



U.S. Army War College
Strategic Studies Institute



Op-Ed: Relearning War

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Today, the United States stands at a strategic crossroads. As troops leave Afghanistan and U.S. policy reorients itself toward emphasizing the Asia-Pacific region, the visible signs of being at an inflection point multiply. Yet, there are some glaring absences in U.S. strategic thinking that could again lead us awry, as happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, if they are not attended to soon. In pivoting or rebalancing to Asia, the United States has announced a new concept of operations called air-sea battle. Whatever its merits or demerits might be, it cannot fairly be called a strategy, given its absence of a real political dimension that governs the conduct of operations. Moreover, it appears to be premised on the belief that future conflict will be more or less conventional, featuring high-tech, long-range aerial and maritime strike platforms directed against the enemy. Second, despite the turn toward jointness in the last two decades, this operational concept appears to exclude consideration of the necessity of the ground forces to accomplish strategic objectives. This is another reason why the concept cannot be called a strategy; it leaves out the one force that can effectively enforce a strategic conclusion to any future war.

Can we expect our enemies to be so obliging as to allow us to fight the kind of war that we prefer? Such thinking fails to account for the dramatic expansion, over the last generation, of the tools of war and their easy acquisition by any manner of adversary. These new “tools of war” include: asymmetric war, up to and including the threat of nuclear use as, for example, stipulated in Russian doctrine; the massive development of information war, not just cyber-strikes, but the whole issue of exploiting communications media to frame the narrative of contemporary war; “lawfare,” where international law is exploited on behalf of one or more belligerents in any conflict, etc. While war remains a contest of wills as described by Clausewitz, it also remains a chameleon able to assume many forms and manifestations where, as we have seen, the U.S., for all its advantages, still finds strategic success elusive.

If we are to grasp the challenge of the moment, we need to learn not only about future war, but from other international actors. It is not enough to learn from our own mistakes here. Rather, we must emulate Bismarck who wisely observed that he wanted to learn

from and profit by other's mistakes (as well as their successes). For example, we should wish to emulate the lessons of the Soviet General Staff, in the interwar period in particular, which focused relentlessly on analyzing what the next war would look like. In that effort, they produced several classics of contemporary strategic literature that merit study even today. It would therefore be useful and beneficial to the Army and the other services if they required not just that students at service academies, all the way up to war colleges take a required course in future war and its dimensions, but were required to write studies outlining what such wars might look like. Our strategic leaders and the institutions that support them—both civilian and military—should also be required to take part in such analyses. If Chinese leaders can take designated time off to discuss and study contemporary trends in world politics, we should be able to arrange a similar process for our elites as well as for the publication of serious studies like the 1999 Chinese publication “Unrestricted Warfare.”

If accurate information is crucial to the winning of future conflicts and wars, then it must be information fortified or leavened with understanding, not just an agglomeration of data piled on top of data. The forthcoming period of budgetary austerity must be seen as a challenge where the Armed Forces need to think about war as much and maybe even more than they practice or train for it. Otherwise, we can expect to reenact the record of the last 70 years where we have repeatedly been surprised at the onset of wars in unexpected theaters and often in forms for which we were not prepared.

Even if the Army is understandably loath to fight another counterinsurgency, it may well be forced to go into this kind of war. Intervention in Syria's looming civil war is hardly inconceivable, especially from a NATO standpoint, since it is clear that Turkey already feels growing pressure to do so. Therefore, we cannot turn our back on insurgency, counterinsurgency, or civil wars in the “Third World.” Here too we can learn from others. For example, rather than continuing to make a fetish of French writing and experience—born, we might remind everyone, of defeat—or the rather mixed British record; we might learn from successful operations by Russia, who has a rich tradition of COIN going back 500 years. In the second Chechnya war, Moscow learned from its mistakes in the first war and effectively sealed off the theater from an informational point of view. In subsequent U.S. wars, our population and the provision of domestic support for our forces may equally well be the center of gravity that is crucial to the war effort and which must be addressed in satisfying and legitimate ways. The same goes for framing the narrative, another task at which we have dismally failed.

It is simply not enough to say that we will fight and (hopefully) win the nation's wars. It is, after all, inconceivable that the U.S. Armed Forces will not go wherever they are ordered to fight. But it is equally clear that if they go off to some future war bereft of a solid strategic education, their sacrifices will be infinitely greater than they should be and

the outcome much more uncertain. As President Eisenhower observed, plans are nothing or worthless, but planning is everything. In our time, planning means getting to know the enemy, and thinking long and hard while we have the opportunity to do so about future war and future adversaries. In this regard, deep understanding and both an intelligence and intelligent preparation of the battlefields of the future are of inestimable value.

Another Soviet example will suffice here. The Soviet briefing book for Iran that it used in the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941 fell into Allied hands after World War II. Anyone reading this remarkable study will find out that Moscow had analyzed every possible road in Iran for its capacity to support troop movements and had thoroughly learned all about Iran's politics and economics as well. Such insights undoubtedly facilitated the rapidity and success of this operation, which was of the utmost importance in 1941. Admittedly, much of that was accomplished by espionage and subversion. Today, however, technology makes it possible for us to gain such information to a much greater extent. But it is not the information itself that is remarkable. Rather, it is the understanding that we derive about potential adversaries and theaters that is crucial to the attainment of operational success.

The Army, its sister services, and the civilian structures that facilitate them are uniquely placed not just to gather that data and furnish the analysis necessary to produce an informed strategic understanding, this information makes it possible to instruct officers and leaders so that they can perform up to their maximum potential and so that we can demand that potential from them when war comes, even if it does so as a surprise. Armed with these analyses, our military leaders will not be left cognitively off balance or unprepared for the ordeals that await them. The present economic crisis and future austerity may well be necessary, but they should not be seen as an opportunity for crawling back into our shell and doing business as usual or preparing for the last war. We have traveled that road before and, as we well know, the costs of such folly were not only exorbitant, they were also irretrievable.

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