

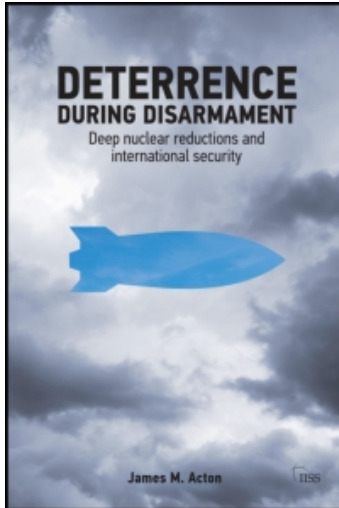
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## Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

A recurrent theme in much contemporary writing on strategy is that war in its classical form, involving set-piece battles between regular armies, does not have much of a future.<sup>1</sup> This issue is particularly important for the United States. Its international role relies on an ability to take on all comers in all circumstances. It has superior capabilities for nuclear exchanges and conventional battle, but capabilities at the level upon which most contemporary conflict takes place have been found wanting when recently put to the test. After Vietnam, the US armed forces demonstrated a marked aversion to counter-insurgency operations and dismissed peacekeeping as an inappropriate use of capabilities geared to high-intensity combat. They acknowledged a lack of comparative advantage in low-intensity operations, as they prepared for bigger things, but they also took comfort in the apparent lack of any strategic imperative that would oblige them to engage in distant civil wars. On occasion, as in Somalia, the US government chose to engage, but the military leadership left little doubt that as far as it was concerned this was a bad choice, and, at least in this case, experience seemed to prove it right. Afghanistan and Iraq, however, have created new strategic imperatives and so engagement has become unavoidable, continuous and vexatious. The US would not be the first apparently unbeatable military power to find itself undone by an inability to take seriously or even to comprehend enemies that rely on their ability to emerge out of the shadows of civil society, preferring minor skirmish to major battle, accepting no possibility for decisive victory but instead

aiming to unsettle, harass, demoralise, humiliate and eventually to wear down their opponents. This was, after all, the basis of many successful 'wars of national liberation' against colonial powers. Meanwhile, the strategic imperatives that would justify the large-scale investments in nuclear and conventional capabilities that dominate the Pentagon's budget are no longer self-evident.

This paper does not argue that major regular wars will not occur in the future or that it is pointless to prepare for them. There have been many predictions of the obsolescence of major war that turned out almost immediately to be wrong.<sup>2</sup> These predictions were often quite correct on the irrationality of warfare but wrong on their assumptions that rationality would prevail, or at least in terms of appreciating the short-term conditions that might lead countries to act so decisively against their long-term interests. While the impulse to acquire colonies or to secure markets through conquest may never again reach nineteenth-century proportions, different impulses towards inter-state war may arise, perhaps as a result of conflicts over scarce resources or in the wake of great environmental upheavals. Perhaps the current consensus on the irrationality of major war depends more than is appreciated on a calculation of the prevailing balance of power; if guards should be lowered or offensive capabilities suddenly increased, then these calculations may start to look quite different. Given these possibilities, some expenditure on nuclear and conventional forces might be prudent to deter great power confrontations (although this sort of claim is impossible to prove). The capacity for regular war is not confined to the major powers and it would not be surprising if one of the many territorial disputes among minor powers reached such a critical point that resort to arms seemed to be the only way to achieve a resolution. These uncertainties mean that it is highly likely that governments will continue to make provisions for regular war and to train their armed forces accordingly. Even while they may accept that a full-blown capacity for regular war may never be used, there are aspects of contemporary conflict which still involve high-intensity operations and can take advantage of the most advanced weapons systems.

Nor is it necessarily the case that the recent pattern of Western engagement in irregular warfare will continue, even though they now have experiences at home in an extreme, if only sporadic, form. In the conflicts that now demand immediate attention it is suicide bombers who appear to be most threatening. As agents of terror they might turn up almost anywhere, including in city centres, with a strategic purpose that appears little more than an expression of a generalised sense of global grievance; alternatively they act as the shock troops of more localised but intensely

vicious insurgencies. If this represents a trend in how to express personal-ity disorders then it may last for some time. If it is, however, strategic in inspiration then it may prosper or fizzle out depending on whether it is setting back or advancing the causes that it is supposed to serve.<sup>3</sup>

There is an argument that the risks of having to cope with acts of indiscriminate ferocity could be reduced if states were to refrain from future engagement with the more troubled parts of the world. During the 1990s it seemed reasonable to suppose that Western countries would have to engage in distant conflicts – even when their interests were at most indirectly involved – to protect vulnerable populations at risk from internal repression or inter-communal disorder. During the present decade it has become evident that Western interests could be more directly at stake but also that they are not so easy to secure through the use of force. It is quite possible that in response to events in Iraq there will be an attempt to wind down existing Western commitments and a reluctance to take on more. If the real need is to prevent terrorist acts within Western countries then that may depend more on the quality of work by intelligence agencies and the police than the use of armed forces in expeditionary roles.

Nonetheless, this paper assumes that, for the moment, the most perplexing problems of security policy surround irregular rather than regular war. It is, of course, a matter of enormous relief that these wars lack the sense of ultimate, existential danger posed by the major wars of the past, but that is also the reason why they are so perplexing. When the security of the state is threatened by a large and self-evidently hostile enemy then all social and economic resources can be mobilised in response. When, by contrast, there is a debate to be had about the nature of the threat and whether matters are made better or worse by direct action, military operations appear to be more discretionary and national mobilisation on even a modest scale becomes more difficult. Describing and quantifying the risks becomes harder, complicating the terrible calculus of costs and benefits that policy-makers face when embarking on any military operation, whereby collections of lives are weighed against one another, or the tangibles of human and physical destruction are set against the intangibles of high principle and even reputation. Even when military action is chosen, operations undertaken in politically complex settings can be full of surprises and lead to new missions and new rationales. The surprises often result from a failure to understand the strategic cultures and agendas of both friends and enemies, and the mixtures of motives and attitudes that influence their behaviour. Coping with these new conditions presents a substantial challenge to strategists.

The experience of Iraq since 2003 can and will be taken to reinforce the principled and prudential reasons to challenge the very idea that war might be used as a means of achieving supposedly liberal goals. It may be that this will encourage Western countries to leave the weak and failed states of the world well alone. It is not the purpose of this paper to identify contingencies for future military action. For a variety of reasons I believe that, over the medium and long term, non-intervention will be a difficult position to sustain although in the short term it may be a tempting one to try. Current exigencies may well draw Western governments into events around the globe, particularly as they affect Muslim countries. Even those aspects of contemporary conflict best handled by the police and intelligence services raise questions of strategy and the legitimacy of action.

This sets the context for the four core themes of this paper. The first is the difficulty the US armed forces face in shifting their focus from preparing for regular wars, in which combat is separated from civil society, to irregular wars, in which combat is integrated with civil society. Second, the political context of contemporary irregular wars requires that the purpose and practice of Western forces be governed by liberal values. This is also the case with regular wars, to the extent that they occur, but it is the integration with civil society that makes the application of liberal values so challenging. Third, the paper argues that this challenge becomes easier to meet when military operations are understood to contribute to the development of a compelling narrative about the likely course and consequence of a conflict, in which these values are shown to be respected. Fourth, while it is vital that the employment of armed force remains sensitive at all times to the underlying political context and to the role of narratives in shaping this context, a key test of success will always be the defeat of the opposing forces. The application of this test in regular war remains straightforward; this is not the case in irregular war, which can be of long duration and contain frequent shifts in tempo and focus. These themes raise issues that go beyond those connected with the 'war on terror', although this has undoubtedly highlighted their main features and associated dilemmas. Together they set the terms for contemporary strategic thinking.

## Strategy

The concept of strategy that underpins this paper is closely related to the concept of power, understood as the ability to produce intended effects. Power is often discussed simply as capacity, normally based on military or economic strength, but in the face of certain challenges or in the pursuit of particular objectives much of this capacity may be useless. It takes strategy to

unleash the power inherent in this capacity and to direct it towards specific purposes. Strategy is about choice. It depends on the ability to understand situations and to appreciate the dangers and opportunities they contain. The most talented strategists are able to look forward, to imagine quite different and more benign situations from those that currently obtain and what must be done to reach them, as well as more malign situations and how they might best be prevented. In so doing they will always be thinking about the choices available to others and how their own endeavours might be thwarted, frustrated or even reinforced. It is this interdependence of choice that provides the essence of strategy and diverts it from being mere long-term planning or the mechanical connection of available means to set ends. To focus on strategy is to emphasise the importance of choice and the extent to which the development of the international system will be much more than a function of impersonal trends or structural logic. In this respect, the transformation of strategy refers to the changing conditions in which choices must be made. While strategic discourse has now moved well beyond its etymological roots in the art of generals, and is notably prominent in organisational and business theory, this paper sticks close to the classical usage. This requires consideration of the changing character of armed forces, in terms of the development of military capabilities and the prevalent forms of conflict that shape their distribution and application.

The link with other forms of power comes at the level of grand strategy, at which the military instrument must be assessed in relation to all the other instruments available to states – economic, social and political. This is evident, for example, in the debate over the relative merits of ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ power and the claim that in the contemporary international environment influence is as likely to flow through cultural and economic relationships as military ones. Even when it comes to military affairs, wider socio-economic and technological changes have a major impact. Indeed discussions about changes in military affairs are as likely to focus on these factors as much as the changing nature of conflict.

Strategy has traditionally been concerned with attempts by states to influence both their position within the international system and the structure of the system itself. Over past decades, changes in the international system have resulted in important developments in thinking about military strategy, for example the rise and fall of wars of decolonisation, the fixation with nuclear deterrence and the revival of interest in conventional warfare. The reasons for suggesting that a transformation of strategy is now underway reflect the demilitarisation of inter-state relations, particularly among the great powers, and the expansion of the state system as a

result of decolonisation, which has resulted in many new states that are also internally unstable. Often this instability leads to violence and brings irregular forces into being. Foreign governments must then decide whether to become involved in helping to restabilise the situation or to mitigate the consequences of failing to do so. These are difficult choices and the way that they have been made and implemented has also contributed to the transformation of strategy. A further twist has been added by the arrival of super-terrorism as a major security threat and the campaign led by the Bush administration to deal directly with those responsible for past acts of terrorism and potentially for future acts. The 'war on terror', and also the more altruistic humanitarian interventions, require the separation of militants from their potential sources of support, which means understanding and, if possible, influencing the civil societies from whence they come.

### Transformation

I addressed these issues in a 1998 *Adelphi Paper* entitled *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs*.<sup>4</sup> In it I challenged the view that a technology-driven revolution in military affairs (RMA) was underway. Although some important changes had taken place in the way that the armed forces were able to go about their business, largely the result of advances in information and communication technologies, their impact on the actual conduct of war depended on the interaction of these developments with changes of a quite different type – in political affairs – which pointed away from the decisive clash between great powers. The RMA focused on major wars like those of the past, involving regular armed forces that would benefit from technological enhancements. This paid insufficient attention to the wars that might actually have to be fought, which were more likely to be asymmetrical and irregular. This was because there was a revolution in political affairs underway that was at least as important as a revolution in military affairs. Together they could (if this language were to be employed) constitute a revolution in strategic affairs.

In some respects events since 1998 have vindicated this analysis, but there are others in which it needs to be brought up to date, notably with regard to the 'global war on terror' and the experiences of Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. This *Adelphi Paper*, picking up on the themes of its predecessor, argues for thinking about the role of armed force in the light of changing political conditions and not just the new configurations made possible by the latest technological advances and organisational concepts.