to do. If the issues that might have prompted, and in some cases did prompt, these interventions were ignored, the consequences for those directly involved might have been dire, but others could have carried on as before. Indifference was an option. The term “war of necessity” implied the presence of an existential security threat, the handling of which would determine a state’s future position. In these cases, indifference was not an option.

It was difficult both before and after 9/11 to measure the threat posed by Al Qaeda. The rhetoric of leaders such as Osama bin Laden was extravagant in its incitement to violence, yet their followers had only occasional successes. They made an appeal to an underlying ideolo-

gy that ran deep and wide in certain countries but was patchy in others. The resulting violence was largely localized and sporadic.

For the moment, at least, the spectacular attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon remain unique. At the same time, the insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and countries where the United States and its allies have not made the same military commitments, have been persistent, intensive, and troublesome. Strategy has become preoccupied with issues such as the relationship between military technique and political legitimacy, the radicalization of populations, the management of intercommunal violence, governance and corruption, and the role of international opinion.

If the recent past has set a pattern that will continue for some time, we are now entering a period when conflicts will be dominated by irregular forms of warfare. Talk of a fourth generation of warfare suffers from a historicist fallacy similar to the one affecting the RMA concept: namely, that forms of warfare pass through a natural progression. The difference is that the rhetoric behind the RMA was buoyed by a technological optimism, while the gloom surrounding the notion of the fourth generation reflects cultural and political pessimism. Irregular warfare, however, is hardly a novel phenomenon. It was used in the fight against colonialism to circumvent the evident superiority of the metropolitan states in military organization and firepower. During the course of major regular wars, there were often irregular elements. The two forms are not exclusive and can coexist. One of the textbooks of irregular warfare, Lawrence of Arabia’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, was based on his role in Arab harassment of Turkish forces during World War I. In World War II, German forces in Europe had to defend their territorial

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gains from irregular partisan attacks as well as from regular allied forces. Regular war supposes that political disputes can be settled through battle with a military surrender followed by a transfer of sovereignty. But if a sufficient portion of a population refuses to accept the result, popular militias, along with other forms of resistance, may challenge the apparent victor. At this stage, the conflict is no longer a regular war. One such popular uprising occurred in France after the 1871 war with Prussia, eventually leading to the Paris Commune. It also happened in 2001 in Afghanistan and in 2003 in Iraq.

Regular warfare is perceived to be in decline. This view can be attributed to the likely destructiveness of war between great powers, especially those armed with nuclear weapons; a consequential readiness to solve great-power disputes by means other than war; and the superiority of Western states in the conduct of regular war. The increased focus on irregular war emerged from the apparent invincibility of U.S. forces, with or without their allies, in conventional battle. To the extent that states, not necessarily great powers, remain ready to resolve disputes through force of arms, regular war remains a possibility, as Palestine and Israel, India and Pakistan have shown over the years. For the moment, these particular conflicts are being carried out largely through irregular means, although Israel and India have indicated they are prepared to use regular forces if irregular attacks are pushed too far. The conflict in Libya has seen regular forces taking on a cobbled-together militia that could survive only with support from NATO airpower. Future regular wars that do not involve the United States and its allies directly are possible, even if they take on a cataclysmic form (for example, a confrontation between China and India).

For the United States, the issue is not the war the country is most likely to fight but the war for which its military should prepare. Preparedness is a form of deterrence; it should mean that the war does not have to be fought, which inevitably leaves open the question of whether the expenditure and effort were necessary in the first place. This is especially the case because a defensive preparedness must involve a substantial capability for major war. Thankfully, America's strength is only one of a number of reasons why such a war remains highly unlikely. Regardless, we can assume that the ability to fight and prevail in a war with another great power will continue to be the top priority for U.S. defense. The key question is whether the United States will need to maintain a substantial capacity to fight an irregular war. Over the past few years, it has added a much more sophisticated counterinsurgency capability to its repertoire. In the 1970s, the U.S. Army considered Vietnam to be exactly the sort of war it never wished to fight again; thus, it turned away from counterinsurgency in order to concentrate on its core task of preparing for great-power conflict, at that time against the Warsaw Pact in the center of Europe. In this setting, the RMA emerged: indeed, the embrace of the relevant technologies can be traced back to the rediscovery of maneuver warfare and the Army's adoption of "air-land battle" as core doctrine.

As Iraq and Afghanistan became more demanding in the 2000s, this comfort zone was no longer so available. A growing sense of a global conflict against a resourceful and ideologically driven opponent suggested another pattern. The messy, prolonged fights in which the United States was directly involved, as well as those in which the United States had an interest, if a less central role—such as Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Leb-

anon, and Gaza – appeared to be part of the picture. Instead of an occasional decisive campaign to ward off a challenge from an aspirant great power, the future would likely be marked by a succession of struggles against Islamist opponents operating in and out of broken, weak states.

In most cases where states facing a serious Islamist threat looked to the United States for help, support took the form of intelligence and training as well as specific capabilities such as special forces and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Iraq, to say the least, was hardly an inevitable response to 9/11. The intervention in Afghanistan had a greater logic in that regard. Al Qaeda, residing brazenly in Afghanistan, could be targeted by means of a reasonably regular military campaign. An available conventional response was an unusual feature of this case, but it encouraged the perception of the utility of conventional military force in the “war on terror.” However seriously we take the Islamist threat, it is important to emphasize that this response is the exception rather than the norm.

**I**rregular forms of warfare are favored by underdogs who know that they have little chance against superior conventional forces. By itself, irregular warfare cannot lead to a decisive victory. Some, of course, may acknowledge this point while insisting that it is irrelevant. Their objectives may be no more than to express anger, exact retribution, or promote a particular cause, such as animal rights. If, however, the objective involves an attempt to liberate some territory or seize political control, then at some point, a direct challenge to other regular or militia-type forces will be required, possibly leading to open battle rather than to raids, harassment, and ambushes.

This scenario might come about as follows: persistent attacks try the patience

and resilience of the ruling elite and its external supporters; their authority and confidence are undermined while an audience is created for a rival political creed; and eventually, there is sufficient support to topple the regime and put a new, popular government in its place. The crucial moment arrives when the irregulars gain recruits and support, and the enemy suffers from desertion and popular disaffection. As the balance of power shifts, the irregulars will be able to act in a more regular fashion.

This aspiration was explicit in Asian guerrilla theory, including in the campaigns of Mao in China or Giap in Vietnam. Irregular warfare – for example, in the form of guerrilla tactics – was not a preferred way of fighting: it was for want of something better. By itself, it could not produce victory because it did not allow power to be wrested directly from the state. At some point, even if only during the endgame, the irregulars had to gain the strength to ensure a decisive victory over the state or, if the enemy collapsed, assert their authority as the armed forces of a state-in-waiting. In this way, Fidel Castro and his hitherto ragged bunch of guerrilla fighters marked their victory over the regular forces of Batista in Cuba a half-century ago. Once state power is seized, even if relatively little effort is required, it must be secured against internal and external enemies. Defending state rule requires organizational and operational forms quite different from those required to wage guerrilla war, let alone mount random acts of terror.

Regardless of how successful they have been in mounting individual attacks and embarrassing enemies, irregular campaigns rarely lead to power. For example, even if successive terroristic attacks on U.S. targets persuaded the United States to disengage entirely from the Middle East, the responsible group would still be

left fighting local opponents and rivals for actual power. Note what happened in Afghanistan after the Soviet Union withdrew. In this respect, the Libyan conflict was almost back-to-front. An anti-Gaddafi mass movement developed quickly, asserted itself in the capital Tripoli, and soon seized other population centers – notably, the eastern city of Benghazi. Using superior firepower, crudely applied, the regime was able to regain control of Tripoli and would then have rolled up the rebels had it not been for the UN-authorized intervention. Ironically, it was the beleaguered regime claiming that the rebels were really Islamist terrorists masquerading as democrats, while NATO countries accepted the rebels more or less at face value, as a loose and largely uncoordinated collection of anti-regime elements.

The point here is that the great dramas of regime change differ significantly; further, they often involve substantial armed components as well as terrorist plots. It is not that every two-bit terror group must imagine itself as a great army-in-waiting, although many do. For most, the first priority is survival, perhaps through advertising their presence with a conspicuous act, which may be geared to recruitment and fundraising as much as to the pursuit of long-term political objectives. They may have intense and contentious debates about long-term strategy – indeed, some do little else – but these are often exercises in futility. Nonetheless, even small and simple groups try to present themselves as regular forces in development, distinct from a political wing yet with military-type command structures and designations.

This is why it was unusual to be able to respond to Al Qaeda in 2001 by means of a regular operation. In general, terrorism is the most primitive form of irregular warfare. It might be defined as succeed-

ing if the *only* intention is to cause hurt; if there is a wider political intention, the effort normally fails. Al Qaeda's Afghan base made it unusual for terrorist groups because it was not operating against the host state and, in fact, was afforded a degree of state protection as it mounted attacks elsewhere. When terrorist groups operate within hostile societies, the best option is to consider them to be criminals: that is, offenders to be dealt with through the methods of law enforcement, such as domestic intelligence, the police, and the judiciary. Terrorists involved in robbery, extortion, and even kidnapping to obtain finance may fit this description literally. Defining them in this way has benefits in terms of propaganda as well as in the choice of countermeasures. It is also likely to be appropriate as long as the terrorists consist of small cells of militants hiding within the host population. The most basic counterterrorist work in the West, therefore, involves intelligence gathering, arrests, and protecting key targets. If these groups reach the point where they are best dealt with by military means, then they have outgrown the terrorist label and have become something altogether more serious.

Groups with the size and persistence to challenge state power are usually described in terms of *resistance* or *insurgency*. Here, the intent is less to attack civil society than to use civil society as a base from which to attack the regular forces of the enemy, either demonstrating the weakness of the state or inviting the state to reveal its oppressive nature. Terrorist acts may play a role in such campaigns as part of a more integrated strategy involving various types of operations. Strategic *resistance*, which is essentially defensive, refers to the methods used to prevent an occupying force from establishing itself; a strategic *insurgency*, which is essential-

ly offensive, refers to the methods used to expel a purportedly illegitimate force from a defined territory.

At either level, the attitude of the local population is crucial. Success for a resistance movement typically depends on a supportive population. The task for an insurgency is to create support where, at the outset, it is scarce. To do so, the insurgents must find a point of political contact with the target community. Support leads to sanctuaries, supply lines, recruits, and intelligence, without which either type of warfare risks defeat and suffers from a constant fear of informers and a lack of supplies and new recruits. Relations with the community may be forged on the basis of a shared patriotism or kinship, but they may also be based on intimidation and fear – for example, the consequences of known collaboration with the enemy, or the expectation that even when the insurgents disappear, they may return ready for revenge if they ever feel betrayed.

As with any type of warfare, successful terrorism depends on strong and intelligent leadership and internal discipline and organization. The clandestine circumstances in which terrorists operate make these qualities much harder to achieve than in other forms of warfare. In practice, terrorism tends to rely on barely coordinated and fragmented attacks by independent cells. It risks alienating likely sources of support without denting state power. These groups, in part because of their radical, ideological nature, are often prone to fragmentation and intense arguments about political narratives, strategy, and tactics. Organizational survival may lead to operations undertaken to demonstrate leadership of the struggle and maintain activist morale as much as to hurt the enemy. There is always the potential for internecine warfare, as different groups vie with each other to control a struggle to which they all are notionally committed.

If a terrorist group makes progress, it does so by creating an aura of irresistibility, suggesting the state's inability to cope. This process generally depends on regular, incessant attacks. Regularity may be more important than scale because the aim is to demonstrate an ability to operate at will – to outsmart the authorities at every turn – which is possible only with a degree of popular support. In this regard, terrorism as a strategy can be defined by its objective to create the conditions for resistance or insurgency. By extension, the objective of resistance or insurgency is to create the conditions for regular war. And regular warfare, in turn, seeks to create the conditions for a transfer of sovereignty.

The basic requirement for countering opponents who adopt irregular warfare is to take the progression described above and push it in the other direction: that is, force the enemy to take the backward step from an insurgency to terrorism. This task entails denying the credibility of irregulars' claims to be acting on behalf of whole communities. Front-line countering forces must ensure they are recognizably local and can play the patriotic card as effectively as the enemy. Further, they must acquire critical intelligence in order to identify and isolate the militants from their potential sources of support. These measures take time and put a premium on patience. They require sensitivity to grievances and fears and attention to culture and anthropology as much as technology and tactics. Their boundaries are blurred; there is no confined military space and time to be set apart from civilian space and time. On the one hand, heavy-handed tactics may confirm enemy propaganda and help the adversary gain recruits; on the other, an overly light touch might allow opponents to establish unencumbered their political authority – as in no-go areas where state

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forces dare not enter and where a parallel government may be established.

To fight an irregular war outside one's own territory is inherently difficult. Indeed, foreign forces can soon appear to be an alien force of occupation. This perception will grow if they adopt harsh methods. Compared with colonial times, overt coercion of civilians is now out of bounds. Damage to civilian infrastructure or civilian casualties that result from attacks on military-related targets are explained as unintended and regrettable "collateral damage"; such consequences are not justified as a means of persuading the enemy to give up. When an enemy is engaged in irregular methods, however, following the precepts of regular warfare in distinguishing at all times between combatants and noncombatants becomes difficult. An enemy militant may well look like an innocent civilian. Frightened soldiers are apt to take few risks when they fear attack. For them, it can be frustrating to be forbidden to chase enemy fighters into their towns and villages, or to allow open supply lines to avoid creating a sense of civilian siege.

The need to win over "hearts and minds" is a frequent theme in discussions of strategies for irregular wars. It is referred to whenever tough methods used by one's own side are questioned and whenever there is a need to persuade people, through good works and sensitivity to their concerns, that the government and the security forces really are on their side. The term captures the idea of wars being won in the cognitive (intellectual and emotional) rather than the physical domain. Practices that diminish support are not hard to discern: arbitrary arrests, displays of brute force, rudeness, and disrespectful behavior are likely to generate alienation and hostility. Winning support is harder: the real concerns and grievances of the local people must be

addressed, even if attending to this task means upsetting local power structures. In part, it may be a matter of civic action – repairing roads and building schools, or securing power and sanitation infrastructures – but at some point, issues of official repression, land reform, or ethnic mix may become germane.

There is a chicken-and-egg problem. These strategies can be too dangerous to follow without local security; but until local security is established, they cannot be followed. Without security, foreign troops and local people will be unable to interact closely and develop mutual trust. Security is not just a matter of immediate safety. It also requires looking forward to assess the likely future power structure that will emerge as the conflict develops. As the irregulars and the counter-irregulars compete for local support, impressions of strength may be as important as those of kindness and concern. Support is as likely to be based on convincing people that you will win as it is on promises of future goods and services.

Thus, unlike regular warfare, irregular conflicts are unlikely to turn on having the most advanced technology or overwhelming force. In these conflicts, politics does far more than set the terms for the fight: it infuses every move. Incentives for authorities typically point toward minimizing the fighting and appearing not to rely on shows of force. The military role may therefore be quite limited; key tasks are instead in the hands of intelligence agencies, the police, and even political leaders and intellectuals who frame and describe the core issues at the heart of the struggle. The challenge for external forces intervening in such struggles, especially if their role is prominent, is not only to win local support, but also to retain the public's favor back home. In both respects, a military strategy must be integrated with a political one.



This judgment does not change in the two most difficult scenarios. In the first, groups are able to develop forms of unconventional attack that could rock the foundations of society. The main concern in this category has been the possibility of chemical, biological, radiological, and – most frightening but least likely – nuclear weapons campaigns. Alternatively, irregulars might be able to attack the information networks that sustain core infrastructure. Other than in the particular case where terrorists are acting as agents of, or with substantial support from, another state, these threats are still best addressed through intelligence agencies and the police. There may be specialized military capabilities of potential value: intelligence support, specialist sensors, and the forms of assistance that may be required after any catastrophic incident. The military tends to play a role in the aftermath of any disaster because it can offer fit and disciplined troops as well as organizational capacity, including managing logistical problems, gathering information, and maintaining complex communication networks over time and in adverse conditions.

In the second difficult scenario, which is already common, a weak state that is unable to cope with a developing challenge requests support. There may be good reasons for its weakness. Supposed counterterrorism operations may just be part of an attempt to impose political order from the center, as a rationale for wider repression. Given that the parallel political processes necessary for a “hearts and minds” approach may be absent, there is little prospect that grievances will be addressed. The police may be unable to cope or, if they are corrupt, incompetent, sectarian in nature, or distrusted by the target population, they may be part of the problem. If the supported regime is weak for these reasons, the situation is

unlikely to be improved by the insertion of large numbers of foreign forces. The commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan were the result of the direct role the United States played in toppling the previous regime and its responsibility for what followed. Without that responsibility, the more likely inclination will be to limit liabilities and confine support to specialist capabilities.

Attitudes toward the use of force after the Cold War have been shaped from the start by Iraq. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the crudity of the aggression and the importance of the region led to a strong collective response. Desert Storm was a regular war; Kuwait was liberated by battle; and the vicious repression that followed the postwar insurrection led coalition forces to set up safe havens for the Kurds in northern Iraq. This engagement set the precedent for subsequent humanitarian interventions. As Saddam Hussein played games with UN inspectors, the United States used coercive means to force him back into line. Those efforts culminated in the December 1998 air strikes of Desert Fox. Frustration at the leader’s continued defiance and survival led to the 2003 invasion, illustrating just how strong the United States is when fighting on its own terms. The subsequent irregular warfare, however, demonstrated just how difficult it finds fighting on another’s terms.

The experience of the past decade has provided a far better grasp of both the potential and the limitations of irregular forms of fighting, from terrorism to insurgency. Unconventional methods can create contests of endurance, especially for external powers trying to assert control in places where they are not entirely welcome and where their strategic interests are uncertain. This scenario creates a paradox. In conventional warfare, the

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United States and its allies are unbeatable against countries lacking advanced military capabilities. At the same time, all powers struggle when facing resistance from a population, or from segments of that population. In the end, the United States and its allies can avoid defeat because such a loss would require irregular forces to undergo transformation into a regular force capable of seizing power. To win, however, the United States itself depends on the regimes it supports, or in the anomalous case of Libya, the rebels it supports, who lacked the wherewithal to take on the enemy effectively on the ground. There is no reason to doubt that Western forces would have faced far less difficulty in taking out pro-Gaddafi forces, but even the anti-Gaddafi forces, in addition to the relevant Western governments, felt that such a response would send the wrong political messages.

This analysis suggests three propositions. The first, to be blunt, is that after two decades of high-tempo and controversial operations, absent any further 9/11-type shocks, the United States will be increasingly wary about entering into any more long-term commitments involving direct combat. In Libya the Obama administration was prepared to accept the risks of an inconclusive outcome, and it framed U.S. involvement as participation in a coalition led from elsewhere, rather than as taking responsibility for another major operation.

The second proposition is that no single country, however large and resourceful, can control the rest of the world to suit its own interests. A new international political configuration has begun to take shape with a number of “emerging” powers making great strides economically, even as established liberal capitalist states have faltered. These emerging powers are unlikely to coalesce into a new bloc – at least, no more than was ever the case with the

“third world.” Two of them, India and China, are the most populous countries on earth, and both are wary of each other. India, to some extent, has moved much closer to the West over the past decade, in part because of a shared concern over Islamism. China, which is now asserting itself, is considered a rising superpower and clearly has great economic clout, but it remains hampered by a lack of obvious allies (other than North Korea) and wide ideological appeal. Its foreign policy could be described as realist and mercantilist. Russia, which has recovered (largely on the back of energy prices) from the shambles of the 1990s, is sometimes classed with these emergent powers; but its economy is narrowly based, and Moscow has uneasy relations with most of its neighbors.

The problems the United States has faced may help explain why others are wary of trying to compete for full great-power status, although they may well act forcefully around their own borders and, in a number of cases, have already done so. Great-power status implies a responsibility and a right to intervene at a distance from border areas. Any cost/benefit analysis would encourage caution. For this reason, the rising economic powers might turn out to be circumspect when claiming such a position for themselves. Brazil, Russia, India, and China, the supposedly ascendant powers, all voted against UN Resolution 1973, which authorized the Libyan intervention, when the decision came before the Security Council. Indeed, being a great power is severely overrated. The duties and responsibilities associated with the status are as likely to turn candidate great powers away as they are to inspire pursuit of the title. A wiser policy may be less about bossing everyone around and more about helping other peoples sort out their quarrels.

The third proposition, therefore, is that while the United States is suffering from

the financial crisis and the cumulative effects of its more recent interventions, both of which have diminished its standing, it will remain the world's predominant power. When a coalition of countries decided to act in Libya, Britain and France, which were taking the lead, still needed vital American "enablers."

The cumulative impact of these conclusions points to a unique situation. For the first time since decolonization, no evident strategic imperatives draw Western countries into the affairs of the developing world. Oil continues to make some parts of the world more important to the West than others; it becomes a factor when tensions rise, but not to the extent where supply issues mandate certain forms of intervention. There is a view that scarce resources and other problems aggravated by climate change, such as population movements, may result in much more international conflict. It would certainly be unwise to argue that no larger circumstances exist that would lead to direct military engagement, let alone less demanding forms of political or technical assistance. The point is that, for the moment, the incentives for involvement are much weaker than before, a situation that carries risks of a political vacuum.

Another view is that this reluctance to intervene will be all to the good; that past Western actions have inflicted more harm than benefit, stirring up discontent and anti-Western feeling; and that individual countries should take responsibility for their own regional discontents. Even NGOs, which have decades of development experience, are now far more realistic than sentimental, emphasizing long-term capacity building rather than financial subsidies or loans from rich countries. For a variety of reasons having to do with resources, practicality, prudence,

and changing attitudes, we may now be entering a period in which international crisis management will become progressively less energetic and more dependent on local attitudes and efforts.

Libya appears as an exception, yet the intervention occurred only because of considerable provocation by a regime whose behavior had already been denounced. Further, a massacre in Benghazi appeared imminent; the Arab League was urging action; and even with strong UN support, numerous provisos were designed to limit the liabilities of the outside actors and ensure that the final struggle was between Libyans. Nothing in this episode suggests a lack of caution. In the future we can expect more buck-passing, or looking to others to take the lead only to blame them when things go wrong. In addition, there will be a greater stress on diplomatic efforts to encourage "common sense" among disputants and help mediate settlements. This will replace a readiness to actively knock heads together and impose settlements. In the face of defiance, the priority will be to explore political solutions, and force will be very much a last resort. Major reconstruction efforts will be desultory.

Putting Libya to one side, there is already evidence for this shifting outlook. It can be seen in the uncertainties over what to do about North Korea, Iran, and the Israel/Palestine dispute, or the popular uprisings in Iran, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. It is expressed in the frustration over Afghanistan and the lackluster or belated responses to the tragedies of Sudan, Congo, and the Ivory Coast. The Micawberish hope appears to be that something will turn up, perhaps the overthrow of an odious regime or an economic upturn, that will ease problems by creating a shared interest in prosperity. If this is the case, and sometimes it is, then international order will increasingly de-

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pend on good luck rather than good management.

Attempting to predict the future confronts the general problem that prospects depend on choices yet to be made. Nonetheless, in describing matters of degree, tendencies, shifting emphases, and declining capabilities and will, rather than their complete absence, the new norm is one of less activity rather than total passivity. It is no longer possible to think of international politics in terms of simple hierarchies of great powers. Certainly, particular events can change perceptions. The expectations about the Bush administration, which was forecast to follow a cautious “realist” strategy along the lines implied here, were overturned by 9/11. A terrible humanitarian catastrophe or a set of terrorist outrages may prompt surges of diplomatic, developmental, and military activity. If countries are used as sanctuaries for terrorism, or attempt to manipulate energy supplies or maritime trade, defensive measures may not be enough. There will still be arguments to address threats emanating from dangerous parts of the world at the source; in these cases, the prevailing view will be that it is best to nip dangers in the bud before they become critical. As we have already seen with Libya, crude forms of oppression can prompt a revival of the forms of discretionary interventionism that developed during the 1990s under the heading of the “responsibility to protect.” But again as we have also seen with Libya, these claims, and the evidence on which they are based, will have to look extremely strong before they are taken as seriously as they were in 2002–2003.

The question of the future of armed force lies in politics rather than technology, and of the two, politics is by far the murkiest. Nonetheless, the ambition of the 2000s is likely to be followed by the caution of the 2010s.