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Have We Found the New “Artillery”?¹

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Abstract

In our day new conflicts erupt in the so called “hot zones” around the world. What can be clearly seen in those conflicts is the extensive use of certain strategies aimed at giving specific advantages to the adversaries. This phenomenon is due to certain factors of modern way of decision making and way of thinking in general. The current paper's purpose is to examine the reasons that constitute the utilization of such strategies almost a necessity and to analyze a number of them. To be more exact, four strategies are under examination, including their advantages, disadvantages and a number of instances where they have been utilized in the past. The aforementioned strategies are: 1. proxy warfare, 2. pre-emptive strikes, 3. deterrence and 4. strikes from a distance, with speed and precision. To conclude, an effort will be made to make a general assumption about the future of the aforementioned strategies and if their presence will be something of a formality in the near future or if they will inevitably fade away in due time.

Keywords: new strategies of warfare; proxy warfare; pre-emptive strikes; deterrence; strikes from a distance; precision strikes; hypersonic missiles; modern battlefields

Introduction

On September 16, 1793, a young Corsican artillery captain of the French Republican Army, named Napoléon Bonaparte, receives his first command post during the Siege of Toulon. The rest is a well-known history. The reason “Le Petit Corporal” is mentioned here, is neither due to his undeniable military prowess nor accomplishments. What is important for this paper, is the transformation of warfare this military genius brought to his era and beyond. Among other things, this included the extensive importance he gave to artillery. “*God is on the side with the best artillery*” he is believed to have said, as he utilized it better than anyone else while redrawing the borders in Europe. Napoléon’s gravity on artillery was imparted to next generations, hundreds of years later.

However, “*everything flows*” as Heraclitus had said. The conduct of warfare could not be left untouched. Back then, the use of artillery was a strategy of its own, nowadays usually a part of one, if not merely a tactical component in some cases. Technology advances, new capabilities and mentalities emerge. Human lives, for example, matter a lot more nowadays. So, what remains when the dust settles? Well, two things remain unfazed by the general tendency for change: the first, is the desire of actors to pursue their interests and the second, is their unwillingness to bear an unnecessary

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big cost, be it lives, money, bad publicity or time. All in all, "do more with less" is always the first and highest strategy, upon which all the rest are based.

But where do all those general points culminate in? The current situation is as complex as ever. Multipolarity is at its peak, state and non-state actors are included, technology advances rapidly, there are always interests to be pursued and the mentality is set in keeping conventional forces as far out of the battlefield as it is possible. Thus, new strategies have naturally made their appearance and others, already known from the past, have been upgraded, updated and used more extensively than ever before. Due to length constraints, this paper will focus just on four of them: the warfare via proxies, the strikes aimed at pre-emption, the deterrence way and the capabilities of striking from a long distance, with great speed and with near-perfect precision. Apart from this analysis and the examples that will be given for each specific strategy, this paper will end with a general evaluation and a hypothesis about what the future may hold for them.

Proxy warfare

Despite it is a known phenomenon since ancient times, as we learn from Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, proxy warfare's definition, nature, forms and participants were thoroughly examined during the Cold War, when USA and the Soviet Union embarked on a plethora of conflicts and grudges via the utilization of proxy groups all over the world. The cases include, among others, the Suez Crisis, the Arab-Israeli War and the Six-Day War (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019).

After the end of the Cold War, proxy wars remained important. Undoubtedly, the biggest change in the nature of modern warfare is the appearance of a new mentality which has decreased public and political will for large-scale military adventures. What is more, the cost of large armies, innovative military technologies, lost lives and protracted wars such as in Iraq and Afghanistan is nowadays rising high. Yet the deep desire of states not to cede their strategic interest is still here (Mumford, 2013). Thus, a different, lighter and cheaper form of warfare, such as proxy warfare, could not be more welcome.

In this age, as pointed out by Mumford (2013), new tactics are also being used extensively such as the deployment of Private Military Security Contractors. The use of PMCs allows governments to evade negative effects that may hurt the general cause and effort. PMSCs are used in activities such as weapons procurement, police training, intelligence gathering and the close personal protection of civilian leaders. Finally, the changing dynamics of proxy wars are also shown clearly by its extensive use by regional powers and by the newly-emerged phenomenon of coalition proxy warfare.

But why is this strategy so broadly used? It is all due to the advantages it holds, both for the sponsoring and the sponsored side. The former includes locals fighting and dying. Moreover, some states do not possess large power-projection capabilities and use proxies as a way of influence outside their territory. As far as operational advantages are concerned, the proxies, being locals and, therefore, often accepted by the affected communities, can gather intelligence more easily and are less likely to cause turmoil. Furthermore, they often know the terrain better and can blend more easily with the population (Byman, 2018a).

For a proxy, third states provide weapons, money and training, among other forms of support. Some also provide safe routes or hideouts. Outside support means de facto foreign recognition, thus cementing a group's legitimacy. Small factions without many resources may also avoid being devoured by larger and more powerful groups. Last but not least, the outside support also offers gravity over possible rivals.

However, proxy warfare should at no point be considered a panacea. Proxies act according to their own interests. A stronger proxy is more effective but is also more able to start acting independently. Moreover, there is often the risk of dragging the sponsor into an unwanted conflict on behalf of its proxy. It should be also underlined that support for a proxy often leads other states to sponsor their own, eventually deteriorating and prolonging the overall conflict (Byman, 2018a). Last but not least, there is always difficulty in ensuring both the state monopoly on violence, thus its stability, and the tracking of given weapons after the end of the conflict (Benowitz & Ross, 2020).

According to Byman (2018b), however, negative effects for a proxy are also looming both on the inside and outside. Outside support may help the group at the expense of the general movement, allowing possible divisions to grow and multiply. Furthermore, some groups may gradually lose touch with the native population because they do not rely on them to raise funds or recruit fighters. What is more, third states' governments tend to sacrifice proxies when necessary to advance their own interests. Thus, sponsors may abandon their proxies or back rival ones if their goals change.

Pre-emptive strikes

George Washington's phrase "*offensive operations, oftentimes, is the surest, if not the only means of defense*", is the base of the next strategy to be analyzed. A pre-emptive strike can be a greatly effective arrow in an actor's quiver, as it can either cause grave damage or even completely decapitate an enemy.

The USA chose to follow this strategy with its intervention in Iraq. The campaign was based on factors such as the enormous threat due to both Iraq's military capabilities and destabilizing behavior and its continuous failure to comply with the resolutions of the UN Security Council. Therefore, the possibility of the posed threat to transform into reality was considered high, also considering its augmenting capabilities in the use of WMDs and Saddam Hussein's aggressive and unstable personality. Despite the UN Security Council not giving direct permission for the use of force, Iraq's aforementioned status and actions provided enough moral grounds for an intervention (Sofaer, 2003).

An interesting approach to pre-emption, according to Popescu & Secieru (2018), is that of Russia, which chose to make the most out of its advanced cyber capabilities. Those have been made apparent after its campaigns in Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia. The latter two were the opening act of the military campaigns that followed. This strategy has both advantages, such as low cost, low risk and the projection of Russia as a still capable player in the international power chess game, and disadvantages, such as the other states bolstering their own cyber capabilities, thus augmenting the competition.

Recently, Japan contemplated buying air-launched cruise missiles that would allow a strike from a distance at North Korea and China's launch sites. That was officially stated to be an act of self-defense, despite the attacking nature of the weapon (Kelly, 2020).

All in all, and in line with Sofaer (2003), there is a diachronic debate concerning pre-emption's reasonability, from which some factors that should be taken into consideration have emerged, such as the nature and possible impact of the threat, the possibility of the threat being realized, the existence and exhaustion of alternatives and the consistency with international laws. However, it is clear that artificial rules cannot usually cope with the pressure of the real world, so it really depends on the willingness of each state to adopt a positive or negative stance. Basically, an actor that wants to break the rules, will eventually do it.

Deterrence

When an actor wants to stop an adversary before any harm is made but without the use of violence that a pre-emptive strike demands, deterrence gets into the frame. Deterrence is basically a threat posed by an actor towards another actor in order for the second one not to realize an action he had beforehand considered taking. Deterrence's credibility is based on factors such as the deterrer's capability to realize the threat, the probability of realizing it and the clear communication of the threat by the deterrer (Osoba et al., 2020).

As stated by Cohen et al. (2014), the most famous case of deterrence is of course the nuclear capabilities of the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War that prohibited each other from taking too aggressive actions, let alone engaging in a direct conflict. Despite the present availability of nuclear weapons as deterrence tools, there is still a need for conventional capabilities, as it is in many cases more compatible with the threat encountered. A terrorist group, for example, is not going to cease its actions due to fear of being obliterated by a nuclear strike.

In the modern era, technology provides a large variety of means to promote deterrence. Specifically, the extensive use of autonomous and unmanned vehicles has various implications regarding deterrence. First of all, it considerably augments the capability of the user to strike from a distance, thus making its threat stronger. Furthermore, it increases the credibility of the user's deterrence, as it considerably reduces the risk for the state's personnel. Last but not least, the use of such systems may be a solution that allows both the promotion of a state's interests and the reduction of risk concerning a full-scale counterattack. However, there is always the possibility that the use of this type of military equipment by an actor, may lead to its adversaries to develop similar capabilities (Osoba et al., 2020).

In agreement with Mälksoo (2020), deterrence, except for its evident strategic value, also holds an important symbolic aspect. NATO, especially the USA as the natural leader of the alliance, has small forces based in East Europe as a deterrent against Russian aggression. Such moves promote the internal coherence of the alliance, thus projecting a strong stance against possible enemies. What is more, for allied troops stationed in "hot zones", maintaining a neutral stance that shows restraint may also achieve another symbolic victory, as such a public image can gather support for the cause of the alliance.

Distance, precision and speed

As reported by McKay (2021), technology plays a nonnegotiable role in the conduct of conflicts all around the world. Someone could say that there is currently an arms race, concerning platforms and weapons that permit strikes from afar, combining high precision and speed. The aforementioned weapons are usually deployed in "grey zones" and are often disclosed to the public eye.

The 2020 drone strikes against Saudi Arabia's oil-processing facilities exhibit this new form of warfare that could potentially be a normality from now on. Behind the attack were Yemen's Houthi rebels who have possibly been provided with the necessary expertise and equipment from Iran. They adopted this strategy due to the unsuccessfulness of their previous attacks using ballistic missiles of low-precision. This strategy provides them with a cheap, better-guided and rather destructive means

that can be used in numbers and from afar, against which there are currently not very effective countermeasures (Cordesman, 2019; Hubbard, Karasz & Reed, 2019).

Another example of such capabilities occurred in January 2020 when a US drone strike killed the leader of the Quds Force of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani. The strike was justified by the government of Donald Trump as a pre-emptive, self-defense action aimed at achieving deterrence, as it was claimed there were sufficient clues that Soleimani had ordered hostile actions against USA military personnel in the past (Crowley, Hassan & Schmitt, 2020).

During the last confrontation between Israel and Hamas, it was apparent that the IDF is far technologically superior to Hamas fighters. Thus, it is normal that the two sides used different weapons, however their tactics were similar: attack from a distance. Hamas used basically low-cost, home-crafted, mainly short-range missiles in big numbers that hit nearby Israeli cities. They also used a variety of more capable rockets, alongside with suicide drones, a far vaster and more sophisticated weaponry than it would be in the past due to technological advances. On the other side, Israel's strikes at Gaza included targets varying from particular buildings and underground facilities housing Hamas' leaders or military and economic activities to precision assassinations. Those precision strikes came mainly from aircrafts armed with high altitude, guided bombs that could hit specific targets, UCAVs, with smaller but more versatile capabilities, and UAVs, used extensively for surveillance and acquiring targets (Maher, 2021; Roblin, 2021).

According to Rajagopalan (2021), the USA is considered to be behind China and Russia in the hypersonic arms' race and is currently trying to catch up. Apart from extraordinary speed, the aforementioned missiles ought to be also as precise and maneuverable as possible, so that they cannot be easily detected and destroyed.

When talking about possible drawbacks of the aforementioned weapons, we can distinguish a wide variety. On a tactical level, those strikes' success depends heavily on accurate targeting provided by C4ISR capabilities. In environments where these are diminished, the collateral damage may be bigger. On a strategic level, precision strikes are not at all a panacea and relying solely on them to achieve a strategic goal should be avoided. On the contrary, it should always be the higher strategy that determines their use. On the political end of the spectrum, the precision provided by new technological achievements has influenced decision makers in making decisions to attack more easily. This, however, may lead to higher damage than anticipated (Universiteit Utrecht, 2020).

Conclusions

What is it that constitutes those strategies desirable and so extensively utilized in modern battlefields? It is undoubtedly the capabilities they offer: plausible deniability, hits from safe distance, single-hit availability, avoidance of a wider conflict, reduction of high costs and human losses, the ability to save face, leverage against enemies and much more already mentioned advantages. Bearing in mind that there is not a single actor, both state and non-state, that is willing to back down from its interests, any strategy giving the above positives is and will remain attractive. Thus, we will most probably continue seeing more and more actors adopting them at least for the foreseeable future.

However, it must be highlighted again that the aforementioned strategies can often bear important drawbacks: big collateral damage, spill-off effects, possible retaliation by enemies, enlargement of small conflicts, utilization by aggressive actors with less resources, new arms races, just to name a few. This reality, combined with the natural tendency of humanity to evolve its capabilities and rid them from as many wrongdoings as possible, sets the tone for future endeavors. Since these strategies are more and more of a normality as a means in confronting modern era's threats, there will almost certainly be efforts to further advance and clear them from probable drawbacks.

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