8 April 2013

Our Most Recent Revolution in Military Affairs — A Thumbnail Historical Sketch

The current RMA is no spring chicken, argues the ISN's Peter Faber. It's cultural and conceptual foundations go back at least 100 years, involve breaking away from a long-standing American Way of War and have been fought over, in terms of its future direction, by brass knuckled bureaucratic factions.

By Peter Faber for ISN

Setting the historical context for our look this week at the modern era's most recent Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is no easy task. Given the swirling conceptual, technological, political and bureaucratic controversies that have surrounded this particular conceptualization of war, let me keep things relatively short and simple.

The historical ramp up to the current RMA (It's longer and deeper than you might think.)

Let me make my overall point by first agreeing with Dima Adamsky, who stated the following in the April 2008 edition of the "Journal of Strategic Studies":

The roots of this RMA can be traced to the mid-1970s, when the US shifted its attention away from Indochina and back to the European theater. The West immediately faced a daunting strategic situation: [an] increasing realization of mutually assured destruction was eroding the option of nuclear war. Yet, in the balance of conventional forces, the Soviets were predominant. The early 1980s saw the Western response – an introduction of two new doctrines: Air Land Battle (ALB) and Follow on Force Attack (FOFA). Basing itself upon state-of-the-art scientific-technological developments in the field of microelectronics, the West capitalized on precision guided munitions (PGMs) to destroy the menace of Soviet second echelons deep in the rear. (See Adamsky's *"Through the Looking Glass: The Soviet Military-Technical Revolution and the American Revolution in Military Affairs."*)

What Adamsky is basically saying here is that the United States laid the technological groundwork for our late 20th century RMA, but it was Soviet military theorists who were the first to intellectualize about its long-term consequences. Fair enough; we all know about Soviet Strategic Strike Complexes, for example. What's not being stressed here, however, is that by the late 1980s and early 1990s US military thinkers who were working under the tutelage of the Pentagon's legendary Dr. Andrew Marshall were beginning to adapt Soviet writings to their own purposes. One could ask why it took them almost a decade to do so, but that would be asking the wrong question. That the massively ponderous Pentagon reacted as quickly (!) as it did points to one of the true foundations of the most recent, US-driven RMA – i.e., American Progressivism.

Early 20th century American Progressivism, along with its industrial variation, Taylorism, had a profound impact on American society. In the latter case, Theodore Roosevelt and others were deeply impressed by the 'scientific' efficiency then appearing in American factories. They marveled at the stopwatch-precision that Frederick Taylor and others were bringing to the production line and they concluded that the principles behind such 'enlightened' business practices could be applied to the federal government. Reformers that they were, Roosevelt-era Progressives also saw a golden opportunity to clean up the parochialism, cronyism, and sheer waste of the musty bureau system then in place at the US War Department. And yet, despite Secretary of War Elihu Root's reforms in the early 1900s, Progressivist/Taylorist practices did not really take hold in the War Department until WWI. It was then that Bernard Baruch used modern business practices to ramp up the US military and enable it to fight the first of its two major industrial wars.

The above 'rational' practices only grew in sophistication and scope in the interwar years, and they quickly connected up with two other key historical pieces of the RMA puzzle -- 1) Americans increasingly embraced technology as a 'force multiplier' in war, and 2) the US military increasingly subscribed to the Reformists' business model, which they were willing to accept because it was fast becoming compatible with a new American Way of War. This way of war would soon come to define how America preferred to fight its wars until, in my view, 2005-2006. Its underlying progressivist principles were as follows.

1. The American Way of War is practical/utilitarian rather than abstract/theoretical;

2. It is problem-solving-oriented;

3. It is optimistic/can do-oriented;

4. It is technology-loving and dependent;

5. It is firepower oriented;

6. It is large-scale/mass-oriented;

7. It is aggressive/offensive;

8. It is profoundly regular (in the sense of embracing Napoleonic-Industrial Warfare as its preferred model of how wars should be fought);

9. It is impatient;

10. It is logistically excellent;

11. It is highly sensitive to casualties;

12. It is largely tone deaf to historical context;

13. It is culturally tone deaf;

14. It is flexibly/weakly connected to political objectives;

15. And finally, American hard power has often been perceived as an ALTERNATIVE to diplomatic bargaining rather than an extension of it, or as a form of violent bargaining itself.

The above faith in 'scientific' efficiency, technological solutions, can-do'ism, etc., then went on to shape how the US fought in World War II and how Secretary of Defense Robert Forrestal institutionalized his infant department.

The progressivist way of war truly flowered, however, under Robert McNamara's watch. When he assumed control of the Defense Department in 1961, he was NOT a bizarre interloper from corporate America. Instead, he built on the A-leads-to-B-leads-to-C approach first laid out by Progressivism/Taylorism, the Root Reforms, Baruch's rationalization of US mobilization in WWI, and on the follow-on "children" of Baruch in WWII – i.e., the Economic Objectives Unit, the Committee of Operations Analysts, etc. (Their names say it all.) Instead of being an anomaly, Mr. McNamara just ended up being the logical extreme of a multi-generational quest to rationalize, industrialize and normalize war into a predictable 'product' you could optimistically tweak and adapt as necessary, primarily by ever-helpful technological means.

As Adamsky rightly suggests, the progressivist American Way of War bore largely irrelevant fruit in Vietnam. The US's failure in that war not only revived an interest in the politically-centered writings of Carl von Clausewitz, it also led to the appearance in the early 1980s of a group of Washington-based polemicists who provided yet another historical piece to the RMA puzzle. John Boyd, Bill Lind, Pierre Sprey, Jeffrey Record, et al, were brash military reformers who wanted to adapt the American Way of War to what were changing circumstances. They wanted, for example, less complicated, cheaper and more numerous weapon systems that would be, in today's parlance, 'light and lethal'. And they partially succeeded in their efforts, primarily by promoting Dr. William Perry's trailblazing efforts to develop Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) that could be carried by, yes, 'light and lethal' F-16 aircraft.

But the reformers didn't stop there. Stressing these discriminate capabilities also required a concept of war that moved the US away from massed, force-on-force violence and towards the uncertainty of the blurred conflicts we all face today. John Boyd's championing of information-laden and decision-centered maneuver warfare did just that. It represented a paradigm-busting rejection of the American Way of War and its unhelpful tendency, at least in the reformers' eyes, to overemphasize firepower, mass, and other 'Napoleonic' tendencies. As before, the reformers had some success. Boyd and his well-placed sympathizers, for example, eventually managed to get their warnings transformed into the official US doctrine of Decision-Cycle Dominance.

The RMA – Initial principles and their rebuttals

If the above thumbnail history helps identify the long-term influences that primed the US military to perform a conceptual turn around in the early 1990s (along with the near-term spur of Soviet thinking), the next question to ask is what were the initial, out-of-the-block principles that the RMA rested upon and what criticisms did they inevitably inspire? The following are some of the more commonly repeated beliefs, some of which have fared better than others over the last 20-25 years.

a) RMAs are a process not an end. They represent a fundamental departure in how we use military power, its attributes, and its capabilities. Put another way . . . .

b) RMAs are not mere forms of modernization, revitalization or adaptation. They involve order-of-magnitude improvements in military capability. They primarily require sustained and determined conceptual, technological, and organizational innovations over time. They secondarily require deliberate experimentation and an ability to learn from experience.

c) The 'geography' of today's conflicts will continue to expand into artificial/human-made spaces. These spaces will eventually equal 'real' territory in their importance.

d) The definition of who is and who is not a combatant has blurred. Foes are, for example, increasingly modular, borderless, ephemeral, and asymmetrical. They include digital, financial and no-limit fighters that reject 'Western' rules.

e) The best security strategies are now 'empty baskets' – i.e., those that stress forms and processes over principles and rules.

f) The best organizations need to be networked and more horizontal rather than hierarchical.

g) RMA-based militaries need to shape, determine or ideally define the environments they operate in.

h) Time and space were once equally important in conflicts; now time is more important. Because we can fight across far distances in synchronized ways, we should try to fight short and decisive wars that seek to inflict system-wide paralysis rather than 'battlefield' defeats.

These then are some of the principles that first undergirded the most recent and American-driven RMA. For better or worse, they reflect the lingering influence of 1) US Progressivism (and its accompanying scientism), 2) the old American Way of War, and 3) the technological triumphalism that stubbornly remains part of the American military psyche. However, before I identify who rebutted the above principles and why, left me first identify the counter-narrative these nay-sayers developed. As far as they were (and are) concerned:

a) The essence of war remains unchanged. Technology cannot induce '90-degree turns' in what it is, as some RMA advocates would have us believe. Only marginal '10-degree' turns are actually possible.

b) Given this assumed truth, technology is not a transformative agent in war -- it's a mere 'garnish' to traditional methods.

It's just 'parsley' on a plate. War, in short, remains a HUMAN activity. It is about intangibles, will and morale.

c) If war is indeed about intangibles, then technologists over-promise. They continue to suffer, as they always have, from a promise-reality gap.

d) Because of this gap, military planners should avoid 'strategic monism' at all costs (i.e., they need to build and maintain 'balanced' force structures.)

e) What all the above counter-arguments are really saying is that 'real' war remains fixated on controlling physical space.

f) Which finally means that ground combat remains the focal point of joint warfare and tactical 'red zone' operations remain the focal point of ground combat.

It is not unfair to say that the pro-con debates that initially raged about the RMA and that still continues, although in a much more muted way, almost always turned on the above biases and beliefs. Fair enough, but why did these arguments occur in the first place?

The politics of the RMA and transformation

To early devotees of the RMA, America and its allies faced a new threat in the 1990s. It wasn't a specific one, as in the past. It was now an abstraction – i.e., the Spectrum of Conflict. To deal with this abstraction properly, argued some, the US now needed to perform more capabilities-based planning. In fact, the wider and more versatile our capabilities were the better. Well, when you coupled a new 'threat' with a parallel need for versatile capabilities, you were almost begging to embrace the idea of open-ended military transformation, which made post-Cold War defense contractors very happy indeed. The operative idea was thus perpetual military revolution, and that therefore meant perpetual needs, both new and old.

Fine, so far so good. But now the United States Army, and to a lesser extent the US Marine Corps, entered the fray. Their leaders balked at this particular concept of the RMA and the ceaseless transformation it implied. In their minds it was just too technology-centric. They saw it, in other words, as a threat to their budgets and to their future roles and missions. As a result, the usual 'attack dogs' were unleashed to question the technology-dominant premises of the RMA at the time. They argued, for example, that RMA-driven transformation can't be perpetual, as Mr. Rumsfeld once argued. It can be accelerated, but that's about it. They also insisted that technology is not at the center of any RMA. Indeed, the US succeeded in the first Gulf War not because of a multi-month, army-destroying PGM assault but because of . . . superior military training.

And so the arguments continued. The US Army and US Marine Corps actively promoted and popularized an alternative RMA narrative. That narrative, in turn, represented a watered-down version of the original let's-shock-the-system with high technology approach. And by watering the concept down, the US ground services diminished it as a threat to their institutional good health. They were able to tout the continued centrality of ground combat, which the post-9/11 security environment then enabled them to reinforce.

A close reader might walk away with several conclusions from the above story. Here are mine, which to me represent

inescapable truths – 1) military service doctrines are never 'pure' – they are alloyed with institutional biases, assumptions and needs which make all doctrines institutionally self-serving; 2) academics and defense analysts (i.e., the 'attack dogs') are not objective; because they can be (and are) 'bought' in various ways, we always have to unpack the messy blend of biases and genuine beliefs that their writings contain; and 3) believers in the centrality of 'red zone' combat continue, for both objectively necessary and selfish institutional reasons, to expend considerable effort in convincing themselves and others that the essence of war will remain unchanged. At core, one could say that the RMA technologist's challenge to the 'red zoners' ultimately turned on a simple question -- are you sure that your vision of war is right?

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