

War
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The hidden face of our modern warfare



By Rajan Menon

If you listen much to practitioners and theorists of war these days, you're going to hear a lot about "the revolution in military affairs." They even refer to it by its initials, RMA. The term describes the many ways in which war has been transformed by breakthroughs in information and computer technology, making the already mighty armed forces of the United States close to invincible.

Thanks to this revolution, the United States can now station forces in the air and at sea well beyond an opposing side's reach, and, with an exceptional degree of accuracy, destroy its military formations, command and control centres, and communications and transportation networks — in short, its capacity to wage war. Although the death of innocent civilians (antiseptically labelled "collateral damage") is still unavoidable, the new accuracy reduces the civilian toll enormously. And because strikes can be launched from afar, the loss of American military lives is also minimised.

The "revolution" also gives American forces a real-time view of the entire battlefield. The other side can't move a tank column or launch an aircraft without American commanders knowing about it.

Meanwhile, electronic jamming and the establishment of total air superiority make it impossible for the adversary to track the movements of our forces. We see everything; they see nothing. We can strike at will, when we want and where we want.

This new approach to battle was first revealed in the 1991 Gulf War, but its true significance became apparent in the campaign that toppled Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi army crumbled within weeks. Its armour was annihilated; not one of its fighter jets left the ground; its armoured divisions, exposed to relentless attack, fell back in panic. Military analysts decreed that warfare had been irrevocably altered, that the United States could destroy any opposing military force summarily and with minimal losses to our soldiers. That's true. But only when it comes to war in the traditional sense.

We still tend to think of war as a fight between the armed forces of states. War in this form has been around ever since the sovereign territorial state emerged in the mid-17th century. It is the kind of war military manuals and treatises focus on. These traditional conflicts can consume millions of lives — just consider the two world wars — and billions of dollars, and they are still with us, as can be seen in the clashes between Israel and the Arab states, India and Pakistan and Iran and Iraq, to name a few. There is no doubt that the revolution in military affairs has created a new world when it comes to such conflicts — one in which America rules by dint of its peerless technology.

The problem is that war among states, while hardly passé, is no longer the dominant form of major conflict. There are several reasons for the declining frequency of inter-state war. One is the spread of democ-

cracy: Democracies, while in no way squeamish about war per se, don't fight other democracies. Another is that, in an age of globalisation and the Internet, the physical conquest of land and people is no longer the path to world dominance that it once was. Imperialism is no longer considered acceptable foreign policy. Nor is war any longer a cost-effective means to advance national goals. What it does — the

These are the states that now account for the overwhelming majority of recent wars. The persistent tribal strife in Africa is a perfect example of this.

In the West, the state has been in existence longer and is more robust for having sunk deeper roots, but one has only to look at the Basque region of Spain or at Northern Ireland to understand that breakaway nationalism

We still tend to think of war as a fight between the armed forces of states. But this is no longer the dominant form of major conflict. One reason is the spread of democracy: Democracies, while in no way squeamish about war per se, don't fight other democracies. Another reason is that, in an age of globalisation and the Internet, the physical conquest of land and people is no longer the path to world dominance that it once was. Imperialism is no longer considered acceptable foreign policy. Nor is war any longer a cost-effective means to advance national goals

Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s is a classic example — is leave all combatants weaker and poorer.

But war has by no means disappeared. It's just that, instead of being fought between states, it is now more typically fought within them. This change results from the end of empire and the resilience of nationalism. Once the European empires collapsed after World War I, a constellation of new states arose from the debris. Most had weak political institutions and were driven by ethnic and religious conflict

remains a potent force even in long-established nations.

The wars the United States will fight in the future will be less like the 1991 Gulf War or the recent campaign to bring down Hussein. Rather, they will occur within the boundaries of a state.

The fighting will resemble the anti-colonial struggles of the 20th century: the wars that the Israelis fought in Lebanon (and continue to fight in the West Bank and Gaza), that the Soviet Union fought in Afghanistan, that the Vietnamese waged

in Cambodia, that the Indian army encountered in Sri Lanka and is up against in Kashmir, that Russia faces in Chechnya, and that South Africa yielded to in Namibia. The common denominator here is that professional militaries fought irregular forces.

Such wars render technological superiority, the defining trait of the revolution in military affairs, far less decisive. That's because the opponent is no longer another professional military force but a rag-tag assortment of warrior bands, often fighting in widely separated groups with no unified command structure. There is no central authority to "take out"; the enemy is headless. Paradoxically, its disarray becomes an asset. Modern armies, large, complex organizations that rely on standard routines, are confronted with nimble and unpredictable foes.

A gaggle of fighters armed with rudimentary weapons and living off the land doesn't need the elaborate logistical networks that supply and feed modern armies; instead it exploits the vulnerability of these vital arteries. And intra-state wars elude the distinction between the front and the rear, civilians and soldiers; the enemy is everywhere — and nowhere. The street, the bazaar, the smiling civilian on the roadside all become part of the battlefield, making friend and foe indistinguishable.

This opponent doesn't fight with armoured columns, high-speed aircraft or battleships, which are easily spotted and eviscerated with high-tech tools. Intra-state wars feature guerrilla groups, snipers, kidnapers, arsonists, assassins and bombers, who strike suddenly and melt away into the surroundings. Against such primitive and elusive enemies, supersonic jets, aircraft carriers, cruise missiles and bunker-busting

bombs guided by global positioning satellites are useless.

Professional soldiers are forced to dismount from tanks and armoured personnel carriers and to patrol the labyrinthine streets and back alleys of teeming towns and cities and to venture into remote villages. Cultural incompatibility also works against professional armies forced to fight against irregular forces. Not only are they fighting on the terrain of another people: They don't understand the most basic things about the local religion, culture and language. No matter how lofty and sincere their motives, members of the professional army will always be "the other." Their superior might and distant origins merely highlight this, and with time, their presence comes to be seen by the local population as an alien occupation. And as troops far from home become disillusioned, as heat and tedium take their toll, the home team gains an enormous advantage.

Our predicament in Iraq illustrates the vast differences between inter-state and intra-state war. In the beginning, when it was the US against the Iraqi army, our technological superiority made victory a foregone conclusion. Relatively few US troops were killed or wounded. A brutal regime was smashed with speed and ease. Morale at the front and support at home ran high. Now we are engaged in an intra-state war, where the US advantage is no longer so clear. Since the president's May 1 declaration that the active phase of military operations in Iraq was over, more than 40 American troops have died in combat.

The war has shifted to a different plane — one in which technological wizardry, while not irrelevant, is no longer a magic bullet. Welcome to the new face of war. —Courtesy The LA Times