Chapter 14

The changing character of war

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- Introduction 216
- Definitions 217
- The nature of war 218
- The revolution in military affairs 220
- Postmodern war 223
- New wars 224
- Conclusion 227

Reader's Guide

War has been one of the key institutions of the practice of international relations, and has always been a central focus of the study of international relations. In the post-cold war period, many observers have suggested that the nature of war is undergoing fundamental changes, or even that, in some parts of the world at least, it has become obsolete. With the advance of economic interdependence through globalization, and the spread of democracy, some groups of states seem to have formed security communities where war between them is no longer a possibility.

Elsewhere, however, war has continued to exist, and to take a number of different forms. For some countries, such as the USA, the use of advanced technology to achieve dramatic victories against conventional armies has led to suggestions that a revolution in military affairs is under way. Other parts of the world, however, have been characterized by warfare in which non-state actors have been prominent, the military technology employed has been relatively unsophisticated, and atrocities have been commonplace. Such 'new wars', it is argued by many, are a direct result of the process of globalization.

Introduction

The British strategic thinker Basil Liddell Hart once wrote that 'if you want peace, understand war', while the revolutionary Marxist Leon Trotsky declared confidently that 'you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you'. This advice remains appropriate in the contemporary world. Around 14,400 wars have occurred throughout recorded history, claiming the lives of some 3.5 billion people. Since 1815 there have been between 224 and 559 wars, depending on the definition of war that is used (Mingst 2004: 198). War has not disappeared as a form of social behaviour and shows no signs of doing so, though it is not necessarily an inevitable form of human behaviour. Since the end of the cold war, the annual number of wars, the number of battle deaths, and the number of war-related massacres have all declined sharply compared with the cold war period. Between 1989 and 1992 nearly 100 wars came to an end, and in terms of battle deaths the 1990s were the least violent decade since the end of the Second World War (*Human Security Report 2005*: 17). Despite the overall decline in the incidence of war, however, in many regions it is very much present and is displaying some novel features in comparison to those typical of the cold war period (**see Ch. 3**).

The utility of warfare

In the contemporary world, powerful pressures are producing changes to national economies and societies. Some of these can be seen to reflect the impact of **globalization**, others are the result of the broader effects of postmodernity, but their cumulative effect has been to bring about significant political and social changes, which have in turn been reflected in changed perceptions of the nature of threats coming from the external environment. This is turn has influenced beliefs regarding the utility of force as an instrument of policy, and the forms and functions of war. In the past two centuries—the 'modern' era of history—war has traditionally been seen as a brutal form of politics, a way in which **states** sought to resolve certain issues in international relations, and an outcome of their willingness to amass military power for defence and deterrence and to project it in support of their foreign and defence policies. The two 'world wars' of the twentieth century typified this approach to the instrumentality of war. However, in the post-cold war period, the kinds of threats that have driven the accumulation of military power in the developed world have not taken the form of traditional state-to-state military rivalry. Instead, they have been a response to rather more amorphous and less predictable threats such as **terrorism** (**see Ch. 23**), insurgencies, and internal crises in other countries that seem to demand the projection of military force to resolve them (**see Box 14.1**).

The nineteenth-century strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that the fundamental nature of war as the use of violence in pursuit of political goals is immutable. The nature of war refers to the constant, universal, and inherent qualities that ultimately shape war as a political instrument throughout the ages, such as violence, chance, and uncertainty. The forms of war, in contrast, relate to the impermanent, circumstantial, and adaptive features that war develops, and that account for the different periods of warfare throughout history, each displaying attributes determined by socio-political and historical preconditions, while also influencing those conditions. Clausewitz also distinguished between the objective and subjective nature of war, the former comprising the elements common to all wars, and the latter consisting of those features that make each war unique.

Box 14.1 The obsolescence of war

A striking feature of war in some parts of the contemporary world is its absence. The North Atlantic region has been described as a 'security community', a group of states for whom war has disappeared as a means of resolving mutual disputes, although they may continue to use war against opponents outside the security community. One common characteristic of these states is that they are democracies, and it has been suggested that while democracies will go to war, they are not prepared to fight against a fellow democracy. The assumption of this 'democratic peace' argument is that where groups of democracies inhabit a region, war will become extinct in that region, and that as democracy spreads throughout the world, war will decline. However, there is a danger that some wars will occur as democracies attempt to overthrow non-democratic regimes to spread the 'democratic zone of peace', so that wars will be fought in the name of peace. In addition, for some observers, even non-democracies will be averse to fighting wars when both they and their great power rivals are armed with nuclear weapons. John Mueller and Charles Mosko have both argued that while war as such will not disappear, a 'warless society' will exist, embracing the superpowers and major European powers in their relations with each other.

The characteristics, or form, of war typical in any particular age might change, but the essential nature of war could not. For Clausewitz, the novel characteristics of war were not the result of new inventions, but of new ideas and social conditions. It would not be surprising, therefore, to see that the processes of postmodernity and globalization of an international system characterized by constant and even accelerating change should be marked by changes in the forms of warfare being waged in the system. Wars are a socially constructed form of large-scale human group behaviour, and must be understood within the wider contexts of their political and cultural environments.

In an era of unprecedented communications technologies, new fields of warfare have emerged. **Non-state actors** in the post-cold war period have moved to transform both cyberspace and the global media into crucial battlegrounds, alongside terrestrial military and terrorist operations, so that war is now fought on a number of different planes of reality simultaneously, and reality itself is subverted in the cause of war through sophisticated strategies of informational and electronic deception. The battlefield of the past has now become the '**battlespace**', and it is three-dimensional in the sense of including airpower and the use of space satellites, and in some senses is non-dimensional, in that it also embraces cyberspace and communications wavebands (**Box 14.2**).

At the same time, the tangible capacity for war-making has also been developing.

Military technology with enormous destructive capacity is becoming available to more and more states. This is important not just because the technology to produce and deliver weapons of mass destruction is spreading, but also because highly advanced 'conventional' military technology such as remotely piloted 'drone' aircraft is becoming more widely available.

Box 14.2 Cyberwarfare

As states become more dependent on complex information-gathering and weapons-targeting technologies and command systems, they become vulnerable to cyberwarfare. Cyberspace is 'the total interconnectedness of human beings through computers and telecommunications'. Cyberwarfare therefore relates to a state's ability to attack another state's computer and information networks in cyberspace and to protect its own capabilities from attacks by adversaries. This is critical in contemporary high-technology warfare, where the USA, for example, seeks to dominate the information domain so totally in wartime that it can conduct its military operations without effective opposition. Such attacks can be limited to purely military targets or can be directed against the adversary's economic and political system more generally. A large number of states, such as India and Cuba, are believed to be developing cyberwarfare capabilities, and several, including the USA, Russia, China, and the UK, have incorporated cyberwarfare into their military doctrines.

Key Points

- War has been a central feature of human history.
- Since the end of the cold war, both the frequency and lethality of war have shown a sharp decline.
- War between the great powers, in particular, has become much more unlikely than in previous eras.
- Changes in the international system may be changing the character of war.

Definitions

In order to evaluate how war might be changing, it is first of all necessary to say what it is. Because war is a fluid concept, it has generated a large number of sometimes contradictory definitions. Some have seen it as any form of armed and organized physical conflict, while for Quincy Wright war was 'a violent contact of distinct but similar entities' (Freedman 1994: 69). A general description of this sort is not particularly helpful for understanding contemporary war, because it is insufficiently specific and could equally describe gang warfare. Violent crime is an important aspect of global human insecurity, killing more people each year than war and terrorism combined, but it is not war. More useful is Clausewitz's statement that war is 'an act of force intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will', and 'a continuation of political intercourse with a mixture of other means'. In Clausewitz's work, the meaning is clarified in the context by the assumption that the reader understands that he is talking about large-scale military confrontations between the representatives of states. Webster's Dictionary reinforces this position by defining war as 'a state of usually open

and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations'. Unfortunately, in the current era, that is not something that can simply be assumed, because non-state groups have become prominent actors in contemporary warfare. A more useful definition in this sense is Hedley Bull's, that it is 'organised violence carried on by political units against each other' (Bull 1977: 184). Bull goes on to insist that violence is not war unless it is both carried out by a political unit, and directed against another political unit.

It is valid to ask what sorts of goals are involved and how much violence is required for an armed clash to be called a 'war'. However, choosing a particular threshold can also seem arbitrary, as with the influential Singer and Small definition, which requires a war to involve at least 1,000 battle deaths per year. By this token, the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War between Argentina and the UK would barely qualify, although few would argue that that conflict was not a war. Some sense of scale is clearly needed, but perhaps Quincy Wright's less specific formulation is still reasonable, that war is 'a conflict among political groups, especially sovereign states, carried on by armed forces of considerable magnitude, for a considerable period of time' (Wright 1968: 453).

Key Points

- War in the contemporary era is not always easy to define.
- War is a brutal form of politics.

The nature of war

If, as some have argued, war has indeed taken on new forms in the post-cold war era, or perhaps has even seen an evolution in its essential nature, then it is necessary to compare these recent examples with traditional forms and interpretations of war in order to determine what, if anything, has changed, and what are simply contemporary manifestations of an ancient phenomenon. This is not as straightforward an exercise as it might at first appear. War is a form of organized human violence, and when conducted by states using significant quantities of personnel, materiel and firepower, it is comparatively easy to recognize. But at the lower end of the spectrum of violence it begins to overlap with other forms of conflict such as terrorism, insurgency, and criminal violence, and clear distinctions and definitions become harder to maintain (**see Ch. 23**). War always involves violence, but not all violence can be described as war. Violence is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for a conflict to be defined as a war.

Wars are fought for reasons. The Western understanding of war, following Clausewitz, sees it as instrumental, a means to an end. Wars in this perspective are not random violence; they reflect a conscious decision to engage in them for a rational political purpose (**see Box 14.3**).

War and society

War is a form of social and political behaviour. This was one of the central arguments of Clausewitz. It remains true in the twenty-first century, but only if we operate with a broad and flexible understanding of what constitutes politics. As our understanding of politics, and the forms it can take, has evolved in the postmodern era, we should expect the same to be true of the character of war, since that is itself a form of politics.

The political nature of war has been evolving in recent decades under the impact of globalization, which has increasingly eroded the economic, political, and cultural autonomy of the state. Contemporary warfare takes place in a local context, but it is also played out in wider fields and influenced by **non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations** (**see Ch. 21**), regional and global media, and users of the Internet. In many ways, contemporary wars are partly fought on television, and the media therefore have a powerful role in providing a framework of understanding for viewers of the conflict.

Box 14.3 Thucydides on war

In some ways wars have changed little over the ages. 2,500 years ago the Greek historian Thucydides observed: 'That war is an evil is something we all know, and it would be pointless to go on cataloguing all the disadvantages involved in it. No one is forced into war by ignorance, nor, if he thinks he will gain by it, is he kept out of it by fear. The fact is that one side thinks that the profits to be won outweigh the risks to be incurred, and the other side is ready to face danger rather than accept an immediate loss.'

(Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, Book IV)

War is an extremely paradoxical activity. Human beings are simultaneously the most violent and the most cooperative species that has inhabited the earth. In one sense war is very clearly 'made up of acts of enmity rather than co-operation, of imposition rather than negotiation, of summary killing rather than due process, of destruction rather than creation' (Francis 2004: 42). Yet, in another sense, war is clearly a profoundly social activity, an example of humanity's 'enormous capacity for friendly co-operation' (Bigelow 1969: 3). Michel Foucault called the institution of war 'the military dimension of society' (Foucault 1996: 415). This is because the conduct of war requires a society to cooperate in performing complex tasks on a large scale. Societies can fight wars because they are able to cooperate at the internal level. On the other hand, they feel themselves compelled to fight other societies because they often find it difficult to cooperate at the external level. The very act of fighting outsiders may make it easier to cooperate internally. Unless a war is a civil war or highly unpopular domestically, there is a curious sense in which a state at war is also a state at peace.

War is both a highly organized and a highly organizing phenomenon. In the words of the sociologist Charles Tilly, 'war made the state, and the state made war'. The machinery of the state derived historically from the organizational demands of warfare, and modern states owe their origins and development to a large degree to the effects of earlier wars. The modern state was born during the Renaissance, a time of unprecedented violence. The intensity of armed conflict during this period triggered an early revolution in military affairs, in which the size of armies, their associated firepower, and the costs of warfare all increased dramatically. The need to survive in such a competitive and violent era favoured larger, more centralized political units that were able to control extensive tracts of territory, master complex military technologies, and mobilize the immense human resources required for success in battle.

Modernity and warfare

The high point of this evolution was the Thirty Years War, which racked Europe from 1618 to 1648 (**see Ch. 2**). By the end of that conflict, Europe was entering a new phase of historical development, modernity, which would come to dominate international history for the next 300 years before giving way to postmodernity in the late twentieth century. Modernity had many features and, as Clausewitz noted, each age has its own dominant characteristic form of war, which reflects the era in which it occurs, although there will also be other forms reflecting cultural and geographical realities. There was therefore a form of warfare that was typical of modernity.

The period of modernity was characterized by the rise of nationalism and increasingly centralized and bureaucratic states with rapidly rising populations, by the scientific and industrial revolutions, and by the growth of secular ideologies with messianic visions and an intolerance of opposing metanarratives, broad overarching ideologies such as **Marxism**. The warfare that was characteristic of the period reflected the forces of modernity, and its enormous transformational effects. States mobilized mass armies through centralized bureaucracies and the power of nationalism. They armed and equipped them with the products of industrialization and expected their populations to sacrifice themselves for the state, and to show no mercy to the opposing population that was being called upon to make the same self-sacrifice for its own motherland. The result was industrialized warfare on a massive scale, in which civilian populations as much as enemy soldiers were seen as legitimate targets, a process that culminated in the nuclear attacks on Japan in 1945.

At the same time, another feature of warfare during the modern period was that, at least in the conflicts between the developed states, it was governed by **rules**. An entire body of **international law** was developed to constrain and regulate the use of violence in wartime (**see Ch. 14**). Quincy Wright argues that war always involves a legal relationship, which distinguishes it from mere fighting, even organized fighting. It is 'a condition of time in which special rules permitting and regulating violence between governments prevails' (Wright 1965: 2). This is an important feature distinguishing war from other forms of violence. It is a particular kind of relationship between politically motivated groups.

War and change

The intensity of war often unleashes or accelerates numerous forces for change, transforming industry, society, and government in ways that are fundamental and permanent. By weakening or destroying traditional structures, or by compelling internal reforms, war may create conditions conducive to social change and political modernization. The requirement to defeat the opponent's forces may lead to advances in technologies

such as transportation, food manufacture and storage, communications, and so on that have applications well beyond the military sphere. It was in this sense that for the ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus war was 'the father of all and the king of all'.

Historically, during the period of modernity, the conduct of war compelled governments to centralize power in order to mobilize the resources necessary for victory. Bureaucracies and tax burdens increased in size to support the war effort. But the strains involved in preparing for and engaging in war can also lead to the weakening or disintegration of the state.

Nevertheless, war, in terms of both preparation and actual conduct, may be a powerful catalyst for change, but technological or even political modernization does not necessarily imply moral progress. Evolution in war, including its contemporary forms, may involve change that is morally problematic, as indeed is the case with the forces of globalization more generally (**see Ch. 33**). War is a profound agent of historical change, but it is not the fundamental driving force of history.

Key Points

- Contemporary warfare is being influenced by globalization.
- War requires highly organized societies.
- War can be a powerful catalyst for change.
- The nature of war remains constant, but its form reflects the particular era and environment in which it occurs.

The revolution in military affairs

Although many observers have suggested that the character of war is changing significantly, their reasons for coming to this conclusion are often quite different. One school of thought focuses on the so-called **revolution in military affairs** (RMA). The concept of the revolution in military affairs became popular after the dramatic American victory in the 1991 Gulf War. The manner in which superior technology and doctrine appeared to give the USA an almost effortless victory suggested that future conflicts would be decided by the possession of technological advantages such as advanced guided weapons and space satellites. However, the subsequent popularity of the RMA concept has not produced a clear consensus on what exactly the RMA is, or what its implications might be. Although analysts agree that the RMA involves a radical change or some form of discontinuity in the history of warfare, there is disagreement regarding how and when these changes or discontinuities take place, or what causes them.

The former US Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, defined a revolution in military affairs as 'when a nation's military seizes an opportunity to transform its strategy, military doctrine, training, education, organization, equipment, operations and tactics to achieve decisive military results in fundamentally new ways' (C. S. Gray 2002: 1).

RMA proponents argue that recent breakthroughs and likely future advances in military technology mean that military operations will be conducted with such speed, precision, and selective destruction that the whole character of war will change and this will profoundly affect the way that military/political affairs are conducted in the next few decades. Most of the RMA literature focuses on the implications of developments in technology. In the conflicts in Kuwait (1991), Serbia (1999), and Iraq (2003), American technology proved vastly superior to that of its opponent. In particular, computing and space technology allowed the US forces to acquire information about the enemy to a degree never before seen in warfare, and allowed precision targeting of weapon systems. Advanced communications allowed generals to exercise detailed and instant control over the developing battle and to respond quickly to developments. The speed, power, and accuracy of the weapons employed enabled them to be carefully targeted so as to attempt to destroy vital objectives without inflicting unnecessary casualties on civilian populations. Opponents lacking counters to these technologies found themselves helpless in the face of overwhelming American superiority. It was historically significant that at the outset of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi forces initiated anti-satellite warfare by attempting to jam the US military satellite signals. Such attacks will be a feature of future inter-state wars, where the information systems and processes of the opponent's armed forces will become crucial targets. However, the RMA emphasis on military technology and tactics, while understandable, risks producing an

over-simplistic picture of what is an extremely complex phenomenon, in which non-technological factors can play a crucial part in the outcome.

Military responses to the RMA

In addition, most of the literature and debate on the RMA has been American and has tended to take for granted the dominance conferred by technological superiority. The current RMA is based on a particularly Western concept of war-fighting and may well be of utility only in certain well-defined situations. There has been far less discussion of how the opponents of a technologically advanced state might use unconventional or asymmetric responses to fight effectively against a more technologically sophisticated opponent (**see Box 14.4**). Asymmetric conflicts since 1990 have been fought by US-led 'coalitions of the willing' against Iraq (1991 and 2003), Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. Because of the extreme superiority in combat power of the coalition, the battle phases of these asymmetric conflicts have been fairly brief and have produced relatively few combat deaths compared to the cold war period. However, in the post-conventional insurgency phases in Iraq and Afghanistan, the asymmetry has produced guerrilla-style conflict against the technological superiority of the coalition forces. This is a significant dimension of contemporary asymmetric warfare. Techniques such as guerrilla warfare and terrorism, which in earlier historical periods were employed as minor elements of a larger conventional strategy, are now being used as strategies in their own right.

A skilful opponent will always seek to capitalize on its own strengths while minimizing those of the enemy. In any war the outcome will be largely determined by the relative power of the combatants, which will influence the methods they use to fight the war.

Box 14.4 Asymmetric warfare

Asymmetric warfare exists 'when two combatants are so different in their characters, and in their areas of comparative strategic advantage, that a confrontation between them comes to turn on one side's ability to force the other side to fight on their own terms ... The strategies that the weak have consistently adopted against the strong often involve targeting the enemy's domestic political base as much as his forward military capabilities. Essentially such strategies involve inflicting pain over time without suffering unbearable retaliation in return.'

(L. Freedman (1998), 'Britain and the Revolution in Military Affairs', Defense Analysis, 14(1): 58)

Some combatants may not even be trying to defeat the enemy armed forces as such, but simply to manipulate violence in order to demoralize the opponent and lead them to make concessions. RMA authors also tend to work within a Westphalian state-centric model that overemphasizes the traditional state-to-state confrontation, and may not be particularly relevant in the intra-state insurgency warfare that has been prevalent since 1991.

The conflict in Iraq from 2003 onwards (**see Case Study 1**) raised major questions about the pattern of warfare likely after the RMA. Who are the most likely future opponents of states capable of adopting the RMA technologies? Does the RMA influence all forms of war or simply large-scale, conventional inter-state war? What about urban warfare or nuclear weapons? What is the likely response of opponents such as terrorists, insurgents, and armed forces unable to acquire RMA technology themselves?

Technology and the RMA

The danger in the emphasis on technological aspects that is central to the RMA literature is that it can lead to an underestimation of the political and social dimensions of war. The outcomes of wars are influenced by a wide range of factors in addition to technology, and in most parts of the contemporary world the current and potential wars are not being influenced by the RMA technology, which is possessed by only a handful of states. However, some conflicts are being influenced by elements of the RMA, such as specific technologies. The conventional fighting between India and Pakistan in the late 1990s involved highly advanced weapon systems and the use by India of satellite technology.

While some authors have questioned the existence of a true RMA (**see Box 14.5**), there are arguments for seeing it as an inevitable outcome of the era of globalization and postmodernity. Alvin and Heidi Toffler (1993) argue that the way a society makes war reflects the way it makes wealth. Starting with the very invention of agriculture, every revolution in the system for creating wealth triggered a corresponding revolution in the system for making war. Therefore, to the extent that a new 'information economy' is emerging, this will bring with it a parallel revolution in warfare. In the 'information age', information is the central resource for wealth production and power, and the RMA is the inevitable outgrowth of basic changes in the form of economic production (**see Chs 14 and 15**).

Case Study 1 The Iraq War, 2003–10

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On 20 March 2003, US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq with the proclaimed objective of locating and disarming suspected Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The coalition forces conducted a swift and overwhelmingly successful campaign, leading to the collapse and surrender of the Iraqi armed forces. President George W. Bush proclaimed the official end of major combat operations on 2 May 2003. While casualties during this conventional phase of fighting were historically low for a major modern war, the fighting quickly evolved into an insurgency in which guerrilla and terrorist attacks on the coalition forces and Iraqi civilian population were the norm. By the end of 2009 the coalition forces had suffered nearly 4,700 deaths and 32,000 wounded. More than 9,000 Iraqi soldiers and police were killed in the same period, along with some 55,000 insurgents. Estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths are disputed, and range from 100,000 to 600,000.

The Iraq War illustrates a number of the themes that have been prominent in discussions of the possible future development of war. The rapid coalition victory saw the Iraqi armed forces shattered by the technological superiority of the advanced weapons and information systems of the US forces, suggesting that a revolution in military affairs was under way.

The doctrine employed by the American forces was also vital. The allied success was the result not just of technological superiority, but also of a superior manoeuvre-oriented operational doctrine. The swift and comparatively bloodless victory for the American-led forces reinforced the view that in the post-cold war strategic environment, there were few inhibitions on the use of force by the USA. With the trauma of Vietnam apparently laid to rest, war had become swift, decisive, and affordable for the USA, and the end of the cold war removed the threat of regional conflict escalating into a nuclear war with another superpower.

A central feature of the conflict was the American dominance of information warfare, both in the military sense of the ability to use satellite and other systems for reconnaissance, communications, and weapons targeting, and in the postmodern sense of the manipulation of the civilian communications and global media images of the war to produce an international understanding of the fighting that reflected what the US administration wished the watching world to perceive.

However, the conflict did not end with the surrender of the regular Iraqi forces—confirming, in turn, some of the arguments of the proponents of the 'postmodern' and 'new war' theses. The ability to operate using complex informal military networks allowed the insurgents to conduct effective asymmetric warfare, despite the overwhelming superiority of the US military technology. In addition, the insurgents were able to use the global media to manipulate perceptions of the character and implications of the strategy of terrorism and destabilization. The techniques used by the insurgents were brutal, ruthless, and targeted against the civilian population, in a campaign supported by outside forces and finance, and sustained by an overtly identity-based campaign, again reflecting features of the 'postmodern' and 'new wars' conceptions.

Box 14.5 The revolution in military affairs: a cautionary note

Benjamin Lambeth warns that '"a revolution in military affairs" cannot be spawned merely by platforms, munitions, information systems and hardware equities. These necessary but insufficient preconditions must be supported by an important set of intangibles that have determined war results since the days of Alexander the Great—namely, clarity of goals backed by proficiency and boldness in execution. In the so-called "RMA debate", too much attention has been devoted to technological magic at the expense of the organisational, conceptual and other human inputs needed to convert the magic from lifeless hardware into combat outcomes.'

(B. S. Lambeth (1997), 'The Technology Revolution in Air Warfare', Survival, 39(1): 75)

A major part of the appeal of the RMA concept in Western societies is that it suggests the possibility of using so-called smart weapons to achieve quick, clean victory in war. The RMA technologies allow the battlefield to be controlled in a way that was not possible in previous eras, so that the tempo of battle can be orchestrated and wars won without massive loss of life. To the extent that such an RMA is occurring, for the foreseeable future it is very much an American-led RMA, and reflects American understandings of how and why military affairs are conducted. The American approach has been to attempt to win wars quickly by applying overwhelming force, and to use the industrial and technological strength of the USA to minimize casualties. One example of this is the increasing use of unmanned aerial systems, or

'drones', in conflicts such as the war in Afghanistan. These aircraft began to be deployed by the United States in the late 1990s and initially were only used for unarmed reconnaissance. However, after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 armed drones were developed. During the first Obama Presidency over 300 armed drone attacks were carried out by the United States. When the US chose to leave front-line combat missions against Libya to its NATO allies in 2011, it still used American drones to carry out 146 armed strikes on Libyan targets, as well as providing targeting data for allied air strikes. Yet the reality of war is that it is never clean or bloodless. In conflicts such as the 1991 Iraq War and the 1999 Kosovo War, 'smart' weapons often proved inaccurate or were delivered against the wrong targets. Even in the age of computer-guided weapons and space technology, war remains a brutal and bloody undertaking, where political objectives are achieved through the deliberate infliction of human suffering on a major scale.

Key Points

- Dramatic technological advances mean that a revolution in military affairs may be under way.
- Few states currently possess such technology.
- The 'information age' is increasingly reflected in 'information warfare'.
- Opponents with little or no access to RMA technology are likely to use 'asymmetric warfare' to fight the war on their own terms.

Postmodern war

Global society is moving from the modern to the postmodern age. This is a process that has been under way for several decades and is the result of a wide range of economic, cultural, social, and political changes that are altering the meaning of the 'state' and the '**nation**'. As this happens, it will affect the character of war. In some parts of the world the state is deliberately transferring functions, including military functions, to private authorities and businesses. In other areas, these functions are being seized from the state by other political actors. At the same time, globalization has weakened the 'national' forms of identity that have dominated international relations in the past two centuries, and reinvigorated earlier forms of political identity and organization, such as religious, ethnic, and clan loyalties.

The greatly increased role of the media is one feature of this evolution. The media have become far more important in terms of shaping or even constructing understandings of particular wars. Media warfare has made war more transparent. Each side now goes to great lengths to manipulate media images of the conflict, and journalists have effectively been transformed from observers into active participants, facing most of the same dangers as the soldiers and helping to shape the course of the war through their reporting.

Another postmodern development has been the increasing 'outsourcing' of war. Over the past decade, more and more states have contracted out key military services to private corporations. Privatized military companies (PMCs) sell a wide range of war-related services to states. Hundreds of PMCs have operated in more than fifty countries since the end of the cold war. The growth of PMCs reflects a broader global trend towards the privatization of public assets. Through the provision of training and equipment, PMCs have influenced the outcomes of several recent wars, including those in Angola, Croatia, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone. PMCs played a significant role in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The twentieth century saw the advent of **total war**, which involved the complete mobilization of the human, economic, and military resources of the state in the pursuit of victory, and which recognized few if any moral restraints in terms of who could be targeted if their destruction would bring victory closer. The effects of the Industrial Revolution, along with the advent of popular democracy and modern bureaucracy, had combined to 'nationalize' war to involve the whole of society. Raymond Aron called this hyperbolic war, where the growing scale and intensity of war are driven by the pressure of industrial and technological advances.

However, it is noticeable that while the Second World War ended with a nuclear strike against Japan, nuclear weapons have never been used in a subsequent conflict. Nina Tannenwald argues that 'a powerful **nuclear**

taboo against the use of nuclear weapons has developed in the global system' (2007: 2). This is a significant development. Because of their long ranges and widespread effects, the nuclear arsenals of the major powers are examples of military globalization, and this has been reflected in nuclear proliferation (**see Ch. 24**). Yet, paradoxically, these most powerful of weapons to date have delivered no value to their possessors as instruments of warfare, as distinct from their deterrent role. This in turn has emphasized the utility of both conventional and unconventional war-fighting capabilities.

The brutality and ethnic cleansing characteristic of many contemporary wars are not only not historically novel, but are in many ways a variant of the same totalizing mentality that dominated Western war-fighting during the era of modernity. In modern Western inter-state war, as Foucault noted, wars 'are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity; massacres have become vital' (Foucault 1990: 137). Martin Shaw uses the term 'degenerate wars' to capture the continuity of contemporary wars with the genocidal total wars of the twentieth century.

Key Points

- In the globalized world, key state functions, including military capabilities, are being taken over by non-state actors.
- National forms of identity are weakening in many regions.
- Inter-state wars between industrialized nations have become uncommon, while insurgencies and civil wars have become more typical of the era.

New wars

Mary Kaldor has suggested that a category of 'new wars' has emerged since the mid-1980s. The driving force behind these new wars is globalization (**see Box 14.6**), 'a contradictory process involving both integration and fragmentation, homogenisation and diversification, globalisation and localisation' (Kaldor 1999: 3). These conflicts are typically based around the disintegration of states and subsequent struggles for control of the state by opposing groups, which are simultaneously attempting to impose their own definition of the national identity of the state and its population. Just as earlier wars were linked to the emergence and creation of states, the 'new wars' are related to the disintegration and collapse of states, and much of the pressure on such states has come from the effects of globalization on the international system. In the past decade, 95 per cent of armed conflicts have taken place within states, rather than between them.

Box 14.6 Globalization and war

'The impact of globalisation is visible in many of the new wars. The global presence in these wars can include international reporters, mercenary troops and military advisers, diaspora volunteers as well as a veritable "army" of international agencies ranging from non-governmental organisations (NGO's) like Oxfam, Save the Children, Médecin sans Frontières, Human Rights Watch and the International Red Cross, to international institutions like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Union (EU), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations itself, including peacekeeping troops.'

(M. Kaldor (1999), New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era (Cambridge: Polity Press): 4)

The 'new wars' occur in situations where the economy of the state is performing extremely poorly, or even collapsing, so that the tax revenues and power of the state decline dramatically, producing an increase in corruption and criminality. As the state loses control, access to weapons and the ability to resort to violence are increasingly privatized, and paramilitary groups proliferate, organized crime grows, and political legitimacy collapses. One of the effects of these developments is that the traditional distinction between the 'soldier' and the 'civilian' becomes blurred or disappears altogether. At the same time, however, the 'new wars' are often characterized not by conventional conflict between opposing soldiers, but rather by the use of violence by an army against an unarmed civilian population, either to 'ethnically cleanse' an area, or to extort economic and sexual resources.

For Kaldor, a significant feature of these conflicts is that the combatants focus on questions of **identity**, which she sees as being a result of the pressures produced by globalization. In the postmodern world there

Case Study 2 The Sudanese Civil War

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When Sudan became an independent state in 1956 it was characterized by significant divisions between its constituent population groups, which made nation-building extremely difficult. The northern part of Sudan, where the majority of the population lived, was populated mainly by Muslims of Arab descent or Arabic culture, while the population in the southern region was overwhelmingly black Africans, who were Christians or followers of traditional religions and who saw themselves as culturally linked to central rather than north Africa. Post-independence efforts by the central government to build a Sudanese national identity were seen by the southern population as an attempt to impose northern culture on the entire country.

A low-scale guerrilla insurgency led by the Anyaya organization began in the south in 1955 even before independence was achieved. This initial insurgency ended in 1972 with the Addis Ababa Accord, which granted a significant degree of regional autonomy to the southern region. However, under the military government of President Nimeiri the autonomy was increasingly constrained and was effectively abolished in 1981, when regional boundaries were changed to bring the Bentiu oil-producing region within the boundaries of the Arab north. Along with the introduction of Sharia law in Sudan and a mutiny by discontented southern soldiers, this triggered a second insurgency under the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLA), which lasted from 1983 to 2004. At times the SPLA received aid from neighbouring states such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda. However, in 1993 these states, along with Kenya, sponsored peace negotiations which ultimately led to the Machakos Protocol, which ended the fighting and was followed by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. In July 2011, the southern regions became independent as the Republic of South Sudan.

The United States Committee for Refugees has estimated that the Sudanese conflict killed 2 million people and saw 80 per cent of South Sudan's population displaced within Sudan and 350,000 forced to become refugees abroad. The United Nations Committee for Refugees said in 2001 that one out of every five South Sudanese had died during the civil war. The UN views the losses in the Sudanese civil war as the largest civilian death toll of any war since the Second World War.

The Sudanese civil war was typical of such conflicts in the globalization era. It was, for the most part, fought using comparatively low-tech weaponry, the conflict lasted an extremely long time, involved external intervention, and saw the vast majority of the casualties borne by the civilian population. While issues of identity were a prominent cause of the conflict, economic factors were also significant. The northern government's reluctance to cede genuine autonomy was influenced by the fact that the Nile river, which flows north through South Sudan, was crucial to the northern economy, and the discovery of significant oil deposits in the southern region reinforced this economic rationale for centralization.

Sudan has also been the scene of the Darfur conflict, which itself has resulted in several hundred thousand civilian casualties.

has been a breakdown of traditional cleavages based on class and ideology, and a greater emphasis on identity and culture (**see Case Study 2**).

The relationship between identity and war is also shifting in terms of the gender and age of the combatants. The 'feminization' of war has grown as women have come to play increasingly visible and important roles, from auxiliaries in the late modern period, to direct front-line roles in the postmodern period—from uniformed military personnel to female suicide bombers. But war has been 'feminized' in a darker sense also. The majority of the violence of the 'new wars' is directed against women. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 also saw more than a quarter of a million rapes (Munkler 2005: 20). Children have also become more visible as participants, rather than non-combatants, in war. In the civil war in Sierra Leone, nearly 70 per cent of the combatants were under the age of eighteen. Children fight in around three-quarters of today's armed conflicts, and may make up 10 per cent of armed combatants (Brocklehurst 2007: 373). And nearly one-third of the militaries that use child soldiers include girls in their ranks. The use of child soldiers is made easier by the fact that the 'new wars' are dominated by the use of light weapons, small enough to be used by youths and children.

Post-Westphalian warfare

Mark Duffield (1998) argues that the non-state dimension of much contemporary warfare is striking, and that describing such conflicts as 'internal' or

'intra-state' is misleading, since the combatants often are not attempting to impose a political authority in the traditional sense. Sub-state threats do not trigger the full mobilization of the state's military and other resources in the way that an inter-state threat would. Because they often blur political and military threats, they are more difficult to counter within the traditional state-to-state strategic approach.

The assumption that 'war' is something that takes place between states is based on an acceptance of the 'Westphalian' **state system** as the **norm**. War was an armed conflict between opposing states, fought by uniformed, organized bodies of men. They were regulated by formal acts including declarations of war, laws of neutrality, and peace treaties. As the state system evolves in response to postmodernity and globalization, typical forms of warfare can be expected to evolve also. Thus it is not surprising that commentators should speak of '**post-Westphalian war**'. The sub-state features of many wars are prominent, as they are increasingly fought by militias, paramilitaries, warlord armies, criminal gangs, private security firms, and tribal groupings, so that the Westphalian state's monopoly of violence is increasingly challenged from both outside and inside. This has been notable in conflicts such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Bosnia. 'Paramilitaries' include armed police, border guards, internal security forces, riot squads, militias, and privatized armies. They are usually more heavily armed than police forces, but less well equipped than regular soldiers. Because of this, they can be quickly raised, equipped, and trained, making them particularly prominent in recent conflicts.

These complex interrelationships of non-traditional actors are not limited to insurgents or criminal gangs. Because of the prevalence of **humanitarian intervention** and the belief that economic **development** acts as a deterrent to war, aid organizations, UN agencies, armed forces, and private security firms are increasingly networked in areas such as the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East (**see Ch. 31**). The causes of internal conflict are often related to poverty and underdevelopment, so that issues of **poverty**, stability, development, and peace have been increasingly seen as linked in an overall pattern of insecurity (**see Chs 28 and 29**). This has meant a greater willingness by developed states to see war as in many ways an issue of underdevelopment and political insecurity, and the presence of such social and economic insecurity as being in itself a justification for wars of intervention, or what Ulrich Beck has called the 'new military humanism' (Chomsky 1999: 4).

Many of the features of the 'new wars' are not new in the sense that they have been common in earlier periods of history—ethnic and religious wars, for example, or conflicts conducted with great brutality. Looting and plunder have been a feature of most wars in history. Low-intensity conflicts have in fact been the most common form of armed conflict since the late 1950s. However, it can be argued that the initiators of the 'new wars' have been empowered by the new conditions produced by globalization that have weakened states and created parallel economies and privatized protection. Such conflicts will typically occur in **failed states**, countries where the government has lost control of significant parts of the national territory and lacks the resources to re-impose control. Steven Metz has termed the countries falling into this category as the 'third tier' states of the global political system (**Box 14.7**).

This weakness of the state makes a significant difference in the economic support for the 'new wars' compared to their 'modern' predecessors. The 'new war' economies are decentralized, and highly reliant on external assets. Participation in the war by the general population is usually low. Unemployment is generally

Box 14.7 'Third-tier' states

Steven Metz groups the world's states into three 'tiers' for the purpose of predicting likely forms of conflict. Those of the first tier are the states that have effective functioning economies and political systems, and exhibit high degrees of internal stability and external law-abiding behaviour. The democracies of the North Atlantic region are typical of this group. Second-tier states exhibit periodic instability, and may have areas within their territory where the government does not exercise internal **sovereignty**. However, the state is not in danger of collapse. Third-tier states are marked by crisis: there are considerable areas where the central government has lost control and non-governmental armed forces are operating. In such areas the 'warlords' or other groupings neither exercise full control over the areas they dominate, nor contribute to the stability of the country as a whole, which is therefore essentially ungovernable. War in such areas will typically 'involve substate groups fighting for the personal glory of the leader, or wealth, resources, land, ethnic security or even revenge for real or perceived past injustices'. Such conflicts may involve groups representing different ethnic or communal groupings and 'the fighting will usually be undertaken with low-technology weapons but fought with such intensity that the casualty rates may be higher than in conventional warfare, especially among civilians caught up in the fighting'.

(Craig Snyder and J. Johan Malik (1999), 'Developments in Modern Warfare', in Craig Snyder (ed.), Contemporary Security and Strategy (London: Macmillan): 204)

high, providing a source of recruits seeking an income. The fighting units therefore finance themselves through plunder and the black market, or through external assistance, not through state taxation as in the 'old' wars. Criminal activities such as hostage-taking, trafficking of weapons, drugs, and people, and money-laundering are also used to support the war effort. This merging of a regional war zone with international criminal networks produces what Herfried Munkler calls 'an **open war economy**', sustained by the forces of globalization (2005: 96). Where foreign aid is reaching the conflict zone, theft or extortion of the aid will also fund the fighting. Globalization also means that the combatants do not produce their own weaponry, as was typical in 'modern' war, but acquire it directly or indirectly through intermediaries on the global arms market, or through the disintegration of the state structures, as in Moldova and Chechnya.

For some observers, the economic rationale, rather than politics, is what drives the 'new wars', so that war has become a continuation of economics by other means. It is the pursuit of personal wealth, rather than political power, that is the motivation of the combatants. In some conflicts, therefore, war has become the end rather than the means.

Key Points

- 'New wars', following state collapse, are often conflicts over identity as much as over territory.
- The 'new wars' in fact follow a pattern of warfare that has been typical since the late 1950s.
- Such conflicts typically occur in countries where development is lacking and there is significant economic insecurity.

Conclusion

The end of the cold war has not significantly altered the dominant patterns of war that had been in place for the previous fifty years. The 'new' forms of conflict are for the most part not new as such, but have received more Western attention since the end of the cold war. While they are often characterized by great brutality, the absence of heavy weaponry and superpower support means that casualty levels are markedly lower than during the cold war. RMA technologies have dramatic potential, but have so far had little impact outside US operations. While war is less common and less deadly than in the 1945–92 period, it remains a brutal and inhumane form of politics. The forms of warfare that are most prevalent currently are directly linked to the globalized international economy.

Questions

1. To what extent is globalization a cause of war?
2. In what ways are wars examples of cooperative behaviour?
3. Why do some authors believe that war between the current great powers is highly unlikely?
4. What is the distinction between the nature and the character (or form) of war?
5. To what extent is a 'revolution in military affairs' taking place?
6. What is 'asymmetric warfare'?
7. How important is gender in understanding war?
8. What do you understand by the term, the 'new wars'?
9. What is the relationship between children and contemporary war?
10. Has war become more brutal since the end of the cold war?

Further Reading

Biddle, S. (2004), *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). An interesting and stimulating study of warfare since 1900, analysing the techniques and technologies that have aided the offence and defence to achieve victory in modern wars.

Blank, S. J. (1996), 'Preparing for the Next War: Reflections on the Revolution in Military Affairs', *Strategic Review*, 24(2): 17–25. An analysis of the post-1990 revolution in military affairs, which argues cogently that to benefit from the technological advantages of the RMA, states must embrace necessary organizational and doctrinal changes.

Brocklehurst, H. (2006), *Who's Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations* (Aldershot: Ashgate). A ground-breaking study of the place of children in modern warfare, exploring their roles as warriors, as victims, and as witnesses. The book raises searching questions about the meaning of 'childhood' and 'child' in the light of contemporary conflict.

Cohen, E. A. (2004), 'Change and Transformation in Military Affairs', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27(3): 395–407. An engaging article in which the author argues that the changes in the structures of military forces and the nature of battle mean that there has been a fundamental change in the character of war in the past two decades.

Coker, C. (2001), *Humane Warfare* (London: Routledge). A challenging book that argues that the horrors of twentieth-century warfare have led Western democracies to seek to fight 'humane wars', characterized by minimal military and civilian casualties on both sides.

Duyvestyn, I., and Angstrom, J. (eds) (2005), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass). A collection of excellent essays debating the changing character of war in the post-cold war era.

Gray, C. S. (2002), *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass). A very good introduction to the RMA debates, with useful historical case studies of earlier RMAs.

Ignatieff, M. (1997), *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt). An examination of the motivations of 'moral interventionists', such as aid workers, journalists, and peacekeepers, and those of the ethnic warriors with whom they engage in postmodern war zones.

Kaldor, M. (1999), *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press). A controversial study of the 'new wars', focusing on the 'identity' dimension of the conflicts. Usefully read in tandem with Munkler's study.

Munkler, H. (2005), *The New Wars* (Cambridge: Polity Press). An extremely stimulating and thoughtful study of the dominant forms of post-cold war conflict, both the new wars, which Munkler analyses though the prism of the globalized economy, and international terrorism.

van Creveld, M. (1991), *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press). Another stimulating and controversial set of arguments. Van Creveld is particularly strong in bringing out the socio-economic demands of modern warfare.

von Clausewitz, C. (1989), *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). It is always better to read Clausewitz himself rather than authors discussing his ideas. Still absolutely essential reading for the serious student of war.

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