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The Evolving Nature of War

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Throughout history, wars generally hinged on clashes of arms. To win, a party had to defeat its enemy's military forces. For the United States since the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, however, the only conflict of this conventional model was the Gulf War of 1990-91. Israeli wars have not conformed to that model since the end of the 1973 October (Yom Kippur) War. Having remained largely unchanged for millennia, the character of war has changed radically only in recent decades. Inter-state battlefield clashes of arms are now rare, although the amount of tanks, mechanized weapons and fighter aircraft that exist in arsenals around the world means that traditional arms clashes remain possible.

The United States and Israel have been more active in wars than have most countries, and in general now the aim of war against them has been to change a foe's policies without having to defeat that foe's military forces. Political and military decision-makers have not fully adapted to the new reality.



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To be sure, the 2018 U.S. *National Defense Strategy* highlights military threats from China and Russia and says, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” The point is well grounded. Nonetheless, democratic countries are particularly vulnerable to asymmetric strategies – those using military operations and techniques mainly designed for political rather than military effects. And even major state powers use asymmetric strategies, as Russia did with its “hybrid” warfare in Ukraine² and China has done with its armed civilian reserve force in the South China Sea.³

By enormously increasing information flow around the world, the Internet, small satellites, drones, improved sensors, cell phone video cameras and broadband connectivity, are transforming both war and politics. These technologies allow military forces to find targets and strike them with great precision from long distances. They open the way for cyber warfare, hacking and manipulation of foreign political systems. They allow individuals to broadcast not just text but also photos and videos instantaneously and globally in ways that many states cannot control. And, at the same time, they give authoritarian states instruments for political control and repression that exceed anything ever imagined even by George Orwell.

Information operations can be far more potent than ever before. They are not just technical. They do not simply facilitate war by functioning as “force multipliers.” Rather, *substantive* information operations – propaganda, arguments, images, and “narratives” – can serve as primary instruments for achieving war aims, especially against democratic countries.

Such operations often focus on news media – mainstream and otherwise – to influence elite and popular opinion. In democratic countries, the news media are especially rich targets for manipulation because public opinion there matters more and the news outlets are more likely to be independent of the government.

In all events, news media are important because people in general have little understanding of foreign conflicts except what they gather from the news as the conflict is underway. They usually have no relevant personal experience, and their knowledge of history is often negligible. This is true of elites also, including government officials and news reporters themselves. News media reports shape public opinion directly and through influencing other news media. In other words, journalists tend to reinforce one another. Their reports often blend into self-affirming conventional wisdom, despite errors of fact and context. This is the point of the humorous quip that journalists often operate as a “herd of independent minds.” Non-state actors manipulate that “herd” to counter the military superiority of their enemies. Those who fail to take this into account can find themselves defeated by a weaker opponent.

In the past, battlefield events were intended to influence international politics only indirectly and in the long run. Combat’s immediate goal was military: to damage the other side’s ability



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to fight. Now, however, an attack's immediate purpose is often to produce news reports that will put pressure on enemy decision-makers without actually reducing their ability to fight. The target is the enemy's will rather than capability. Ironically, battlefield success, if it results in negative news media coverage, may do a party more harm than good.

The United States and Israel in recent decades have continually been at war with insurgent movements and terrorist organizations. Generally lacking the kind of strategic "center of gravity" that conventional armies (and other highly organized bodies) possess, such movements and organizations have been able to keep fighting under circumstances that would compel a conventional army to surrender. They use information – both truthful and false – as an invaluable weapon of war. Sometimes, as with ISIS, they use it to intensify and spread fear, increasing the effect of terrorist acts. Sometimes they present themselves as victims of inhumane enemies, as when Hamas in Gaza deliberately attacks Israel from populated areas to draw Israeli retaliation that inevitably destroys homes, schools or hospitals and kills or injures civilians. Both strategies can be used simultaneously to produce news media images that strengthen the weaker side and weaken the stronger.

Groups that depict themselves as victims of Western powers win automatic support from Western news media. Images that reinforce simple notions – "narratives" – of this kind of victimization can exercise powerful influence. With certain types of audiences, such images cannot be countered quickly and effectively. Explanations about context, history and other complexities don't work.

Consider, for example, the image of a child facing an American or Israeli tank. Mainstream news media can be counted on to feature it prominently. It will likely "go viral" on social media. And it can generate immediate, widespread, unthinking sympathy. A single image of this kind can generate substantial worldwide support for the child's side in a conflict against the United States or Israel.

War thus becomes a morality tale or "reality show" in which violence is provoked to produce horrifying images to influence other people's political opinions. Skillful military action taken by a technologically advanced state to defend its territory and people can generate images that make its defensive action look aggressive, offensive and inhumane – in a word, villainous. The effective use of force can produce a strategic loss.

As violent non-state actors wage battles with political rather than military goals – to demoralize their enemies and persuade them to quit fighting and retreat – the other side must also operate politically. Counter-insurgency strategy recognizes the importance of military operations with immediate political goals. It aims to curtail support that insurgents or terrorists receive from the population that either harbors them voluntarily or submits to their intimidation.



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Each side in such a conflict has an interest in understanding its adversary's society – its aspirations, needs and internal composition. The enemy's "home front" can be the war's most important theater.

Terrorist organizations target their enemies' civilians on the home front. Meanwhile, terrorists locate their own personnel and weapons among civilians on their own side's home front. Both of these tactics test the social resilience of the country fighting the terrorists. That country may find itself without an option for quick victory. This also requires resilience, patience and cohesiveness rooted in strong morale. Sustained domestic political support for the war effort is the country's strategic center of gravity. If it can keep such support, it can prevail; if it loses it, the terrorists win.

In such wars, heterogeneous democratic societies have particular challenges. Their resilience is a function of trust among their different communities of citizens. The war effort needs broad popular support, which it can lose if the war comes to be viewed as the project of an elite or a special interest group or if the burdens are seen as unfairly distributed. Healthy democratic institutions can be crucial to overcoming these challenges. It is especially important that democratic countries respect the distinction between combatants and civilian population, as this can be crucial to maintaining popular support for a war effort.

When a country, especially a democratic country, is fighting a war against terrorists, opinion abroad – views voiced by foreign officials and journalists, for example, or incorporated in resolutions of the United Nations or other international organizations – can influence domestic public opinion and affect the willingness of foreign governments to provide help.

The contest for public opinion highlights one of the remarkable paradoxes of terrorist warfare: Though terrorists flout law, they rely heavily on legalism. They exploit the reverence for law in democratic countries. Terrorists violate the most important principle of the law of war by deliberately harming civilians. They target those of the enemy and often endanger their own side's civilians by hiding among them, using them as human shields and locating weapons and equipment in civilian hospitals, schools, apartment buildings and the like. At the same time, the terrorists' political strategy hinges on the argument that their enemies, in fighting back, harm civilians and fail to respect the law of war.

Such cynicism wins rewards when officials in the European Union, the UN General Assembly and other bodies, for example, condemn Israeli responses to terrorist attacks. Such condemnations are political in nature – voiced by political officials in political forums. But they are often interpreted as disinterested legal judgments. EU and UN resolutions are commonly (though incorrectly) taken as signs of legitimacy. In fact, they are simply the opinions of interested parties.



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Because people generally know and care little about other people's conflicts, "world opinion" can easily be swayed and misled by a simple line of argument or a single powerful image – recall the point made above about the image of a child facing an American or Israeli tank. Such an image may be out of context – or it may be bogus altogether – but it may nevertheless strongly sway opinion in a world full of people who are ill informed or predisposed to sympathize with the ostensible victim. It is a crucial and difficult strategic challenge to counter the information operations of terrorist groups that are skillful in depicting themselves as victims of strong Western powers.

Terrorist groups adopt war strategies that blur lines between the domestic and the international, between civilian and military, between diplomacy and armed conflict and between crime and war. Often, the goal is "no surrender" – denying victory to their adversary. Since the first intifada began in 1987, in more than three decades of continuous Israeli struggle against terrorism, no terror organization has ever raised a white flag. Hamas and Hezbollah have provoked Israeli military operations and then converted them, despite the operations' military effectiveness, into greater local popular support for themselves.

After the initial phase of "classical" warfare to overthrow the regimes, U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan had difficulty devising a strategy for decisive, sustainable military victory over the insurgents. Eventually, the coalition resolved to win the support of local populations – in Iraq, principally Sunni tribes – by protecting them from the insurgents. This involved patient interaction with the local people, activity that was in many ways the opposite of what would have been done if the goal were a quick and devastating military strike against the insurgents.

Unlike conventional wars, the campaigns of violent non-state actors often lack a clear beginning and end point. Such campaigns are not rare or exceptional, but are an ongoing, virtually constant phenomenon in the world today. Americans remain engaged in such a campaign in Afghanistan, and Israelis are so engaged on multiple fronts. Such campaigns have forced military strategists to focus on concepts such as "military operations other than war" and "the campaign between wars."

War against terrorist organizations tends to involve short periods of high intensity fighting, preceded and followed by periods of lower intensity. The shifts to high intensity can be purposeful or unintended by the party that provides the trigger.

The standard for success in a war against terrorists may be similar to that for domestic crime fighting. The standard is not elimination of all terrorism – or of all crime. Rather, it is to lower the violence to a level that allows society to function normally, while preserving its essential character and principles. After 9/11, the U.S. government set the aim of the war on terrorism as defeating terrorism as a threat to America's way of life as a free and open society.



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Among the sensible military objectives in such a war are defending the state's population, territory and infrastructure; disrupting and deterring attacks through activities at home and abroad; lengthening the time between high-intensity peaks; and countering ideological support for terrorism.

America's enemies in the war on terrorism were mainly non-state jihadist groups functioning as a network of networks. They did not have much organizational structure. Israel, however, has terrorist enemies that have substantial organizational structure. Special strategic challenges face Israel as a result of Hamas's control over Gaza and Hezbollah's political role within Lebanon. In response, Israel's war on terrorism has developed the concept of "flexible deterrence," which relies on threats of measured military force combined with various economic, political and diplomatic sanctions and incentives. This concept is based on distinguishing between the terrorist group and the population within which it operates. The key challenge is to find political, economic or other ways to influence the general population so that they have the will and courage to constrain the terrorists' power. This could lower the risk that minor skirmishes will ignite major confrontations. It could help Israel prevent successful terrorist operations and also incentivize the local population to free itself from terrorist control.

American and Israeli planners have yet to assess how all these changes in the nature of modern war should alter the ways we develop and use military force.

The foregoing discussion illuminates what is meant by the term "asymmetric war" – conflicts of the militarily weak against the strong. As noted, the weak party pursues a strategy that aims *directly* at political results, rather than trying to achieve such results through military victories.

In such conflicts, the key war weapons can be arguments and actions that are diplomatic, legal and moral – domestic and international. The decisive arena is less likely to be a military battlefield than the U.S. Congress or the Israeli Knesset. The most important wins may be scored with a heartrending videotape of civilian casualties, in a CNN interview, a UN Security Council meeting or a *New York Times* editorial.

This means that military preparedness is not enough. War preparations do not take the asymmetrical nature of warfare nowadays properly into account.

The United States and Israel should strategize, train and exercise the information aspects of conflict. Their officials should anticipate diplomatic, legal and moral arguments they will need for future conflicts. Both countries stockpile military equipment and munitions. They train their forces to use these items and conduct exercises with them. They should do the same regarding *political* weapons. They should prepare in advance the necessary political and legal arguments.



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They should train diplomats and legislative and public affairs officials for their roles as “warriors.” They should routinely and seriously exercise war-related political operations together with their military exercises.

For nearly a century, military thinkers have stressed the crucial importance of “jointness” – that is, changing the mentality, planning and practices of military officers so that the army, navy, marines, air force and coast guard can all operate together, and not just separately. To meet the challenges of asymmetric political-military conflict, those responsible for the political aspects should plan, train and exercise jointly with those responsible for the military aspects.

“Gray Zone” conflict is now an important asymmetric strategy. The term “gray zone” applies to a category of conflicts in world affairs. In such affairs, there is a spectrum of competition. It runs from peaceful pursuit of advantages through limited use of force to the outright warfare between established armed forces. “Gray zone” conflicts are not peaceful, but they are short of outright warfare.

For many years, analysts have noted the importance of activities in this spectrum’s mid-section. These include irregular warfare of the Yugoslav partisans or the French resistance in World War II; anti-imperial “national liberation” struggles fought in the period of decolonization; and the terrorism of radical groups in Europe, Japan and elsewhere from the late 1960s forward.

In the 1980s, the term “low-intensity conflict” became popular as a way of referring to violent campaigns that were not large-scale or intense enough to qualify simply as wars. The term “gray zone” gained currency after Russia conquered Crimea through the use of soldiers that wore uniforms without insignia so that they could not readily be identified definitively as Russians.

Western strategists should refine their understanding of the ‘gray zone’ construct. Why does it work? Where might it be replicated or adapted? What vulnerabilities does it exploit? How can it be countered? Can we stymie adversary gray zone strategy and tactics if we collectively think anew?

Military commanders and civilian security officials should be trained to consider the broader and longer-term consequences of all their actions. In addition, they should avoid the common mistake of “mirror imaging” – that is, assuming that adversaries are just like you.

Strategy is ultimately about influencing the actions of individuals. It’s crucial to know as much as possible about the individuals you are trying to influence. A successful strategy that incorporates these tenets will go a long way toward ensuring national security in an era of dynamically changing warfare.



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1. Mr. Feith and Admiral Chorev co-chaired the team that produced the report on “The Eastern Mediterranean in the New Era of Major-Power Competition” (http://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Feith_The%20Eastern%20Mediterranean%20in%20the%20New%20Era%20of%20Major-Power%20Competition.pdf). The other principal members were Dr. Seth Cropsey, Hudson Institute senior fellow and former Deputy Under Secretary of the U.S. Navy; Vice Admiral Jack Dorsett (USN, ret.), vice president for cyber and C4 at Northrop Grumman, former Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information Dominance and Director of Naval Intelligence; and Admiral Gary Roughead (USN, ret.), Robert and Marion Oster Distinguished Military Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and former Chief of Naval Operations.
2. See Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations as a Form of War,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2019 (In a recent speech, Russian General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff, “said Russia’s armed forces must maintain both ‘classical’ and ‘asymmetrical’ potential, using jargon for the mix of combat, intelligence and propaganda tools that the Kremlin has deployed in conflicts such as Syria and Ukraine.” The speech echoed themes from his 2013 article in an army journal “which many now see as a foreshadowing of the country’s embrace of ‘hybrid war’ in Ukraine, where Russia has backed separatist rebels and used soldiers in unmarked uniforms to seize Crimea.”).
3. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019*, p. 53 (Regarding the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM), “an armed reserve force of civilians:” “In the South China Sea, the PAFMM plays a major role in coercive activities to achieve China’s political goals without fighting, part of broader Chinese military theory that sees confrontational operations short of war as an effective means of accomplishing political objectives.”).

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