

MODERN WAR AND THE UTILITY OF FORCE: CHALLENGES, METHODS AND STRATEGY

Jan Angstrom and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (Eds)

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Preface, plus 286 pages

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The utility of military force in general, and that of military forces in particular, has been the subject of much debate since the end of the Cold War in 1989. At the same time, as the threat and incidence of state-on-state war receded, along with its associated conventional force strategies, structures and doctrine, governments were increasingly calling upon their armed forces to carry out missions that they were not trained and equipped for. These tasks included peace support, state-building, humanitarian aid, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, all of which engendered a plethora of arguments pointing to a new paradigm of war. *The Utility of Force*, produced by General Sir Rupert Smith in 2005, is still one of the seminal works in this regard – and the ideas contained therein stand central to the arguments contained in Angstrom and Duyvesteyn’s book. Since the latter is concurrently a critique, an elaboration and a validation of Smith’s tome, one should preferably have read *The Utility of Force* before tackling *Modern War*. This is not essential, though: *Modern War* is perfectly able to stand on its own, especially since it targets those academics that would be conversant with its main themes anyway.

In essence, the editors of this (somewhat overpriced) work contend that Smith’s main conclusion – that modern military force is mainly of tactical utility – has not been elaborated upon sufficiently, and that they wish to correct the matter

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by, among others, indicating how military force can still be useful in the new world order. One of the sub-texts threading the volume together is that neither the West’s military establishments, nor their political leaders, seem

to have adapted well to the new strategic environment, which now results in the employment of military force in ways that often fail to achieve its political objectives. On the one hand, empirical evidence confirms that military force has predictable results and effects when employed by one state against another; at the other end of the violence continuum, it has also been proven that military deterrence through the non-use of credible military power may also be successful in yielding political benefits. However, it is the gamut of military options in between these two extremes that concern Angstrom and Duyvesteyn the most. In their contribution towards the debate on modern force employment, the editors also wish to expand on the theory of force development. They have therefore collected and analysed some of the recent empirical evidence that supports – or, for that matter, contests – current theories on the subject, and have (compared with Smith's work) succeeded in broadening the typology of military-force employment. Finally, they have also striven to offer thoughts on alternative theoretical frameworks for the conduct of modern war.

Angstrom and Duyvesteyn are of the opinion that, since the end of the Cold War, three related debates have greatly influenced the conceptualisation of war and the employment of military force. First among these was the renewed interest in the changed purposes of war, the rationales of which are associated with the apparent transformation in the ways that war is conducted. A second debate focussed on the question of how the modern social construct of war should be conceptualised. While some argued that war had become a spectator sport and that drives such as greed and ethnicity had replaced its political instrumentality, other analysts asserted that war remained a rational tool of politics. The third debate was even more incisive, since it dwelled on the suggestion that the definitions of military victory and defeat seemed to have been adjusted since the end of the Cold War. As the editors explain, "...it became clear that not only was there a distinct possibility that the game had changed, but it was also possible that the way one kept the score of the game had changed". It is within this context that the effectiveness of military force has become a dependent variable, with many contending that the utility of the armed forces has been drastically and generally reduced during the past two decades – a statement that not all analysts are equally confident in supporting.

What Smith emphasises, and Angstrom and Duyvesteyn confirm, is that political leadership of late tends to confuse the value of the employment of military force with the usefulness of force deployment: in other words, they fail to distinguish between the utility of force in conflict and its worth under conditions of confrontation. In the former, the classical military doctrine that is predicated on obtaining a decisive victory will be the norm; in the latter, "...the aim is to influence the opponent, to establish a condition and, above all, to win the clash of wills".

Success in modern war is, therefore, defined by the attainment of a desired condition, rather than the achievement of a military victory. Even so, successful militaries in the new model are still required to be (1) effective in executing their evolving portfolio of missions, which in turn implies that (2) the utility of military forces (note: not military force *per se*) will be dependent on the extent to which they meet the criteria for effectiveness. Angstrom and Duyvesteyn extract these conditions from another scholarly work, but contend that the four criteria are strongly implied throughout Smith's writings anyway.

Generally, militaries that still have potential utility are those that are able to harness available human resources, wealth and technology into actual military power in a conflict situation, and have the following properties: first, they are consistently able to integrate political-military activities at all levels (strategic, operational, tactical), both across and within the services, in developing (policy formulation, doctrine-writing, structuring and force preparation) the armed forces as a whole. Second, effective militaries display high degrees of responsiveness and are able to adapt their activities rapidly in order to accommodate their internal and environmental constraints, while responding appropriately to the competencies and capacity of the opposition. The third characteristic is that of the ability to generate high skill levels, comprising both the aptitude of personnel to executing tasks within complex systems and operational environments, as well as their motivation to do so. Finally, the attribute of a military's effectiveness correlates positively with its capacity to provide and sustain its armed forces with appropriate hardware, as well as comprehensive systems' support. While these properties certainly are indicators of the potential usefulness of a particular military force, in conflict as well as during a confrontation, Angstrom and Duyvesteyn are more concerned with the actual employment of armed forces in operations. The editors therefore attempt to shed some light on four interrelated paradoxes that are central to the current debate on the utility of military force. In the remaining chapters of the book, the contributing authors accordingly proceed to address different facets of the questions raised by these apparent dichotomies.

The first question relates to the apparent ineffectiveness of military force – or organised violence, so to speak – to resolve conflicts within and among nations. Why, then, do non-state actors still choose to employ these means in their confrontations with state actors? Clues to solving the dilemma appear in Isabelle Duyvesteyn's chapter on counter-terrorism, where it is shown that terrorists may use armed force to provoke an over-reaction by state security forces, thereby legitimising the terrorist organisation and its political aims. Second, terrorism can create a false sense of insecurity (the "insecurity dilemma") that results in a self-sustaining cycle of counter-terrorism measures, which again may promote the

terrorist goals. Other clues appear in Jan Angstrom's chapter on the relevance of military force in state-building, which suggests that the related problems of social order and political legitimacy may be at the heart of violence and war in failed states. In this model (which is compatible with both current bargaining theory and the Clausewitzian paradigm), political legitimacy follows on authority's capacity to maintain law and order. "If the state fails to deliver security from warring factions, the population will see this as the state breaking its bargain, and will not consent to its rule."¹ Obviously, those opposed to political control by the state - or by any other sub-state faction, for that matter - would have an interest in promoting disorder and physical insecurity through the employment of armed violence. Equally, military force will have utility insofar as it could be used to establish and maintain order and physical security among the population at large. It can only succeed if it has the wherewithal to do so, and if it does not dilute the legitimacy of the civil government through unilateral and self-serving actions. The state's monopoly of lawful violence may therefore be challenged by an opponent seeking to delegitimise government's political authority, which strategy cannot be successfully countered by government's employment of armed force as the primary instrument of state power.

The second paradox exacerbates the problem further. Whereas conventional forces seek victory by concentrating their efforts on a decisive point, such a focal area in irregular warfare is usually intangible: the insurgents' political programmes or the population at large. Yet, the majority of Western armed forces are still training and equipping for conventional warfare, from the tactical to the military strategic levels. In Chapter 2, "Modern War", (authored by Christopher Dandeker) therefore seeks to address this inconsistency by elaborating on the redefining of success: (1) from military victory to a preferred security condition; (2) from a military in the lead to a military in support of human security; (3) from absolutist actors to pragmatists; and (4) from maximum force to measured power. The governing theory seems to favour the maintenance of a conventional military ethos, based on "training heavy" and preparing for conventional war, but being willing to "fight light" if this is what the situation requires. However, in Chapter 6, Kersti Larsdotter draws tentative conclusions to the effect that, at the tactical level, a more robust deployment of forces may actually be more successful at establishing order and security in a given area. "More" may indeed be "better" during peace-support operations, if the doctrine and training of the security forces are in alignment with the socio-political objectives of the operation.

In Chapter 7, Thomas Mockaitis elaborates on this issue by describing the US forces' historically ambivalent approach to counter-insurgency, which resulted in them arriving in Iraq with a dearth of counter-insurgency doctrine and inappropriate attitudes towards their changed mission. James Corum then analyses

counter-insurgency operations at the strategic level in the chapter thereafter, making pertinent observations regarding the lack of substantial centres of gravity in this type of warfare. He lays the blame for the breakdown of order in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussain at the door of both the United States' politicians and the military: the former for failing to commit sufficient forces to the pacification of Iraq, and the latter for failing (in the absence of political guidance?) to plan adequately for the post-combat phase of state-building. On the vexing issues of mass, centre of gravity and force concentration, Corum concludes (rather unsurprisingly) that having overwhelming military force at one's disposal is no guarantee during counter-insurgency; furthermore, that that military power may not be in the lead and should only be employed in assisting with the achievement of realistic political objectives. The media will invariably label the use of force by the counter-insurgent as excessive and cruel, while the issue of the host government's legitimacy will – especially when foreign forces are involved in combatting the insurgency – always remain a major issue. According to Corum, the utility of force during an insurgent war is heavily dependent upon military leaders at the operational and strategic levels that are mentally flexible, and have a very good grasp of the political context within which they are operating. Skilled conventional commanders apparently do not make good counter-insurgency leaders.

The third paradox posited by the editors relates to the fact that wars concluded by a clear military victory result in a more stable peace than those that are suspended through a negotiated settlement. In the latter case – which seems to be the rule in current civil/irregular conflicts – the utility of military force would be constrained, or at least understood to be very different from the former situation. While the actual use of force may be contentious under these circumstances, its positive effects in the establishment of order and the maintenance of security are still much desired, not least of all by the non-governmental organisations that are rendering humanitarian aid in the area of conflict. It is evident (as also discussed in the chapter by Dandeker) that an escape from this paradox seems to have been generated by adjusting the strategic narrative. The political aims of states have changed, from conquest and occupation to regime change and the establishment of social order; concurrently (and in line with Smith's arguments) the military no longer seeks a decisive victory as soon as possible, but rather long-term success in establishing secure conditions for peace. Dandeker makes the valid point that, for the military, these "timeless missions" require "strategic patience" and may be problematic, in the sense that the object of the military campaign cannot be clearly defined and may eventually result in legitimacy issues.

In an excellent Chapter 11, Robert Egnell highlights two important trends in this regard: the changing tactical context in conflict-ridden countries, resulting in

increasing boundary infringements among military and humanitarian actors; next, the strategic tendency towards multifunctional approaches that seek coherence (and possibly even integration) among all of the actors involved. This has resulted in the coining of phrases such as “the humanitarianisation of the military”, and its mirror image “the militarisation of humanitarian assistance”. Egnell points to the fact that a number of initiatives are currently underway to formalise concepts for increased civil-military integration at the operational level. The militaries of major Western states have, for example, developed the concept of effects-based approaches to operations (EBAO), with a view to coordinating the states’ instruments of power towards greater synergy in application. While this concept appears to have taken hold in the military, civilian doubts regarding its viability have thus far stymied its elevation to the strategic level. However, the “comprehensive approach” (adopted by the European Union) and the “integrated missions” of the United Nations have similar objectives, all pointing towards multifunctional approaches in dealing with modern conflicts. As it stands, integrated or comprehensive operations have yet to be implemented in full, with doubts remaining as to whether any further value is to be added by the integration of military and humanitarian activities; indeed, the efficacy of peace-support operations as a concept is still being contended and sorely in need of empirical validation.

The last paradox is that of Western armed forces that either recognise, or are presently in the throes of, major changes in the “ends” that they are expected to fight for; also, in how they are expected to conduct operations, as well as the human and material resources they expect to be using. At the same time, they are still employing the doctrine, structures, equipment and training applicable to conventional operations, and appear rather keen to maintain the traditional military ethos. While *Modern War* does not address this particular dichotomy in so many words, the search for alternative military strategies is a ubiquitous undercurrent in every chapter. Still, the reviewer believes that Angstrom and Duyvesteyn’s book neglects the sociological explanations for the paradigm shift in the employment of force, such as changing cultures and globalisation. In addition, the influence of technology in the conduct of warfare does not even receive a mention in passing, while the chapter on international private security companies does not add much to the argument either. If the application of military force has the most utility at the tactical level, then the qualities of the warrior and the tools of the trade, as compared with those of the opponent, would be deserving of study as well. In this sense, the book is not sufficiently comprehensive and therefore falls short in accomplishing the elaboration on Smith’s work that it sought.

It is in the last chapter that Isabelle Duyvesteyn with variable success, attempts to summarise the main conclusions of the contributors. She uses the four

functions of military force, as conceptualised by Smith, to demonstrate its modern utility. On the first function of “destruction”, the verdict is clear: violence is as valid as it has ever been. However, counterinsurgency has replaced conventional war as the dominant strategic paradigm for the application of force, and then with the added emphasis on the tactical rather than the operational or strategic level. On the function of “coercion and deterrence”, the jury is also out: military force still serves its purpose, albeit only when the targets of the coercion are able to act rationally and where a shared normative framework exists among the parties concerned. The efficacy of intimidation and prevention rests primarily on the fact that it signals intentions and that it creates credibility for an actor in the area of operations. However, it becomes more problematic in peace operations, where even the establishment of long-term security and stability may not result in a political settlement. In the case of “containment”, the best that the military can do is to separate the warring factions from each other, and possibly the insurgent from the people that he tries to convince of the movement’s strategic narrative. Last, in the matter of “amelioration”, the utility of military force lies in avoiding its application, as would be the case in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. In many instances, the presence of the military may actually increase tensions and work against obtaining the desired socio-political condition, with the unintended result that state-building may possibly be prevented by, for example, the deployment of intervention forces from foreign countries.

The book ends with a number of unexpected – and therefore surprising – observations, of which the statement that “... the use of force has become more Clausewitzian, in the sense that the stress on its nature as a political instrument has increased” is the most salient. This is in stark contrast to the views of many other analysts, who are of opinion that exactly the opposite may be true. However, and even if the editors fail to contrast this important conclusion against the convictions of its detractors, the arguments presented in the preceding 268 pages of the volume are convincing enough to validate this assertion. As Angstrom and Duyvesteyn promised in the introduction, some avenues for further research are proposed in the final pages and the reader is, again, left with an unsupported cognitive leap into a different direction: is it possible that, since the end of the Cold War, the West has merely used its militaries as a global police force, to demonstrate its leadership in a new world order, to confirm the relevance of armed force and to show its commitment to traditional alliances? The open ending is somewhat of a disappointment, and if the book has to be criticised further, it will probably be from the angle of a professional that seeks pertinent guidance, explicit formulae, or recipes for the development of good military strategy. Those that are pragmatically inclined will be disappointed. Even worse, a casual reader will observe many

apparent contradictions in the deductions of the various contributors that remain hanging in the air. However, for the initiated, the content provides ample evidence of the increased complexity and uncertainty of the application of force in a range of contexts, which allows for the exercising of creativity and initiative in employing a competent military. For an informed reader, it would be easy enough to determine those enduring truths that are ripe for application at each of the levels of war. All in all, this volume may be short on definitive conclusions and prescriptions, but it is long on stimulation and provocation, and certainly a worthy addition to the growing body of knowledge on military studies.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Angstrom, J and Duyvesteyn, I (eds). *Modern War and the Utility of Force: Challenges, Methods and Strategy*. New York: Routledge, 2010, 214