

THE TRAJECTORY OF SECURITY TRANSFORMATION

Steven Metz

For a decade now, a historic revolution in military affairs has unfolded, driven largely by technological developments. Within the U. S. military, immense effort has been expended to understand this revolution and harness it into security transformation. A network of organizations, institutions, and individual experts emerged to shape and energize this process. The result has been the most rigorous and sustained security transformation in human history.

But security transformation is always dynamic. It is based, in part, on assumptions and predictions. As the global security environment changes and we learn more about it, we adjust the trajectory of transformation. That is what is taking place today: military and defense policymakers are undertaking the most significant adjustment of transformation since it first began in the 1990s. Much is at stake.

The driving force behind this adjustment is the coalescence of the threat from global terrorism linked to radical Islam. During the first decade of the revolution in military affairs and security transformation, the United States was focused primarily on the threat from rogue states. Now the challenge is global terrorism, growing from ungoverned, repressive, or backward regions, potentially armed with weapons of mass destruction, attacking targets in the United States itself or overseas. This shifting threat has forced a major change in American strategy, most particularly in the core concept of strategic victory.

During the Cold War, the United States assumed that the political, economic, and normative system of the West was inherently superior, so if it could avoid military defeat by communist forces, it would ultimately win at the grand strategic level. Despite occasional talk of “rollback,” the essence of military strategy was to avoid losing—to restore borders if attacked (Germany, Korea, Vietnam) and to deter attacks if possible. In the immediate post-Cold War period the focus shifted to rogue states. When conflict occurred, America preferred to lead the battlefield defeat of an aggressor or repressor then hand over the complex and messy job of reconstruction to some sort of multinational force under the aegis of the United Nations. If that did not work, we simply restored the *status quo ante bellum* (DESERT STORM) even though that left the core problem unresolved and the normal strategic rationale for accepting a less-than-decisive outcome--nuclear deterrence--did not hold.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, showed the United States that the primary threat was not rogue states invading their neighbors, but alliances of rogue states and terrorists. In an era when states support terrorists and terrorists may acquire weapons of mass destruction, simply restoring the status quo when attacked or relying on international and multinational forces to ameliorate aggression was no longer adequate. What the United States needed—for the first time since World War II—was a holistic and comprehensive strategy designed to both defeat an identified threat on the battlefield and permanently eradicate the source of aggression.

The U.S. military is now changing to reflect this new strategy. To help attain decisive victory by transforming an aggressor, the U.S. military must have not only the traditional capabilities such as long-range precision strike, power projection, dominant maneuver, information superiority, and, in general, the ability to defeat a discernible enemy on the battlefield, but also a wide array of additional skills such as psychological precision, tactical and operational non-lethality, the ability to operate in close coordination with a wide range of military and nonmilitary partners, the ability to sustain operations for years, and the ability to understand and operate easily in foreign cultures. New challenges demand new capabilities.

All this requires an adjustment in the trajectory of security transformation. The U.S. military must continue to hone its skills at battlefield success while cultivating equal prowess at a complex array of additional capabilities and concepts. It must re-learn some old skills like counterinsurgency while developing new ones. This is a massive challenge, but the stakes are great. If this adjustment is successful, the United States will be able to attain strategic victory in the new global security environment. If not, the U.S. military may find itself phenomenally skilled at the wrong type of war.