

## **2 Leading military organizations in the Risk Society**

### **Mapping the new strategic complexity**

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#### **Introduction**

It is not easy leading military organizations these days. There is a new strategic complexity, that affects managing (equipping and preparing) forces in peace time and commanding (deploying and employing) them in times of crisis and conflict. The strategic complexity is created by the interplay of several dynamics, and those will be the focus of this chapter. It derives mainly from (a) the current Western security policy that hinges on a pro-active strategy of risk reduction through military engagements in areas with failed or failing states and spill-over consequences from civil wars and other internal conflicts; and (b) the empowerment of violent non-state groups by the forces of globalization. The aim of this chapter is to explore these new conflict dynamics and suggest some implications for the domain of military leaders: 'the art of the general'.

#### **The Risk Society: planning for what?**

The current era extrapolates several trends that became manifest during the 1990s. One characteristic is the avoidance of full-fledged war and prolonged combat in an era in which the West was no longer faced with 'wars of necessity' but only 'wars of choice'. In *wars of choice* vital interests were not at stake, and subsequently casualties among own and even enemy military units needed to be minimized and public and politicians alike manifested abhorrence towards 'collateral damage'. A loss of belligerence was observed leading to 'post-heroic warfare' (Luttwak 1995). In the West, in an era and location that was devoid of existential threats, war had become 'sub-rationally unthinkable' (Mueller 1989). Military force as an instrument gained questionable legitimacy.

If wars were to be fought, the West would play by its strengths – economic power and technological supremacy in the conventional combat arena – to achieve its objectives at minimal cost and bloodshed and in minimum time. Avoiding casualties and destruction was both a humanizing trend and the only way to maintain legitimacy for conducting combat operations (Latham 2002; Luttwak 1995; McInnes 2002). Thus, if wars were to be fought and forces to be employed, in particular in Western Europe the dominant rationale that was palatable for the public were humanitarian, not national security interests. Military actions had to be precise and short, and were to be only directed and limited to enemy combatants. There was no enemy, but only 'rogue states', 'failing states', and humanitarian disasters with potential spill over risks for regional instability (NATO 1999). The military in the 1990s became a humanitarian problem solver. The state, failing or otherwise, was still very much the actor of focus. Defense planning was defined by a threat-complexity – a very wide range of security risks which are difficult to prioritize – and a corresponding mixture of missions,

ranging from high intensity war fighting to low intensity conflicts and peacekeeping operations. But in terms of security and defense policy development in the West, risk remained somewhat remote.

For the West, 9/11 was a rude 'wake-up call'. It demonstrated the end of the strategic pause and the limits of the particular Western cultural conceptualization of war. Al Qaeda and its ilk regarded war from an existential perspective. Risks now became more tangible and could manifest themselves rapidly close by. Risk turned out very much to be an integral part of our open societies. Beck's (1992) concept of the 'risk society' foreshadowed this pervasiveness of ever present risk:

We are moving away from a world of enemies to one of dangers and risks, where the risks are unquantifiable, nor do we know the specifics of the risks, nor the time, likelihood or location they may manifest themselves. They are not geographically nor temporarily contained, but are global and infinite in nature.  
(Beck 1992: 20)

As a consequence, geographically, since 9/11 both the EU and NATO consider their security interests from an almost global perspective. That notion is informed by the awareness that risks may be interrelated, one being the catalyst of another.

Failing states are safe havens for terrorist groups and criminal gangs, resulting in cross boundary proliferation of drug, arms, diamond and women smuggling activities and hence to export of corruption, crime and instability to neighboring countries. This has direct implications for Western nations (Voorhoeve 2007: 11): internal and external aspects of security are intertwined. Risk categories (e.g. terrorism, proliferations of WMD technology, failing states, energy security, and resource competition) are now seen as connected, and calling for a global mindset and local action. This security context results in the 'precautionary approach'. Risks need to be pro-actively managed (Coker 2003; Rasmussen 2006; Shaw 2005).

For Western militaries, the proliferation of (perceived) risks has resulted in an era of *strategic interventions*, where national security motivations coincide with humanitarian motivations (Ignatieff 2002).

### **Limits of the Western strategic mindset**

By engaging in strategic interventions, the West encounters a conceptual problem. Strategic interventions involve limited aims in limited wars. However, the Western strategic mentality has been ill at ease in comprehending anything that did not encompass the massive clash of organized armed forces and the ambiguities of civil wars, insurgencies or terrorism. The popular image of war, strategic literature and the prevailing strategic culture still refer to conventional, regular inter-state war.

Employing and applying force demands that it will lead in a clear manner and according to a convincing logic to the achievement of a politically defined purpose defined as victory. Indeed, if such logic cannot be demonstrated the use of force is criminal. The *strategy canon* of the West is all about the rational relationship between input and output. This body of knowledge is informed by a legalist notion of who may fight war (combatants) and who is protected (civilians), when it is permitted to use force and what are accepted methods to conduct war. War is seen in an instrumental rational fashion, subject and related to, but distinct from politics. It knows defined theaters of war and recognizes levels of warfare – tactical, operational and strategic. It is dominantly about applying or threatening combat – kinetic is the term en vogue. Dichotomies and categories are employed to mark distinctions: conventional versus unconventional, high versus low intensity warfare, regular versus irregular, inter-state versus intra-state, or even military force versus criminal violence. Western military doctrines and education are built on these categories of conflict. Politicians and the public expect a plausible rationale for military deployment and a credible and measurable strategic rationale. It is the military-intellectual legacy of World War II (Smith 2005: 5).

However, as Smith and Bet-El (2005: 1) assert, 'War as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs . . . no longer exists'. What we face instead is continuing hostility conducted largely by non-military means: propaganda and political agitation. Military force is no longer used to decide the political dispute, but rather to create a condition in which a strategic result is achieved. We are in a world of continual confrontations and conflicts in which military acts support the achievement of the desired outcome by other means.

Since 9/11 Western forces have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan under the banner of a variety of often incompatible purposes: spreading democracy, preventing terrorism, subduing an insurgency, bringing stability and prosperity to the war torn country, stabilization and reconstruction, state-building, and Security Sector Reform. Political rhetoric claimed military presence serves national interests or humanitarian interests. However, due to the prolonged, costly and bloody involvement, without any permanent and measurable end state, in both countries, both militaries and politicians have found it increasingly difficult to build and sustain a credible narrative towards their own population. The strategic logic is not obvious: How does the employment of Western military force(s) contribute to security? What is the connection between the deployments to a theater, employment within it and the political aim of the mission? What is the meaning of success? Thus the messy realities on the ground match neither expectations, nor the neat labels the strategic canon has developed. The West is rediscovering vicious and potent dynamics of pre-modern – traditional modes of warfare of local violent groups and the experiencing the surprising benefits globalization can offer such groups.

### Rediscovering vicious dynamics of tribal wars

Most conflicts are of an intra-state and transnational nature. They do not necessarily involve a clash of military forces. There are no formal declarations of conflict and no terminations. There is no easily defined human foe. Borders do not mean much nor do the Geneva Conventions. If agreements between or among contending authorities are made there is no guarantee these groups will honor them. Fighting is not constant, but ever a latent threat. There is not a defined theater of war but violence may erupt everywhere.

Conflicts that mobilize the employment of Western militaries often have a mix of deep underlying causal factors that cannot be approached using traditional strategic lexicon. Indeed, for some peoples and cultures, war may have different purposes (symbolic, ritual or existential) and follow different rules. It may not be linked to and constrained by politics, and may not be as instrumental as Western nations with their high-technology armed forces have become accustomed to (van Creveld 1991; Coker 2003). Here *Kinpolitics* reign, as Ronfeldt (2007) argued. Honor, respect, pride, shame, revenge and compensation, blood feud, honorable reciprocity, these are traditional features of tribal warfare. Whereas states have strongly regulated war and violence, and at least make a deliberate effort to tie war to specific political cost–benefit calculations, such groups and affiliated non-state actors wage war because of a myriad of pragmatic and symbolic reasons. Distinctions between war and crime, and armed forces and civilians are breaking down. Battles are replaced by skirmishes, bombings and massacres. Intermingling with enemy forces, mixing with the civilian population, and extreme dispersion have become the norm. Considering the emotions involved, the side with the more rational interests will most likely lose.

To describe the political economy of such conflicts, Kaldor (1999) coined the term *New Wars* where ‘identity politics’ are central: the exclusive claim to power on the basis of tribe, nation, clan or religious community. In wars between communities as opposed to armies, everyone is automatically labeled a combatant merely by virtue of their identity. Military victory is not decisive, nor aimed at. Instead, territorial gains are aimed at through acquiring political power, not through military force. Weapons and methods to gain political power include ethnic cleansing, rape, assassination of key figures of the opponent, and terror. Such intrastate wars are ‘total’ from the perspective of the participants. War is not something that needs to be finished. In this context the warring states or factions seek finance from external sources that depend on continued violence. This results in a set of ‘predatory social relations’ that have a tendency to spread. Because the various warring parties share the aim of sowing fear and hatred, they operate in a way that is mutually re-enforcing, helping each other to create a climate of insecurity and suspicion. War is not a means but an end in itself.