May 2014 | Issue 14

Are 20th-century-style conventional military assets and strategies still relevant, or are they being replaced by drones, cyber-warfare, counterinsurgency, and satellite technologies?

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

From the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict at the Hoover Institution

Image: Okhrana Records, Box 237, Hoover Institution Archives

Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of "War, Revolution, and Peace." Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: "The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man's endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life." From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the "Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict" has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution's dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.

Editorial Board

Contributing Members

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

May 2014 | Issue 14

THE HOOVER INSTITUTION
Stanford University

Contents

STRATEGIKA · MAY 2014 · ISSUE 14

BACKGROUND ESSAY

FEATURED COMMENTARY

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Proper Military Balance As A Hedge Against An Uncertain Future

By Andrew Roberts

The only thing that is predictable in warfare is its unpredictability. As soon as experts, general staffs, and politicians decide what they believe will be the nature of the next war in order to prepare for it properly, an entirely different kind of conflict happens. The witness of history is so uniform in this regard that it needs to become a general law of warfare: The war we expect and plan for is never the one we're called upon to fight.

When Napoleon invaded Spain in 1808 he assumed that after destroying the Spanish army in one or two decisive battles, the Spanish people would capitulate and accept his brother Joseph Bonaparte as their king. Instead he was swiftly sucked into a six-year insurgency campaign that left a quarter of a million Frenchmen dead and wounded and eventually opened the way for the Duke of Wellington's invasion of France from the southwest in 1814. "That unfortunate war destroyed me," Napoleon lamented in exile on St. Helena the following year, "it divided my forces, multiplied my obligations, undermined morale… All the circumstances of my disasters are bound up in that fatal knot." Similarly he had no idea of going all the way to Moscow when he embarked on his 1812 campaign against Russia; he hoped to fight a major battle on the border, and not get lured further and further into the depths of enemy territory.

Almost all the British wars of the 19th century turned out wildly different than expected. So confident was the War Office during the opening stages of the Crimean War that it would be over before the bad weather descended, that it failed to assign proper winter clothing for the

army, which froze as it settled down to a year-long siege of Sevastopol in 1854-55. The soldiers' invention of the woolen "balaklava" helmet to keep the ears and chin warm derived from this act of over-confidence and incompetence.

It similarly came as a shock to the Victorian public that the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 proved so hard to put down, and that the Zulus were able to inflict a crushing defeat on the British Army in the opening stages of the Zulu War of 1879. Assumptions of racial superiority were part of both those miscalculations, of course, but the Martini-Henry rifle was considered so superior to the Zulus' assegai spears and cowhide shields that immediate victory was taken for granted. By the time of the arrival of the Maxim and Gatling machine-guns at the end of that century, policy-makers were making equally as hyperbolic statements about the nature of future warfare as any present-day aficionados who write of the coming dominance of cyber, drone, and satellite warfare. Yet in the Boer War, despite having machine-guns, the British suffered defeat after defeat in the Black Week of December 1899, and in the end it took a quarter of a million Empire troops three years to subdue the two tiny Boer republics.

In retrospect it seems astonishing that anyone could have thought that a clash between the Central Powers and the Allies during the First World War would, as the famous phrase went, "all be over by Christmas," but many professional strategists did, even in the Royal United Services Institute. To read their deliberations between 1902 and 1914 in the RUSI Journal, it's clear that many senior figures thought the coming war would essentially be a refighting of the Boer War, with the Germans playing the part of the Boers. Although several did predict the part that barbed wire, trenches, and railways would play—helped of course by the experience of the American Civil War—this time they underplayed the importance of the machine-gun, which had been so overplayed in the Boer War.

Okhrana Records, Box 237,
Hoover Institution Archives

The assumption that mass artillery bombardments of no-man's land would inevitably blast away the barbed wire there led to the horrific losses on the first day of the Somme Offensive on July 1, 1916, when it turned out that it hadn't. If one had asked most experts in August 1914 which weapon was likely to make the greatest difference to the course of warfare in the 20th century, they would most likely not have answered tanks, fighter-planes, or machine-guns, but instead dirigibles and submarines. For all we know, drones and satellites might be the Zeppelins of the future.

Similarly, before the outbreak of the Second World War, the new technology that allowed massive destruction of cities completely skewed policy-makers' decisions. On November 10, 1932 the British prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, told the House of Commons: "I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through … When the next war comes, and European civilization is wiped out, as it will be, and by no force more than that force, then do not let them lay blame on the old men."

The British Chiefs of Staff expected there to be 600,000 casualties in London in the opening weeks of the German bombing offensive, and were relieved when the city suffered only a fraction of that during the whole war. Although of course the bombing of cities did play a large part in the war's outcome, it was boots on the ground in Germany that ended the European part of the conflict, and Civilization was not "wiped out." The weapon that eventually ended that war

had not been predicted by a single military expert when it began, for the simple reason that the nuclear bomb was a mere scientific theory at the time.

During the Cold War an enormous amount of time, money, resources, and effort was (rightly) put into countering a massive Soviet tank offensive across the northern German plain, which never happened. As that threat was being contained in Europe, too much faith was put by the American armed forces in their massive technological superiority over the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong, at least at the start of that conflict. The role that the jungle and public opinion back home would play in that war was underplayed in its initial stages, just as the supposed combat readiness of the Iraqi National Guard was hugely overplayed in the First Gulf War, with some commentators even predicting that Baghdad would become "another Stalingrad" in the Iraq War. Thirty years earlier, although military technology was vital for the British victory in the Falklands War, the islands weren't liberated until British boots on the ground there replaced Argentinian ones.

The assumption that the next conflicts will be all about drones, satellites, and cyber warfare, let alone decided by them, rests on the shaky basis that human ingenuity will not come up with new ways of shooting down drones, neutralizing satellites, and countering cyber-attacks. For every weapon ever created since the dawn of time, a better weapon has been developed to overcome it, and there is no reason to suppose the process will end with our generation. Indeed with the exponential increase of scientific invention it is reasonable to assume that within a few decades drones, satellites, and cyber-warfare will be thought of as legacy technology.

With counterinsurgency the story might be different. The billeting of an enemy army in one's nation's capital was for many centuries considered the very definition of ultimate defeat, but not

in the past two. Napoleon captured both Madrid and Moscow, the British burned down the White House, the Germans captured Paris in 1940, the Americans took Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003. As Max Boot's excellent recent book on guerrilla warfare, Invisible Armies, reminds us, none of those wars ended there. Yet he also points out in a detailed statistical analysis that of the 443 insurgencies he has identified around the world, insurgents succeeded in 25.5% of them, while incumbents won in 63.6%, with the other 10.8% being draws of some kind. Victory against guerrillas "requires the application of violence and coercion but in carefully calibrated and intelligently targeted doses," he says, which often also requires boots on the ground.

While it is unlikely that drones, cyber-warfare, counterinsurgency, and satellite technologies won't play some part in coming conflicts, and no-one would deny that technology is revolutionizing the battlespace in the air, at sea, and on land, in the final analysis it is 20th-century style conventional military assets that enforce the victory. History suggests that it would thus be very dangerous indeed not to have balanced, flexible armed forces—conventional, nuclear, cyber, and everything else—because each underpins the others. A good balance could also allow a future war to escalate—such is human nature that they always tend to escalate at the beginning—in such a way that is manageable, rather than obliging the West to enforce a "Nuclear Tripwire" as was the case in grand strategy of the 1950s and 1960s. By hollowing out America's armed forces as the present defense cuts are doing, the Obama Administration is presenting its successors with fewer options, and less time to consider the ones it has, in any future conflict. That is profoundly irresponsible.

With the relative retreat of America and advances of Russia and China militarily, state-on-state conventional warfare seems much less inconceivable now than it has done in recent years, and counterinsurgency, which just a decade ago the politicians assumed was the only game in town,

is now of far less relevance since President's Obama's twin-scuttle from Iraq and Afghanistan (although it could make a resurgence if President Putin invades eastern Ukraine at any stage, let alone western Ukraine). A glance at history proves that those embarking on wars are almost always woefully bad at predicting their nature, extent, length, and even outcome. To assume today, therefore, that drones, cyber-warfare, counterinsurgency, and satellite technologies will decide the next war, is to fall into precisely the same trap as so very many of our predecessors.

ANDREW ROBERTS is an honorary senior scholar at and has a PhD from Caius College, Cambridge. His twelve books include *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (1999), which won the Wolfson History Prize and the James Stern Silver Pen Award; *Masters and Commanders*, which won the Emery Reves Prize; and *The Storm of War*, which won the British Army Military Book of the Year Award. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a director of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, where he is presently chairman of the judging panel for its Military Book of the Year Prize.

Be Prepared For Conventional War, Even If It's Unconventional

By Frederick W. Kagan

Kharkov. Dnepropetrovsk. Odessa. Mariupol. Sites of great armor battles seven decades ago, these cities are once again the front line of war. Tanks are massed but remain idle. Protesters, separatists, and "little green men" are the foot soldiers in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Snipers are the most effective weapons. Ukraine may fall to this "invasion" more easily than to an armored assault. Is this quasi-war the ultimate proof of the irrelevance of conventional forces today?

The participants do not appear to think so. Both sides are gearing up their conventional forces as well as their irregulars. Russia has kept almost all of its available professional forces (now quite small) mobilized on Ukraine's frontiers. Masses of tanks north of Kiev have held the attention of elites in Ukraine even as Russian-backed irregulars have overrun much of the east.

This scene shows in microcosm the interplay between conventional and unconventional force today. The threat of conventional conflict continues to deter the use of conventional forces. U.S. and NATO forces (more than Ukraine's own very meager military) are helping persuade Russian President Vladimir Putin to pursue an irregular invasion. NATO airpower would decimate Putin's armored columns if he hurled them at Kiev, assuming the West chose to fight. Putin chooses to avoid the risk, at least as long as the indirect approach is succeeding.

Precision weapons are central to conflicts around the world, but they are not confined to conventional militaries. Snipers and rocket-propelled grenades fill that role in Ukraine. Suicide car bombs, explosively-formed penetrators, and other seemingly unconventional weapons do so in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere. The U.S. prefers much more

Poster Collection, RU/SU 2575, Hoover Institution Archives

expensive missiles fired from drones or other aircraft—but suicide bombers hit their targets with depressing accuracy and devastating effect, and at a much lower financial cost. America and its Western allies choose not to deploy their conventional forces against foes who do not have regular formations. Russia and Iran pursue deliberately irregular strategies in part out of fear of those Western conventional forces. The current military epoch clearly drives combatants toward trying to apply force precisely in support of (or supported by) irregular troops, insurgents, protesters, social media, and cyber-attacks. The straight-line extrapolation of this trend would suggest that the days of conventional warfare have passed.

And so they have, at least in one sense. Modern weapons systems make the prospect of massed armored assaults, let alone of massed infantry assaults, foolish in almost any scenario. Western airpower makes massing large formations suicide. Adversaries without reliable airpower turn to lower-technology solutions such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs) supported by smaller numbers of advanced man-portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which armored columns could strike an adversary unawares in such a way as to negate the capabilities of these systems. The world is mobilized for war more broadly than it has been since the end of the Cold War—perhaps since World War II. The breadth of the mobilization is measured not in numbers of troops or tanks, but rather in the expanse of humanity that is engaged in, preparing for, threatened by, or victims of conflict. From Western Sahara east to the Pacific Ocean, from the Baltic to the equator, no major state is fully at peace. The conditions that would drive the reluctant superpower to invade will also inevitably produce a bow wave of ample warning for the intended target. Major conflict will likely involve combatants prepared for or preparing for war. Conventional forces will almost certainly face the full panoply

of irregular countermeasures that have been developed to combat them from the outset of hostilities.

All of which means only that the next major conventional war will not look like conventional wars of the past. Armored vehicles will continue to play a role, because mobile protected firepower is an enormous advantage on the battlefield. Air-delivered munitions, both precise and imprecise, will continue to give an asymmetric edge to the side that can use them most effectively. But lethal man-portable weapons, cyber war, and the role of irregular combatants will allow individuals to participate directly in battle even against the most advanced conventional militaries. Mass, mobility, firepower, and maneuver remain key concepts, but their implementation on the battlefield is changing.

This situation is not new. The 1920s found the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union engaged in numerous small-scale interventions and counterinsurgencies. Experts claimed that the new technologies of the day—tanks and airplanes—had ended the era of major land warfare. Those experts were wrong. But the war that came in 1939—after a number of irregular foreshocks in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Ethiopia, and elsewhere that eerily resemble recent conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine—looked nothing like the war that had ended in 1918. It was conventional war unrecognizable to the regular commanders of the previous century. That is the sort of partly-transformed, partly-reimagined, yet historically-coherent conflict for which modern militaries must be prepared. The straight-line approximation is almost always wrong. Conventional warfare is in our future as much as it is in our past. The only question is: will we be ready?

FREDERICK W. KAGAN is the Christopher DeMuth Chair and director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). In 2009, he served in Kabul, Afghanistan, as part of General Stanley McChrystal's strategic assessment team; he returned to Afghanistan in 2010, 2011, and 2012 to conduct research for Generals David Petraeus and John Allen. In July 2011, Admiral Mike Mullen, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, awarded him the Distinguished Public Service Award. He is the author of the series of AEI reports, including Choosing Victory, which recommended and monitored the US military surge in Iraq. Previously an associate professor of military history at West Point, Kagan is a contributing editor at the *Weekly Standard.*

The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Military Forces

By Peter R. Mansoor

In his magisterial treatise On War, Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war may have its own grammar, but not its own logic. By this he meant that wars are fought for political purposes, and although the means by which they are waged changes over time, the nature of war remains constant. History has witnessed a number of revolutions in military affairs, periods of time in which the grammar of war has changed significantly. In the late Middle Ages, gunpowder made possible the development of firearms and artillery, which in turn caused significant advancements in the art of fortification. In the twentieth century, the invention of the internal combustion engine made possible the creation of mobile armored warfare and with it the tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other mechanized vehicles that have dominated conventional warfare ever since the German invasion of Poland in 1939. More recently, the development of precision guided munitions and the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems that enable their effective use has ushered in another revolution in military affairs. But these systems are so expensive that only a few nation-states can afford them; to date, only the United States has fully realized their potential. Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Army crossed swords with the American military in 1991 and again in 2003, and suffered resounding defeats on both occasions. Why then would another power attempt to fight the U.S. military using conventional weapons and suffer similar consequences?

The answer is that they won't—at least not until their military forces catch up with American technological and operational capabilities. Although this state of affairs would seem to bolster peace and stability around the world, the end of the Cold War in 1991 has not heralded the end of history. On the contrary, war is a booming business, with civil wars and insurgencies the flavor du jour. Increasingly, combatants are resorting to asymmetric means such as terrorism

Okhrana Records, Box 237,
Hoover Instituion Archives

and guerrilla warfare to achieve their ends. Conventional military forces are usually not the best tool with which to combat these threats. In the past decade the U.S. military has had to revamp its counterinsurgency doctrine and tailor technical and tactical solutions, such as armed drones, to target hard to reach terrorist targets in the Middle East and South Asia. These methods for fighting the brushfire wars of the early twenty first century have some utility in broader conflicts, for every war is comprised of a mixture of offensive, defensive, and stability operations. However, we should be wary that they represent a radical departure from the way major powers will wage war in the future.

At the conclusion in 1815 of the cataclysmic wars spawned by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, European statesmen created a stable diplomatic order that largely survived for the rest of the century (aside from regional conflicts in the Crimea and the wars of German unification). Many European soldiers seeking combat duty looked to the small wars of empire, messy conflicts that included counterinsurgency, counterguerrilla, and counterterror operations in their repertoire. At the turn of the twentieth century, informed pundits deduced that another general conflagration was impossible given the close intertwining of European economic and financial systems. The end of history 1.0 died in the ashes and bloodshed of World War I, surpassed in its brutality only by the even deadlier Second World War. Nuclear weapons and the bipolar standoff of the Cold War prevented the United States and the Soviet Union from coming to terms on the battlefield, but that did not prevent the U.S. military from fighting conventional wars in Korea and Southwest Asia, and counterinsurgency wars in Vietnam and a host of third world countries.

Conventional forces seem passé only because we are in the midst of a hiatus of great power conflict. In the meantime, the march of civilization continues, and with it the development of military technology, organizations, and doctrine. New concepts such as cyber warfare can disrupt economies, but it is unlikely that a national leader will surrender to computer hackers. Militaries will add drones to their arsenals, but they will not totally supplant other measures of combat power. The tank, for instance, was created to overcome the problem of moving men across fields swept by machine gun and artillery fire. This problem still exists, and so the utility of the armored fighting vehicle remains apparent. Machines cannot take and hold ground; soldiers do. When at some distant point in the future we find that history has not yet ended, we will also rediscover the utility of conventional military force in wars that will no doubt be nasty, brutish, and not necessarily short.

Peter R. Mansoor, colonel, US Army (retired), is the General Raymond E. Mason, Jr. Chair of Military History at Ohio State University. A distinguished graduate of West Point, he earned his doctorate from Ohio State University. He assumed his current position after a twenty-six-year career in the US Army that included two combat tours, culminating in his service as executive officer to General David Petraeus in Iraq. He is the author of *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945* and *Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander's War in Iraq*. His latest book, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*, a history of the surge in Iraq in 2007– 8, was published by Yale University Press in 2013.

Discussion Questions

Are 20th-century-style conventional military assets and strategies still relevant, or are they being replaced by drones, cyber-warfare, counterinsurgency, and satellite technologies?

1. What is the relationship between human nature and the evolution of military strategy and technology?

2. Have nuclear weapons changed war for good, or will there someday be a counter-weapon that ends the protocols of the nuclear age?

3. How long will tanks and aircraft carriers remain vital?

4. Do military revolutions change war or just the appearance of war?

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Hoover Institution | Stanford University | www.hoover.org | 650-725-3461

Suggestions For Further Reading

Are 20th-century-style conventional military assets and strategies still relevant, or are they being replaced by drones, cyber-warfare, counterinsurgency, and satellite technologies?

Max Boot, "Revolutions to Come," Chapter 13 in *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (pp 439-554) (Gotham Books, 2006).

Christopher Coker, *Warrior Geeks: How 21st Century Technology is Changing the Way We Fight and Think About War* (Columbia University Press, 2013).

Thomas Donnelly and Frederick Kagan, eds., *Lessons for a Long War: How America Can Win on New Battlefields* (AEI Press, 2010).

Frederick Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (Encounter Books, 2006).

Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, "Conclusion: The future behind us," Chapter 10 in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (pp. 175-194) (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

For a brief description of the photographs in this issue, see Jill Golden, "Friday Finds: Mortar and Pistol," in the Hoover Institution News, January 18, 2013 (http://www.hoover.org/news/138336).

STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

Hoover Institution | Stanford University | www.hoover.org | 650-725-3461

THE HOOVER INSTITUTION
Stanford University

Strategika