

**THE CHARACTER OF CONFLICT IN
2025:
WORKSHOP REPORT**

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The views, opinions and/or findings contained in this report are those of the author, and should not be construed as official National Intelligence Council position, policy or decision.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a report on a workshop convened by Long Term Strategy Group at the office of CENTRA Technology in Burlington, Massachusetts, on Friday, 4 April, 2008, at the behest of the National Intelligence Council's Long-Range Analysis Unit. The purpose of the workshop was to assemble a group of technical subject-matter experts to evaluate potential characteristics of conflict in 2025. The report captures the key findings and major themes of the workshop. Three scenarios, a baseline and two excursions, that structured the discussion were the product of a previous workshop. Before the event, participants received a brief paper examining key trends in the character of conflict. Both this read-ahead paper and the workshop agenda can be found in the appendix of this report.

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INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND APPROACH

This workshop aimed to analyze how current trends, along with potential discontinuities that may arise over the next seventeen years, will interact to shape the character of conflict in 2025. The target of the inquiry was further specified as the character of warfare, meaning combat, in 2025, with the understanding that a diversity of means – from conventional and strategic attacks to information and cyber operations – may be used by various actors, including states and non-state groups, in the conduct of war.

The effort to think about conflict in 2025 was structured by three scenarios derived from a previous workshop that analyzed the character of the global security environment in 2025. That prior workshop yielded a baseline scenario, or a picture of the security environment that would emerge if currently observable trends continue uninterrupted, as well as two excursions from the baseline – worlds that would result if trends converge in unexpected ways, or if discontinuities arise between the present and 2025.

The baseline scenario was introduced at the opening of the workshop. Participants were briefed on each excursion scenario as it came up on the agenda. At the end of the workshop, the participants were asked to discuss common themes or military issues common to all the scenarios. They were also asked to offer any thoughts on questions not addressed previously in the workshop. Finally, they were encouraged to state briefly their views of what would be the biggest difference between warfare in 2008 and warfare in 2025.

The use of alternative visions of the security environment in 2025 to structure the workshop participants' discussion of warfare in 2025 was designed to prevent the exercise from devolving into technological determinism. A potential pitfall confronting analysts of future military issues is the temptation to extrapolate from current developments in military technology and capabilities and assume that emerging means will not only be employed but even incite war. For instance, one might note the growing use of unmanned vehicles by both the United States military and the Chinese armed forces and posit that the United States will be likely to confront China in a war of drones by 2025. But this line of thinking conspicuously lacks any notion of a *casus belli* or the strategic context in which the United States and China will be operating in 2025.

Rather than let emergent means or technologies structure our thinking about future warfare, the workshop aimed to integrate consideration of the objectives and characteristic modes of behavior of the actors that might be involved in conflict. Most important, the workshop participants were encouraged to make their assumptions about these issues transparent, so that as time passes, observers will be able to determine whether developments in global politics and the structure of the international environment validate these assumptions.

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CHARACTER OF WARFARE UNDER THE BASELINE SCENARIO

The baseline scenario assumed the continuation of current trends that result in the rise of China and India, and the relative decline of Japan and Europe as global powers. Domestic economic development and the cultivation of ties with international trade partners were seen as dominant priorities of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian foreign policy, with world energy needs continuing to be met largely through market transactions. At the same time, the spread of scientific and technological expertise through globally available educational institutions, facilitated by the increasing mobility of human beings via relatively cheap means of transportation, meant that in the baseline world hostile non-state actors would be able to acquire increasingly capable missile arsenals of all kinds, (man portable air defenses or MANPADs, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and guided munitions), and make progress on acquiring chemical and biological warfare capabilities. Due to demographic youth bulges, particularly in the Middle East, radical non-state groups would be able to recruit from expanded populations of military-age men. In this scenario, then, interstate wars would be rare, but non-state actors would be increasingly lethal. The threat of terrorism, combined with unwanted population flows, encourages the erection of walls, which become an important feature of the local security landscape. With the United States continuing to act as the world's sheriff, the leading military concern would be countering terrorists and other non-state actors

There was general agreement at the workshop that the spread of knowledge about science and technology under the baseline scenario conditions would create new challenges for countering terrorism and insurgency. In particular, the rise of GPS-guided artillery promises to greatly complicate the defense of fixed installations such as bases or safe havens – for instance, the Green Zone in Baghdad. There is a tendency to discount the ability of non-state groups to achieve the organizational capacity required to exploit advanced technologies. But in some cases, for instance, the Stinger missile, an advanced device can be relatively easy to use and, compared with older, lower-tech weapons, actually reduce the skill necessary to hit a target.

Non-state actors that challenge the United States and its allies are also likely to have access to a range of space-based communications and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, including, but not limited to, the American GPS, to which the United States would presumably have the ability to regulate access. With European and Chinese global satellite positioning systems in orbit, and with growing bandwidth available and accessible through handheld devices such as PDAs, organizations like al Qaeda will increasingly be able to track and designate targets.

GPS-guided munitions and MANPADs in the hands of non-state actors will require the states that oppose them to disperse their forces. Lasers and electronic countermeasures are likely to be used by states for defensive anti-missile purposes. However, it may be that defense cannot match offense for economic reasons. The security environment of 2025 under the baseline scenario therefore may be offense dominant.

Hizballah's use of relatively advanced weapons such as the Silkworm anti-ship missile in its 2006 conflict with Israel demonstrates the principle that non-state actors can achieve the organizational capacity to acquire and exploit sophisticated new technologies and platforms. The longevity of a select set of terrorist groups – with Hizballah and al Qaeda already having survived past their twentieth birthdays – will allow these non-state actors to behave like states insofar as they will be able to learn from past experiences and integrate lessons into training protocols. This suggests that the organizations to watch will be those that survive and acquire territory that they can reliably control for training their militants. Territory may therefore be a resource over which conflicts arise both between non-state actors and states and between different non-state groups in 2025. Finally, Islam may remain a source of ideological inspiration that successful organizations such as Hizballah and al Qaeda can manipulate to recruit young male soldiers, though it may face competition from emerging nationalist impulses within the Islamic world.

At the same time, we must take into account the state forces trying to suppress non-state actors. Former President Hafez al-Assad's firm hand over Syria, as well as Israel's success in keeping RPGs out of the West Bank, suggests that certain kinds of intelligence-backed policing can prevent non-state actors from mounting high-tech offensive operations against states. States with effective police capabilities may limit the influence of non-state organizations.

At the other end of the spectrum, actors even smaller than non-state organizations, such as individuals, may be able to inflict great damage in 2025 by means of off-the-shelf weapons or biological agents that can be developed in a graduate student's garage. This disruptive threat could coincide with, but exist independently of, the threat posed by terror organizations and insurgencies. Others reasoned that the danger posed by hyper-empowered individuals is overstated because the courses of action open to them – for instance, spreading a pathogen to infect civilians – still require some sort of organizational capacity, as in a network of followers. There is also a question about the effect of a biological attack on an urban population in a commercial center. An angry lone actor who aspires to bring down world trade might see such a target as ideal, but major cities have shown considerable resiliency in the past. London survived not only fire bombing by the Nazis in World War II. The world as a whole survived the flu pandemic of 1918, which killed more people than the First World War, without any noticeable social effects.

With regard to procurement, the low-cost, police-like forces and systems necessary for confronting non-state actors are very different from the expensive stealth platforms or antisubmarine warfare investments that might be necessary in an engagement with a peer or near-peer state. Focusing defense expenditures on the anti-terror and counterinsurgency missions would in effect reduce the budget for developing the capabilities to deter or contend with a peer. Further, a continuation of the trend toward specialized anti-terror and counterinsurgency units might compromise prospects for innovation in these and other mission areas. For instance, the fact that the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps all perform close air support results in productive competition in this area among the three service branches. If the air-support mission were exclusively given to one service branch, the resulting reduction in competition might slow the rate of innovation in tactical aviation. Similarly, if a service specializes in anti-terror or

counterinsurgency missions, this by definition removes one measure of inter-service rivalry, which could reduce overall levels of innovation.¹

Finally, a question worth considering is whether we should take seriously the possibility of a conventional or traditional interstate war resurfacing in this environment, particularly if and when the US and other militaries have adjusted themselves to fighting insurgents and terrorist groups. Such a development could expose deficiencies in training, defense procurement, and innovation, as well as unintended consequences among third-party actors. The kinds of focused exercises through which soldiers train to face particular terror or insurgent enemies may not leave them prepared for other threats. Workshop participants noted the problems encountered by the Israeli Defense Forces who had prepared to fight insurgents in the Golan Heights but found themselves facing an entirely different kind of enemy in Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006. There could be a moral hazard created by the erosion of US conventional capabilities. If the United States elects not to maintain land forces associated with traditional interstate wars, this could create an incentive for states outside the Middle East to go to war over longstanding grievances – for instance, border disputes. Additional circumstances that could lead to a revival of interstate warfare were considered when the workshop discussion turned to excursions from the baseline scenario. It was acknowledged that the baseline world was not only relatively benign but also fragile, susceptible to perturbation by a number of different plausible discontinuities.

¹ A variant strain of thinking on innovation holds that what is most prejudicial to it is the current breadth of focus in defense procurement. According to this theory, if, instead of a commitment to preserving conventional forces while boosting counterinsurgency capabilities, the US military were ordered to shift wholly to a counterinsurgency posture, this new doctrine would create an existential crisis for the US Navy and Air Force, in particular, compelling both service branches to innovate.

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CHARACTER OF WARFARE UNDER THE FIRST EXCURSION

The first excursion from this baseline scenario featured a world in which, either because of growing domestic political opposition to international military engagements or because of a dramatic discontinuity such as a terrorist attack on the US homeland, the United States elected substantially to reduce its military presence on Middle East soil. This reduction could be seen by the region to be a retreat, whether or not the United States saw itself as retreating. In this scenario, the United States transitions into a role of “offshore balancing” – i.e., remaining engaged in the region through naval and means of projecting US power and influence without ground forces. It was assumed in this scenario that Iran was already nuclear-capable and had been building up a nuclear weapons arsenal for several years. It was also assumed that Iran would seek to exploit the vacuum left in the US’s wake by asserting Iranian primacy over the Persian Gulf. These developments would alarm the Gulf States as well as Israel. The United States would then find itself in competition with other major energy consumers for relationships in the Middle East that might mitigate the risk of a disruption in oil supply flows.

In this scenario, assumptions about a few key variables, and potential discontinuities, have a significant impact on the character of the security environment. For instance, a coup in Pakistan would create fears about loose nukes and could change regional alignments. Independent developments inside Middle Eastern countries could lead to instability in those countries – for instance, Saudi Arabia – as well as provoke the United States to revisit its decision to adopt a hands-off posture.

That said, assuming that Iran is nuclear, and that the United States is perceived to have withdrawn from the Persian Gulf, an arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia is likely to ensue. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are capable of conducting anti-access operations to shut down vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) such as the Strait of Hormuz, but neither is capable of controlling or protecting SLOCs. An arms race would entail a competition between Iranian missiles and Saudi air defenses, and the reverse, or a competition in forces that would deter attacks on SLOCs, or both. At the same time, both states might be encouraging proxies – Shiites in Iran’s case and Sunnis in the Saudi Arabia’s – to be restive in the other’s sphere of influence.

The world’s continuing reliance on oil and gas for transportation suggests that despite the advances in alternative energy sources that are likely to have occurred by 2025, net energy importers such as the United States and China will retain an interest in Middle Eastern oil flows. This means that states external to the Saudi-Iranian competition, and even to the region, might get involved in supporting either the Saudis or the Iranians. One could imagine Chinese offers of arms to Iran, for instance, in exchange for proprietary access to Iranian oil and gas fields. It is also likely that in this scenario Saudi Arabia would be working with Pakistan to acquire its own nuclear weapon. At the same time, the United States might try to inflame restive groups within Iran through special operations. These developments in and of themselves would not necessarily destabilize a conventional Saudi-Iranian arms race, but would raise the stakes in the event of a conflict.

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The workshop participants discussed several pathways by which a conflict might break out in this scenario. First, even if one assumes that Iran would seek to consolidate its gains rather than go on the offensive in the face of an American withdrawal, a dwindling supply of accessible oil inside Iran might spur Tehran to strike out in pursuit of additional reserves, following the precedent of Saddam Hussein in Kuwait. Such an offensive would be likely to trigger a reaction from Saudi Arabia, the United States, and possibly China, but the reaction might be muted or deterred by Iranian nuclear weapons. If, in addition, the flow of oil out of the region on the world market were not threatened, external intervention might be limited, and the war would remain local. Even so, interstate war in the Persian Gulf in the nuclear-proliferated environment of 2025 would raise the likelihood of broader unintended effects. The presence of dual-capable missiles some deployed with non-nuclear weapons, some without, all looking the same, creates the potential that a regional state might see the mobilization of non-nuclear missiles, and to infer that preparations were being made for a nuclear attack. This reciprocal fear of surprise attack could contribute to the probability of pre-emptive strikes against nuclear forces, or nuclear strategies of launch after warning. Under these conditions, nuclear weapons use would become less unlikely.

Second, even absent a local or regional conventional conflict, the security environment posited in this scenario is likely to feature demonstrative and possibly even coercive uses of strategic capabilities. There would also be a potential for inadvertent missile launches during alert or testing exercises. Any of these phenomena might be misconstrued as preparatory to an offensive, for instance, by Israel. Israeli investment trends in the area of unmanned vehicles that could perform reconnaissance missions suggest that by 2025, the Israeli Defense Force's surveillance and warning apparatus could provide data that would inspire a preemptive Israeli attack. The risk of such attacks under the conditions specified in this scenario might be reduced by better regional crisis management practices, and shared strategic ISR. Without such practices, the risks would remain high. At the same time, paradoxically, it was also suggested that while excellent early warning and surveillance might improve regional crisis stability, prospects for crisis stability could actually be reduced by the proliferation of less than fully reliable regional early warning and detection capabilities: The less states know about their neighbors' missiles, it was suggested, the less likely they would be to misinterpret incorrect or ambiguous data provided by early warning systems as hostile developments.

Third, Arab demographic trends suggest that by 2025, monarchies in the region that already enjoy shallow domestic legitimacy will have to contend with legions of unemployed young men who may engage in criminal activity or join insurgent groups. This could exacerbate domestic discontent and create the conditions for a coup, potentially in one of the newly nuclear states. Depending on the evolution of the hide-finder competition – whether, for instance, the current inability of sensors to detect shielded nuclear weapons persists – Israel and the United States may not be able to track loose nukes and might ponder intervention. There is also a chance that by 2025, China will have cultivated ties with the organizational custodians of nuclear weapons in states like Pakistan, such that Beijing takes the lead on guaranteeing the security of Pakistan's stockpile. India is unlikely to be comfortable with developments along these lines.

CHARACTER OF WARFARE UNDER THE SECOND EXCURSION

The second excursion, or third scenario, involved a discontinuity in China's foreign policy such that China sought to secure strategic resources by military means. This development could be triggered by a conflagration in the Middle East that leads Beijing to conclude that it can no longer rely on markets to deliver energy. Alternatively, the deterioration of Chinese environmental conditions could precipitate an attempt to grab water or land resources. Such a turn in Chinese policy would be likely to affect Sino-Indian and Sino-Russian relations. India, Korea, and Japan might be expected to accelerate their naval modernization. For the purposes of this scenario, we assumed that China had peacefully incorporated Taiwan by 2025, leading to a further reduction in US naval forces in the region and increasing Japanese concerns while perhaps constraining Japan's options.

China's drive for resources could be related to developments in the Middle East explored in the previous scenario. It could also be inspired by the experience of successfully reintegrating Taiwan. That case may have taught China that acquiring military superiority over another state yields desired outcomes in relations with that state. China has slowly been exploiting Russia's depopulated far east, for example, and may by 2025 assume that it can proceed more aggressively. At the same time, Russia has been seeking to compensate for its conventional inferiority through tactical nuclear capabilities and a doctrine of "escalating to de-escalate." The potential arises for China to provoke Russia into a nuclear strike.

More broadly, in a world where China, India, Russia, Japan, and the United States are all competing for influence in Asia, and China is acting more aggressively as the US's relative position declines, a complicated set of arms races involving multiple players becomes conceivable. China could perceive itself to be the object of an encirclement effort by the United States, India, and Japan. Chinese knowledge of the principle of cost-imposing strategies could lead Beijing to be especially sensitive to perceived US support for Indian and Japanese military modernization efforts – efforts that would encourage Chinese investments in capabilities less relevant to the US-China competition. China would also be especially sensitive to US ties with disaffected minority populations within the PRC.

This might engender a Chinese desire to be independent of the United States as the guarantor of global SLOCs, but China would then face a very difficult problem of acquiring maritime power projection capabilities that would allow for controlling, as opposed to just denying, SLOCs. For instance, a significant increase in Chinese surface warfare capabilities would be necessary.

One of the participants raised a question about whether a maritime power projection ambition might explain Chinese investments in expensive, very quiet nuclear attack submarines. This produced debate, since submarines are very useful for anti-access missions, but they are less useful for controlling SLOCs. Still, Chinese naval capabilities are increasing at a rate that could allow China to engage in seizures of disputed undersea resources in the region in 2025. A Chinese offensive could be triggered by an "accident" at sea involving Chinese civilian oil workers and Japanese naval forces, for instance.

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A more aggressive Chinese approach to strategic resources could be encouraged by demographic trends within the time frame of this scenario. Between now and 2025 the dependency ratio – of children and elderly non-workers to people in their productive labor years – will reach levels not seen since the Chinese Communist Party presided over an expansive social welfare apparatus. Today, there is much less state welfare support for the population, and urbanization and the one-child policy have changed family units such that fewer children will be taking care of aging parents. To avoid a legitimacy crisis, the Party might have to take steps prejudicial to China's overall economic growth. At the same time, the Party will by 2025 be dealing with a peak of excess military-age men, relative to women. It is difficult to say whether this might encourage an expansion in the ranks of the People's Liberation Army as a means of channeling the energy of these young men toward productive ends.

Another participant noted that in the face of demographic and economic trends that indicate a relative decline for Japan over the next two decades, Japan might elect to acquire a nuclear weapons capacity to reinforce its deterrent and offset limits on its conventional power. Japanese naval modernization already complicates Chinese plans for naval power projection. A nuclear-armed Japan would constitute another serious challenge. China also has a history of responding to anticipated threats or unfavorable shifts in international competitions by trying to seize the initiative with a surprise attack. Is it possible that in response to indications of a Japanese nuclear weapons program China would launch a preventive strike?

CONCLUSION: COMMON ISSUES, POTENTIAL MAJOR CHANGES

The workshop ended with a discussion of questions common to all three scenarios. Issues about which our analysis appears to be insufficient illuminate what could be the biggest differences between the character of conflict today and the character of conflict in 2025. The first common issue was the significance of nuclear weapons capabilities in each of the scenarios. Nuclear issues did not come up in the baseline world, but if it is true that accidental launches or misperceived preparations could be catalytic in the first excursion from the baseline, would these kinds of developments not be important in the other scenarios? For instance, even if Iran appears to be working with the international community and responding to incentives not to proceed with its nuclear program, is it not likely that Iran's potential capacity will influence the choices of Gulf States and Turkey in the coming decades? Also, what will be Iran's propensity to leak nuclear weapons technology deliberately or inadvertently to groups such as Hizballah? In the event of a coup in Pakistan or North Korea, would nuclear doctrines and attitudes toward first use shift? What would be the Chinese response to a Japanese shift toward normalization and nuclear weapons? In general, how would our scenarios be affected in the event of a preventive strike on a near-nuclear power between now and 2025? What would happen to the nuclear taboo in the event of the detonation of a terrorist device? If the insufficiency of current nuclear forensics capabilities were exposed, would other nuclear actors be encouraged?

A second set of common issues surrounded the question of red lines or thresholds in light of new military tools and modes of attack. At what point do cyber intrusions or attacks on computer systems become a *casus belli*? What is the limit of US tolerance for other actors' aggressive behavior in space? And what kinds of nuclear activities – for instance, an atmospheric burst? underwater explosion? detonation over a state's own territory? – would be considered a threat requiring a response in kind?

The third common issue was, the question of resurgent nationalism arose briefly in many of the scenarios but bears further attention. For instance, what would be the consequences of, and how would the US and China respond to, a return of a nationalistic, militaristic ideology in Japan? Participants seemed to agree that nationalism or some other potent ideology could create the conditions for coups in states in strategically important regions between now and 2025 and that such regime changes could affect the character of war over this time period.

Related to that, finally, was the observation that interstate war became more likely as market mechanisms for allocating scarce resources began to fail, fundamentally, because of declining levels of interstate trust that might be fueled by rising nationalism, failure of international economic institutions, pandemics or other unknown factors.

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APPENDIX

AGENDA

What is the character of future conflicts under alternative future security conditions?

0800-1000: Baseline Scenario: The decline of interstate war, rise of irregular war

- Irregular warfare
 - Involving US
 - Not involving US
- Possibility of interstate wars

1000-1015: Break

1015-1200: Excursion One: US military goes home from the Middle East

- Interstate and intrastate warfare in the Middle East, not involving the US
- US hemispheric defense and defense of residual US interests in the Middle East

1200-1245: Lunch

1245-1400: Excursion Two: China expands militarily for resources

- Chinese land warfare/territorial expansion
- Chinese air and maritime warfare/area denial
- Character of regional and US responses

1400-1415: Break

1415-1600: Emergent issues, common themes, and questions for US planners

READ-AHEAD PAPER

The Character of Conflict in 2025

This workshop aims to identify the key strategic trends that will characterize the nature of conflicts in 2025. In particular, this workshop will examine potentially disruptive technologies, weapon capabilities, and strategies for warfare that are likely to become prevalent in 2025. Questions this workshop will address include:

- How will wars be fought in 2025? What are the key drivers (political, military, technological, etc.) that are likely to have the most impact on the character of future conflicts?
- What new modes of warfare are likely to emerge?
- What are some key technologies and doctrinal developments that could lead to disruptive threats to US interests and military operations in 2025?
- What will be the impact of these trends on the character of deterrence and escalation dynamics in 2025?
- What potential foreign behavior in future conflicts could be disruptive because it violates American expectations?
- What are the strategic implications resulting from changes in the character of conflict?

In preparation for the discussion to be held at the workshop, the following is a brief description of some of the key issues that participants might wish to consider in assessing the future of conflict in 2025.

Introduction

The question of the nature of the dominant forms of warfare that may confront the United States and other powers in 2025 appears to break down into the following subsidiary questions:

- Will the trend that can be observed from the 1990s onward of a decline in the frequency of internal wars, and hence in the frequency of wars of insurgency and counter-insurgency, continue? That trend has been explained in terms of the end of the Cold War, which decreased the resources that the United States and the Soviet Union were willing to supply to opposing parties fighting each other for post-colonial control of territories in Asia and Africa. Will that trend be reversed by conflict within states in the Islamic world, as insurgent forces united and mobilized by Islam challenge existing secular states? Factors that may lead to an

increase in military activity by non-state actors operating in the context of internal wars include:

- The continued growth in the ratio of young men of military age to adult males in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Authority
- The increased longevity of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and al Qaeda, which may give them increasing organizational capacity and higher levels of training
- The diffusion of military technology that can be operated by non-state actors that do not have a sophisticated logistics infrastructure
- The flow of Saudi Arabian and Iranian money to non-state actors that could replace US and Soviet money as the factor that enables internal rival groups to recruit, arm, and reward soldiers
- Will the dramatic decline in the frequency of war between and among industrialized states that is observable since the end of World War II continue? What are the causes of that decline? Do advanced industrialized economies benefit less from territorial conquest than do agrarian and extractive economies? Will economic growth lead to more democracies and hence to fewer wars as a result of the “democratic peace?” Or will increased demand for resources (energy, water, habitable land) lead to a revival of wars of territorial conquest? And will interstate war, if it does occur, transition from a contest between massed militaries to some new form of conflict?
- Will the long-term trend toward the increasing lethality of weapons and the corresponding tendency for forces on the battlefield and at sea to employ concealment and dispersal continue? How will increases in the destructive power, effective range, precision, and rate of fire of modern weapons impact the character of future wars.
- What will the impact of the possible spread of nuclear weapons be on the character of war? Will this tend to reduce the tendency of militarized crises to escalate to armed conflict, as has seemed to be the case in the Arab-Israeli and South Asian environments, as well as during the US-Soviet Cold War? Or will the larger number of nuclear armed actors interacting in complicated multi-polar military environments tend to increase the chance of inadvertent escalation of crises and armed confrontations to military conflict and limited nuclear weapons use?

Discussion

The Future of Irregular Warfare

The current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have, understandably, fixed attention on the problem of irregular warfare, and to the need for intelligence collection and military capabilities relevant to counter-insurgency. There is, however, the classic problem of preparing to fight the last war instead of the next war. It is observable that the number of wars within countries began steadily to decline during the 1990s, after sharp increases in

the 1960s and 1970s. Casual observation suggests that the arbitrary boundaries and weak governments that were the legacy of European and Japanese colonialism created conditions in which there were motives for internal groups to challenge existing but weak states in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Cold War created conditions in which such groups could appeal to one of the superpowers for support. This then motivated the superpower rival to arm the opposing state or internal faction. External support meant that wars that would otherwise have ended in exhaustion could, and did, continue at higher levels of intensity.

But as time passed, free market economic policies and export-driven economic development strengthened states in Asia and South America and increased pressures for democratization, which tended over time to make for more responsive states. The end of the Cold War removed the ability or the incentive for superpowers to provide assistance to rival factions engaged in internal wars. This may have been the cause of the declining frequency of internal wars. The war in Afghanistan was one of the last wars created by (Soviet) colonialism, which left behind a weak state and impoverished economy, which could be exploited by a foreign group. The American intervention in Iraq was an anomaly, created by a convergence of fears of WMD, fears of hostile control of Persian Gulf oil, and human rights concerns. This convergence, arguably, is unlikely to recur.

On the other hand, the growth in the number of young males in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in the Palestinian Authority, who do not have productive employment, will provide over this time frame large numbers of men of military age who could be recruited by non-state militias. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both made richer by the increased price of oil, could lead to transfers of money and technology that increase the fighting power of such non-state militias. Military technology trends suggest that there will be increased numbers of high tech weapons that can be operated by militias that do not have sophisticated logistical infrastructures. In addition to the precision guided anti-tank missiles and low altitude man portable air defense weapons that non-state militias already have, remotely piloted vehicles and better intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance technology may be available to them. Finally, the diffusion of technology may mean that weapons of mass disruption (biological agents, radiation waste bombs) will be available to be used by such groups in the future. If so, will there be wars of insurgency under conditions of high technology, to amend a Chinese phrase? As Michael Vickers noted ten years ago, modern military technology generates some very capable weapons that do not require large technical or logistic support structures. Man portable SAMs are noteworthy in this category, but what might the other forms of military high technology useable by insurgents be? How might this change the character of classic counter-insurgency, that focuses on intelligence at the small unit level and on local populations security?

More problematic is role that Islam may play. Is religion less important than the simple fact of larger numbers of young males? Will intra-Islamic conflict become a dominant factor motivating internal warfare? In many states, Islamic opposition groups have been ruthlessly destroyed, (in Syria and Algeria), or subdued by arrests and deportations (Egypt) or by co-opting Islamic religious leaders (Saudi Arabia). But the case of

Pakistan suggests that these strategies may not be successful everywhere. Will this lead to internal wars in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and India, as well as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Lebanon?

If so, in which areas of the world may this lead to American military involvement. As an initial response, one might speculate that internal wars in areas home to high-value or strategic assets (such as oil or nuclear weapons) will draw US attention, and perhaps even American military intervention. If these conditions emerge, the current American disinclination to engage in additional wars of counterinsurgency may abate.

Will possible rivalry between the United States and China lead again to competitions in support for rival groups engaged in internal wars? Will the United States support anti-Chinese elements in the Sudan? Will China support anti-US insurgents in the Western Hemisphere? Will the United States and Saudi Arabia support Sunni insurgents to balance against Iranian support for Shi'ite insurgents?

The Future of Interstate Warfare among Industrialized States

Industrialized states have not fought each other on the scale of total global war since 1945. On the other hand, the modes of warfare available to industrialized states have been greatly changed by the introduction of technologies for information collection, processing, and communication. The improvements in sensors, navigation, and guidance have brought about striking improvements in accuracy, which, however, are embedded in a longer-term trend toward the increasing lethality of weapons on the battlefield.

As a result, industrialized states have become increasingly capable of fighting wars that are increasingly rare. What are we to make of this interesting tension?

What future interstate conflicts might be possible? Does this boil down to only a question of whether a US-PRC war could occur? What are the possibilities for other interstate conflicts such as potentially between India and China, India and Pakistan, or Israel and Iran?

If there are future interstate wars what will be their character? Questions to explore include:

- Will advanced militaries of 2025 be increasingly “informationized” or network centric and employ highly precise and long-range weapons?
- Will special importance be attached to long-range precision strikes designed to break the adversary’s will to resist?
- What new types of weaponry and forms of warfare might exist in 2025: laser weapons, electromagnetic attacks, psychotropic chemicals, information warfare?
- Will a key feature of future network centric warfare be attacks on adversary information systems and networks, including space-based systems, to inflict the maximum amount of disruption on an adversary’s ability to conduct its own military operations, in the absence of a head-on clash between forces?

- Will there be a large advantage to the state that strikes first and disables the information architecture of the rival, confronting it with the choice of capitulation or fighting a protracted, broken-back war with pre-information age military capabilities?
- Will future wars be one of industrial production as both sides race to reconstitute the forces that are destroyed in the first, highly effective stages of the war?
- Will there be massive operational military surprises, as forces are used in a war that is high tech on both sides for the first time in 70 or 80 years?
- Will national homelands remain sanctuaries from military attack?

A factor that may lead to a recrudescence of wars of territorial conquest may be the increased demand for resources such as oil and water, and the breakdown of market or other non-military means of ensuring free access to those resources. Oil in the Middle East and water in the countries on the periphery of China might lead, under the specified conditions, to wars of conquest. The shortage of habitable land in China that results from environmental degradation may add to the pressures on China to acquire more living space. Global climate change may interact with increased consumer demand by creating land that is desirable for people seeking to acquire or maintain a middle class standard of living but who cannot do so where they now live. Climate change may make some areas that are currently densely populated less habitable, increasing the demand for control of or access to desirable land.

- Will military forces be employed increasingly to protect or gain access to critical, scant natural resources?

One possibility is that as a consequence of US experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, or as a response to other developments, the United States elects to retrench militarily and assume a much more modest posture in the rest of the world, including or especially in the Islamic Middle East. This retrenchment could precipitate competition for influence among states in the region and a potential re-drawing of the map of the Middle East imposed by colonial powers in the twentieth century. Interstate warfare, mingled with support for non-state actors in intra-state warfare, not involving the United States could then be a result of such developments.

The Impact of Nuclear and Long-Range Missile Proliferation

As of today, there are various contending, plausible guesses about the impact of nuclear proliferation. The nuclearization of the Indo-Pakistani relationship has not prevented crises but appears to have made both sides more careful to control their forces to avoid an escalation of the crisis. In the Middle East, Israeli nuclear weapons may have been a factor in deterring Arab invasions or direct attacks on Israel, but have neither prevented indirect rocket attacks on Israeli civilians by means of proxy forces such as Hezbollah, nor military attacks on Israeli forces in Lebanon. The Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in the 1950s, and made nuclear threats against France and

the United Kingdom in 1956, and indirectly threatened West Germany with war. The Sino-Soviet relationship led to a moment of intense risk in 1969 and 1970 when the Soviet Union threatened a nuclear strike, and put nuclear forces on alert. In no case has there been a direct state-to-state war between nuclear armed states.

- What will be the impact of future nuclear proliferation and other forms of weapons of mass destruction on the character of future conflicts?
- Will new classes of nuclear weapons, such as those designed to be effective in creating disruption of information systems and electronic networks through an electromagnetic pulse or have a very low-yield, become more prevalent in the future? Will such weapons represent a “gray area” between conventional strike weapons and large-scale WMD use in which future actors might view nuclear weapons again as acceptable weapons of modern warfare?
- Will long range ballistic and cruise missiles make it increasingly difficult to exercise military power projection forces as they are currently configured?
- Will advances in missile defenses, against ballistic missiles and possibly against cruise missiles, change the balance between offensive and defensive forces?

The Potential for Shock Warfare

The terrorist attacks of 9-11 was a demonstration of what arguably can be called a “shock warfare” strategy by an adversary who sought to use massive disruption and surprise to undermine US national will and force a change of US foreign policy toward the Middle East. In the future, other terrorist groups and some state actors, unable to compete directly with modern conventional military forces on a traditional battlefield may adopt this form of strategic asymmetric warfare. As a result, in future conflicts some may seek to impose—or threaten to impose—significant costs on an adversary through an intentional escalation or expansion of conflict as a means to disrupt an enemy’s conventional military operations, seize the initiative, and/or redefine a conflict on their own terms. Russian strategists, for example, have discussed how the employment of tactical nuclear weapons can deescalate a conventional conflict against superior military forces. Iranian commanders have also publicly stated that Iran’s response to attacks on its nuclear infrastructure would be “strong and shocking”. Middle East observers speculate that Iran’s response to a military strike would be ballistic missile launches against energy infrastructures in the region and/or widespread terrorist attacks as a means to impose costs on the region and to deter further strikes against it.

- What are the possibilities for catastrophic terrorism in future conflicts? What forms could such attacks take?
- How might “escalate-to-deescalate” strategies impact the character of future conflicts among states? What do such strategies imply for the challenge of containing the escalation and expansion of future crises?

The Emergence of Soft Warfare

Non-Kinetic or “soft” means of warfare might become more prevalent in 2025. China, for example, views economic, financial, informational, legal, and psychological forms of warfare as playing an important role in modern conflicts. Such forms of warfare are designed to affect an enemy’s decision-making, manipulate public opinion, gain domestic and international support for military action, and create a favorable environment for military operations. Russia’s manipulation of energy access for political purposes and the recent cyber attacks on Estonia are other examples of what could be deemed as “soft warfare”.

The information and communications revolution is enabling an unprecedented ability to spread ideas and to influence large numbers of people. In 2025, such capabilities could have the potential to significantly impact the character of future conflicts. Adversaries might employ future mass communications to manipulate public opinion, spread disinformation and propaganda, recruit and train proxies, and proliferate disruptive ideas. Such capabilities might also enable adversaries to incite and coordinate widespread violence. Chinese strategists have identified “media warfare” as an important component of modern conflicts and view the use of mass media to disseminate information to influence public opinion and gain domestic and international support for China’s military actions. Russian strategists also claim that the extensive use of information weapons alone can win a conflict and point to the use of information in fermenting the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia as an example.

- How might information, access to natural resources, and economic power be employed in the future conflicts?
- What forms might “soft warfare” take in the future? Will it become a more prevalent form of warfare among states as large-scale force-on-force conflicts decrease in frequency?