

War and International Relations: A Military-Historical Perspective on Force and Legitimacy

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# War and international relations: a military-historical perspective on force and legitimacy

JEREMY BLACK\*

Writing on international relations frequently makes reference to the use of force, but rarely integrates changes in its nature into a central role in the explanatory model. In particular, force, in the shape of military capability, is often seen as the ‘servant’ of ideas about its appropriate use, and thus of the norms of the international system, rather than as an independent element, let alone playing a central role in affecting the latter.<sup>1</sup> This article addresses the issue with particular reference to relations between the West and the ‘non-West’, arguing that the contested relationship between the different narratives of military history impinge directly on the character of international relations.

## Differing narratives of military history

That this issue is directly pertinent today stems most apparently from the crisis in Iraq, but is in no way restricted to it, because differing views on the effectiveness and legitimacy of military capability play a major role in conflicts and confrontations around the world. Indeed, whether war is seen to stem from mistaken assessments of relative power or from bellicosity,<sup>2</sup> these differing views play a key role.

Nevertheless, the Iraq crisis indicates important aspects of the issue. First, a concern about the spread of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ played an important role, at least in the public explanation of American and British policy towards Iraq prior to the conflict; while it has certainly played a major part in the diplomacy focused on particular states, especially North Korea, Libya and Iran. Secondly, the military and political difficulties the US encountered in Iraq in 2003–05 once the government of Saddam Hussein was overthrown indicated the extent to which analyses of military potency based on American capability could be challenged.<sup>3</sup>

Linked to this is the issue of the legitimate use of particular types of force by the ‘weak’ against stronger powers. Examples of this encompass a continuum from

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, P.W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and H. Duchhardt, *Balance of Power und Pentarchie 1700–1785* (Paderborn, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Black, *Why Wars Happen* (London: Reaktion, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, D. Frum and R. Perle, *An End to Evil: Strategies for Victory in the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004).

(non-state) terrorism in its increasingly varied forms to the strategy apparently planned by Saddam Hussein in resisting American attack in 2003. This kind of force as a weapon of the 'weak' raises further questions of morality and feasibility, not least the question of entitlement to use otherwise unacceptable means in order to seek to counter the inbuilt military advantage of an opponent.

The contentiousness of this issue is further indicated by the question of whether the situation with Israel is analogous. There again, superior weaponry appears to dictate the outcome in overcoming resistance within the occupied territories, and indeed in Israel itself. In the event, however, Israeli capability has been challenged, certainly in so far as a sense of control is concerned, by other military practices. These include popular opposition (a military practice where there is no clear differentiation between a regular military and the rest of society) and terrorism.

The combination of these points with that about American capability ensures that the debate over force and legitimacy brings together two very different narratives of military history: the Western, largely technological, one, and a non-Western narrative that places less of an emphasis on technological proficiency, and does not rest on an expectation of technological superiority. This means that it is valuable to have a historical perspective on this issue. In theoretical terms, this bringing together can be presented with reference to the recent 'cultural turn' in strategic thought, and it can be argued that, in some respects, American practice represents the apogee of a Western model of warmaking.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, that of its opponents in Iraq is an example of non-Western systems.

This is a thesis that repays consideration, but there are major problems with it. For example, not only is Iraqi opposition an example but not a definition of non-Western systems, but the parallel is also the case with the US. In particular there are major contrasts between American doctrine and practice in warfare, with the American emphasis on overwhelming force and technology proving very resistant to the lessons of recent history, and the practice of other Western powers.<sup>5</sup> There is also a need to be wary of a geographical or cultural reification of what is a more widespread military practice *within* as well as *between* systems, namely the response of the weaker power. This classically focuses on developing an anti-strategy, anti-operational method, anti-tactics, and anti-weaponry, designed to counter and lessen, if not nullify, the advantages of the stronger, and sometimes to use the very nature of the latter in order to weaken it.<sup>6</sup> In other words, there may be a functional, rather than a cultural, explanation of the methods chosen, and this functional explanation can span West and non-West. The parallels in terms of diplomatic practice are instructive, as issues of legitimacy at once come into play, not least with the claim to the attributes of sovereignty by groups not recognised as such, but also by the rejection of the idea that sovereign governments have a monopoly of force.

In response in both cases, these anti-methods are presented by critics as unacceptable and illegal, and indeed unheroic, and thus the legitimacy of the cause with which

<sup>4</sup> V. D. Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002); J. Lynn, *Battle* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004). For a critique, see J. M. Black, 'Determinisms and Other Issues', *Journal of Military History*, 68 (2004), pp. 1217–32.

<sup>5</sup> J. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counter-insurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, Ontario: Praeger, 2002); R. Cassidy, *Peacekeeping in the Abyss: British and American Doctrine and Practice after the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> I. Arreguin-Toft, 'How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict', *International Security*, 26 (2001), pp. 93–128.

they are linked is denied. This can be seen in the treatment of terrorism, but also, more generally, in practices, real or alleged, of eroding the distinctions between 'civilian' and 'military'. An instance of this was provided by allegations that military targets, such as missile-launchers, were located by Serbia in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 in civilian areas, and, in the latter case, by the employment of irregulars who did not wear uniform. As much of the legitimacy of the modern Western practice of force, and the legalisation of Western high-technology warfare,<sup>7</sup> is held to rest on drawing a distinction between military and civilian, these moves affected both the character of Western warmaking, especially in the case of the ease of target acquisition, and its apparent legitimacy. Attacks on 'civilian' targets indeed became a basic text in public debate concerned about the morality of Western interventions and the nature of Western warmaking.

This problem challenged pro-interventionist governments in their attempts to influence domestic and international opinion, as doing so in part rested on the argument that there was a distinction between the legitimate use of force directed against the military (and government targets), and usage that was illegitimate, whether by states, such as Iraq gassing Kurdish civilians, or by terrorist movements.<sup>8</sup> There was a parallel here with weapons of mass destruction, with conflicting views on which powers could legitimately possess them. Legitimacy in this case was a response to perceptions of governmental systems and strategic cultures; and the imprecision of the concept of the rogue state does not satisfactorily address the issue.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the ability of the world's strongest power to propose the concept and define its application was seen by many as a challenge both to the sovereignty of states and to international norms. This will become a more serious problem as the rise of China and India leads to a decline in America's relative strength.

The notion of the morality of military usage as depending in part on the uneasy relationship between the doctrine of target allocation and acquisition, and the technology permitting the successful practice of this doctrine, is an instance of the way in which theories of force and legitimacy move in a problematic relationship with shifts in military capability and also in the type of wars being undertaken. This was not the sole instance of this process. To return to the point made at the outset, the nature of the military power wielded by the US (as well as the assumptions underlying its use) is crucial to modern discussion of force and legitimacy across at least much of the world.

## The historical perspective

In historical terms, there is a marked and unprecedented contrast today between the distribution of military force and the notion of sovereign equality in international relations. There have been major powers before, but only the Western European

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Smith, 'The New Law of War: Legitimizing Hi-Tech and Infrastructural Violence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), pp. 355–74.

<sup>8</sup> L. Freedman, 'Victims and Victors: Reflections on the Kosovo War', *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), pp. 335–58.

<sup>9</sup> R. Howard, *Iran in Crisis? Nuclear Ambitions and the American Response* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

maritime states – Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, France and Britain – could even seek a global range, and, prior to that of Britain in the nineteenth century, the naval strength of these states was not matched by a land capability capable of competing with those of the leading military powers in the most populous part of the world: South and East Asia, nor, indeed, with an ability to expand into Africa beyond coastal enclaves. The success of the Western European powers in the Americas and at sea off India, did not mean that there was an equivalent success elsewhere, and this suggests that aggregate military capacity is a concept that has to be employed with care.<sup>10</sup>

East and South-East Asian powers, particularly China, were, in turn, not involved in an international system that directly encompassed the Western maritime states. In some respects, there was a curious coexistence as, from the 1630s, Spanish, Russian and Dutch military powers were all present in East Asian waters, but, in practice, this did not lead to the creation of a new system. The Europeans were insufficiently strong to challenge the East Asian powers seriously, and local advances were repelled by the most powerful, China: in the seventeenth century, the Dutch being driven from the Pescadore Islands and Taiwan, and the Russians from the Amur Valley,<sup>11</sup> while the English in Bombay were forced to propitiate the Mughal Emperor; and were also unable to sustain their position in Tangier.

The assumptions generally summarised as strategic culture also played a major role, as, despite their strength, none of the local powers sought to contest the European position in the Western Pacific: the Spaniards spread their control in the Philippines, and, from there, to the Mariana and Caroline Islands, and the Russians in north-east Asia and, across the North Pacific, to the Aleutians and Alaska. This was not challenged by China; nor Japan or Korea, both of which were weaker states.

The absence of any such conflict ensured that relations between East Asian and Western European powers did not develop and become important, let alone normative, in the context of warfare or international relations. Instead, although trade with China was important for the West, there was scant development in such norms. The same was true of relations between the Mughal empire in India and European coastal positions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and also in South-East Asia, where major, aggressive states, such as Burma and Thailand in the eighteenth century, were able to operate with little reference to Western power (and indeed are largely ignored in Western historiography).<sup>12</sup> This is a reminder of the late onset of modernity, understood in terms both of Western dominance, specifically of readily-evident superior Western military capability, and of Western international norms; although this definition of modernity is questionable, and increasingly so, as Asian states become more powerful.

This late onset of modernity clashes with the conventional interpretation of the international order that traces an early establishment of the acceptance of sovereignty in a multipolar system, an establishment usually dated to the Peace of Westphalia of

<sup>10</sup> The best introduction is J. M. Black, *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents 1450–2000* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> E. van Veen, 'How the Dutch Ran a Seventeenth-Century Colony: The Occupation and Loss of Formosa 1624–1662', *Itinerario*, 20 (1996), pp. 59–77.

<sup>12</sup> W. J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

1648.<sup>13</sup> However appropriate for Europe, and that can be debated, this approach has far less meaning on the global level. The idea of such a system and of the associated norms outlined in Europe were of little relevance elsewhere until Western power expanded, and then they were not on offer to much of the world, or only on terms dictated by Western interests. This was true not only of such norms but also of conventions about international practices such as the definition of frontiers, or rights to free trade, or responses to what was presented as piracy.<sup>14</sup>

The question of frontiers was an aspect of the employment of the Western matrix of knowledge in ordering the world on Western terms and in Western interests. Force and legitimacy were brought together, for example, in the drawing of straight frontier and administration lines on maps, without regard to ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic and political alignments and practices, let alone drainage patterns, landforms and biological provinces. This was a statement of political control, judged by the West as legitimate and necessary in Western terms,<sup>15</sup> and employed in order to deny all other existing indigenous practices, which were seen either as illegitimate, or, in light of a notion of rights that drew on social-Darwinianism, as less legitimate.

The global military situation, specifically the Western ability to defeat and dictate to land powers, had changed in the nineteenth century, especially with the British defeat of the Marathas in India in 1803–6 and 1817–18, and, subsequently, with the defeats inflicted on China in 1839–42 and 1860, and with the Western overawing of Japan in 1853–4. In terms of the age, the speed and articulation offered British power by technological developments (especially, from mid-century, the steamship and the telegraph), by knowledge systems (particularly the accurate charting and mapping of coastal waters),<sup>16</sup> and by organisational methods (notably the coaling stations on which the Royal Navy came to rely), all provided an hitherto unsurpassed global range and reach.<sup>17</sup> Within this now globalised world, force and force projection came to define both the dominant (yet still contested) definition of legitimacy, and its application. Indeed, the capacity to direct the latter proved crucial to the development of the practice of legitimacy as related to its impact on non-Western states.

## The interwar years

British imperial power is generally discussed in terms of a nineteenth-century heyday. This refers mainly to naval power, and the options and ideas that stemmed from it. Yet this imperial power, which acted as the protection for free trade, and thus a major burst of globalisation, and brought what is presented as modernity to much of

<sup>13</sup> K. J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order 1648–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 39. For an example of the widespread application of the term, F. H. Lawson, 'Westphalian Sovereignty and the Emergence of the Arab States System: The Case of Syria', *International History Review*, 22 (2000), pp. 529–56.

<sup>14</sup> T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: a History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); S. Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> W. S. Miles, *Hausaland Divided: Capitalism and Independence in Nigeria and Niger* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> D. R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), eg. p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> P. Burroughs, 'Defence and Imperial Disunity', in A. Porter (ed.), *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 3 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 321.

the world, continued into the age of air warfare. Indeed British and French imperial power reached its territorial height after World War I, not only with the allocation of the German overseas empire, but also with the partition of the Ottoman empire. Britain increasingly acted as a land power (with air and sea support), in large part because of the commitments stemming from new and recent acquisitions, but also because there was no naval conflict in the interwar years. Instead, the 'low-level' struggles of that period, which did not entail war between major powers, were waged on land, albeit with the support of air or amphibious capability, prefiguring the situation since the end of the Cold War. In the Third Afghan War, in 1919, British planes bombed Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Equally, American operations in Central America and the West Indies in the 1920s and 1930s relied on amphibious capability and employed air support. Both were also at issue in the 1920s for the Spaniards in Morocco and the French in Syria.

Interwar military history serves to underline the general point that the uneasy equation of force and legitimacy is in part driven by the dynamic two-way relationship between capability and tasking, with the setting of goals arising from assumptions about relative capability, and in turn affecting measures to develop capability. In the interwar period, the capability gap between imperial and non-imperial forces was related to the tasking set for Western militaries by the need to maintain an hitherto unprecedented requirement for force projection. Western powers sought to dominate not only oceans and littorals, but also interiors. This geopolitical expansion was matched by a cultural expansiveness that saw Western power extended as never before into the Islamic world. As a result of World War I, Britain gained a protectorate over Egypt, as well as League of Nation mandates over Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, while France gained mandates over Lebanon and Syria. Under Mussolini, Italy sought to enforce its claims to the interior of Libya.

Yet, as a reminder of the point about bringing different narratives into contact, the expansion of Western power encountered an opposition that combined both the usual action-reaction cycle of power and warfare (for example an ability to respond to air attack developing in response to air power) seen within a given military culture, with the particular issues that arise when contrasting military cultures come into contact, as when the Italians subdued Libya in 1928–32.<sup>19</sup> These issues overlapped with the willingness, in *some*, but not *all* cases, to take casualties and endure burdens greater than those of the Western powers. This, in turn, forced decisions on the latter, decisions about how best to respond to opposition in which issues of force and legitimacy, capability and tasking, were compounded. Indeed, it is striking to contrast the British response to opposition in Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan with that to the 1930s Arab rising in Palestine. The Third Afghan War (1919) was not used as an opportunity to try to subjugate the country, and revolts in Egypt (1919) and Iraq (1920–1) led to the British conceding authority (although a considerable amount of power was retained). A more forceful response, however, was taken in Palestine (1936–9).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> D. E. Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> C. G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> E. Monroe, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East, 1914–1956* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963).

**Post-1945**

Tasking and capability as factors in the military interaction of imperial powers and non-Western peoples remained an issue after 1945, first in attempting to sustain Western European empires, and, in the Far East, revive them after the Japanese conquests. The challenge to legitimacy (in the shape of colonial rule) however, came more strongly than hitherto because the ideology of national liberation was more centrally established in Western consciousness (especially that of the US and the Soviet Union); but, as with most notions of legitimacy, this was both controverted, and also rendered contingent in particular circumstances.

The definition of legitimacy came into greater play in a triple sense. First, it was necessary to consider the views of the colonial populations. Many of them were increasingly unwilling to accept the strategies of incorporation (alongside coercion) that had made empire work, and, indeed, in many cases had been instrumental in the successful process of conquest.

Secondly, it was more important than hitherto to note the views of international opinion, both those of other states and, albeit to a lesser extent, public opinion, which was given an edge by the role of international organisations, especially the United Nations. The hostility of the UN, the US, and the Communist bloc, both, in theory, to continued colonial rule, and, in practice, to such rule by Western European states, was very important in affecting the determination of the latter, for example the Dutch in Indonesia. This influenced the context within which force was employed by the colonial powers, for example the targeting of civilians and the acceptability of high casualties.

Thirdly, changing attitudes within Western publics was important, particularly in the case of France and Algeria: the despatch of conscripts to fight there made the war eventually more unpopular than the earlier French struggle in Vietnam. This political factor more than offset the enhanced military capability offered by the use of conscripts. More generally, shifts in the definition of the legitimacy of rule were more important than increases in military capability.

More rapid force-deployment, especially by air, became particularly important in the era of decolonisation, as the British sought to respond speedily to crises affecting colonies or recently-independent members of the Commonwealth. One example was the Indonesian confrontation of 1963–6, when Britain went to the aid of Malaysia against Indonesian aggression. Yet, the capability stemming from nuclear weapons and strategic bombers made little difference. The British were far more successful when they attacked Egypt in 1882 than when they did so jointly with France in 1956. In 1882, there had been an enormous capability gap at sea, but a far smaller one on land; in part because of the Egyptian acquisition of military technology. In 1956, in contrast, British forces, once landed, could draw on far superior air power and, indeed, the availability of parachutists greatly expanded the range of possible ‘landings’, and thus enhanced the risk posed to the defenders.

Nevertheless, the contrast between 1882 and 1956 indicated a major shift in Western attitudes towards force-projection. To be acceptable, they had to be able to conform, at least apparently, to ideological goals, rather than to aims more closely focused on power politics. Alternatively, power politics now had to be expressed in terms of the former, as with the cause of ‘national liberation’ supported by the Soviet Union and the anti-Communist crusade championed by the US.



**American force-projection**

Although post-1945 crises in the Third World involving outside powers brought up an instructive series of issues involving force and legitimacy, there was significant change between those in the immediate, colonial post-war years, and those that can be more clearly located in the Cold War. There was a chronological overlap, especially with the Korean War (1950–3), but American opposition to colonialism ensured that there was also a major contrast. The US increasingly deployed a completely new level of military capability, and also sought to direct a world order in which most peoples were independent. This military capability, however, is misunderstood if it is treated in aggregate terms. American superiority was particularly apparent in force-projection, but less so in combat, a contrast readily apparent during the Vietnam War, and repeated subsequently. The Americans could move large numbers of troops to Vietnam and support them there, but were unable to inflict lasting defeat on their opponents in the field.

Indeed, part of the conceptual problem affecting the modern discussion of military strength arises from the extent to which the capability gap in force-projection is not matched in the contact (fighting) stage of conflict on land, a problem that is enhanced in the case of guerrilla and terrorist opposition. This gap is a target of some of the changes generally summarised as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The use of guided airborne weaponry, which is particularly important to the RMA, seeks to overcome this divide by directing precise force-projection onto the battlefield.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the gap remains, helping to ensure that discussion of capability and force has to be alert to what is being considered. As a result, as so often in considering both capability and military history, the use of aggregate measures is of limited value.

One particular sphere of importance in which there is only limited sign at present of a RMA is logistics, and this acts as a constraint on the rapid deployment of large forces, encouraging, instead, an emphasis on smaller expeditionary forces. This is an instance of the degree to which the largely 'silent' absences of, or limitations in, an RMA, have important consequences in doctrine, force structure, and operational method.

The American usage of force-projection has been strategic, operational and tactical. It is now possible to mount an individual operation, or fire an individual weapon, over a very long distance without apparently lessening the effectiveness of either. This has reordered the relationship between sea and land, the two basic components of international relations. In the age of Western sea power, or, phrased more selectively and accurately, the age not only when Western powers dominated the seas but also when the seas were the main axis of their power (an age incidentally that reached its culmination with the total American defeat of the Japanese navy off the Philippines in 1944), the capacity of sea-borne power to dictate outcomes on land was limited. Thus, the unbounded ability of Western powers (and Japan) to project power at sea was not matched by an ability to challenge (land) sovereignty.

Carrier-based planes threatened to alter this relationship, but their payload was limited, and post-World War II American and British plans to build super-carriers capable of carrying heavier bombers were abandoned. Thus, air power remained

<sup>21</sup> S. D. Wrage (ed.), *Immaculate Warfare: Participants Reflect on the Air Campaigns Over Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

primarily land-based: the island-based American air assault on Japan in 1945, was followed after the war by the initial allocation of Western strategic power against the Soviet Union, in the shape of atomic weaponry, to heavy bomber units.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, naval air power was largely for anti-ship purposes, especially for anti-submarine warfare, and, as in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, its use against land targets was as an adjunct of land-based bomber capacity and of only limited effectiveness.<sup>23</sup>

Intercontinental missiles took air power further, challenging the sovereignty of all states, and prefiguring recent concerns about the potency and spread of weapons of mass destruction. The American (and British) deployment of submarine-missile systems added a dramatic new dimension to Western naval power projection, but, short of nuclear war or confrontation, they in fact had scant military effect. In particular, the deterrent capacity of such weaponry was of little value in asymmetrical warfare, or indeed in conventional conflict other than by affecting the possibility that such conflict might escalate.

Developments in military capability, however, are multi-track, and it is not only the maximisation of force that is at issue, a point that is of general applicability for military history and theory, but that tends to be greatly underrated. The practical ability of sea-based forces to challenge their land counterparts has been enhanced over the last two decades not by the development of sea-mounted weaponry for spreading mass destruction, but by less spectacular but more important developments, in particular enhanced mobility and shifts in sub-nuclear weaponry. The first has focused on the growth of helicopter lift capacity, and the second on the introduction and extensive use of cruise-missiles.

Indeed, the specifications of individual weapons, however improved, may make them inappropriate for the task at hand. Fitness for purpose is a crucial concept when judging the applicability of weaponry, but such fitness is frequently misunderstood by putting the stress on the capacity for employing force, rather than the ends that are sought. Although the term is frequently rather overly loosely employed, these ends, and thus the purpose, are culturally constructed, and in this process of construction notions of legitimacy, and thus appropriateness, play a major role in establishing both purpose and fitness. Furthermore, shifts in these can be seen as a motor of change in military history that deserves at least as much attention as the more habitual emphasis on weaponry.

The relationship between shifts in tasking and changes in technology is, as ever, complex, and not adequately addressed by the use of organic ('dynamic relationship') or mechanistic models, imagery and vocabulary. Furthermore, this relationship operates at different levels, and has a varied impact in particular contexts. In recent decades, for the US, one effect has been a shift in doctrine away from amphibious warfare and towards littoral projection, in other words the ability of sea-based forces to operate not only across the shore but also directly into the interior. Given that most of the world's population, especially, as in China, the economically most important percentage, lives within 500 miles of the sea, and much of it within 50 miles, this is of great significance for the relationship between force and sovereignty.

<sup>22</sup> W. S. Borgiasz, *The Strategic Air Command: Evolution and Consolidation of Nuclear Forces 1945–55* (New York, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> J. B. Nichols and B. Tillman, *On Yankee Station: The Naval Air War over Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987); R. J. Francillon, *Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club: US Carrier Operations off Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988).

It is in conventional capability that advances in American power, specifically force projection, have been most important. This has reflected both American doctrine during the Cold War, particularly the determination to be able to fight a non-nuclear war with the Soviet Union, and to maintain conventional capability even if the war became nuclear; as well as the changing nature of world politics after the end of the Cold War, specifically the American practice of interventionism. Looked at differently, this interventionism has been dependent on these very advances in capability, but such an approach must not see such advances as causing interventionism. To do so ignores the role of politics in setting and sustaining goals, as was readily apparent in the Iraq War in 2003. The same is true of Russia, whose Chief of the General Staff declared on 8 September 2004 that Russia could deliver preventive strikes on terrorist bases anywhere in the world. Russia may indeed be planning such action in the Caucasus.<sup>24</sup>

It is important not to exaggerate the end of the Cold War as a break, because many geopolitical issues spanned the divide, while, as suggested above, much of the American capability deployed in the 1990s and 2000s stemmed from Cold War procurement policies, tasking and doctrine. The ability to fight a conventional war in Europe had to be translated to other spheres, which created problems in adaptation, but much of the capability was already in place. The apparent legitimacy of such interventionism is a different matter, as much stemmed from the particular ideologies of the American administrations of the period. This indicated the central role of 'tasking', the goals set by political direction, and also the plasticity or changeability of what is referred to as strategic culture,<sup>25</sup> a term that can suggest a misleading degree of consistency. This was highlighted by discussion in 2004 as to how far the result of the highly-contested presidential election would affect at least the ethos and practice of American foreign policy.

The extent to which American developments in force-projection have not been matched by other powers is an important aspect of world politics, as the state that benefited most in economic terms from the 1990s, China, has instead concentrated, at present, on enhancing its short-range projection capability, thus matching the military consequences of Japan's economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, the contrast between, on the one hand, the force structures and doctrines of China and, on the other, those of Britain and France indicates the role of politics in shaping military capability and tasks, whether those politics are reified or not as strategic cultures.

More significantly, American developments have not been matched elsewhere by advances in anti-strategy/operational practice/tactics/weaponry.<sup>26</sup> The first, indeed, is one of the most important aspects of recent and current international relations, and

<sup>24</sup> P. K. Baev, 'Russia Insists Upon Preventive Strikes: The Possible Options', *RUSI Newsbrief*, 24:10 (October 2004), pp. 112–14.

<sup>25</sup> For a far from exhaustive list, R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); K. Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); C. G. Reynolds, 'Reconsidering American Strategic History and Doctrines', in his *History of the Sea: Essays on Maritime Strategies* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); A. L. Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); C. S. Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back', *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), pp. 49–70.

<sup>26</sup> Moreover, unusually for a state of its size, the US home base also remains strong, with no separatist or class-based violent opposition.

is one that would benefit from careful examination. Hitherto, the general pattern in military history *on land* has been to see such a matching of advances in capability and responses, although there has been no systematic study of the subject. In light of the Vietnam War, it was possible to anticipate at least elements of such a matching in response to the combination of the technological hubris central to the concept of the Revolution in Military Affairs and the greater intensity of American force projection that followed the end of the Cold War. In 2001, when conflict formally involving the US began in Afghanistan, there were frequent references to past British failure there, while, in 2003, it was widely argued that the conquest of Iraq would be much more challenging than its defeat in 1991. Indeed, Saddam Hussein appears to have anticipated that the problems of urban warfare would lessen American technological advantages and lead to casualties that obliged the American government to change policy,<sup>27</sup> an analysis that was certainly mistaken in the short term, and that anyway could not prevent conquest by a well-organised and high-tempo American-dominated invasion force.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, his hope that international pressure, particularly from France and Russia via the United Nations, would prevent the Americans from acting proved an inaccurate reading of the dynamics of contemporary international relations.

### Attempted revolutions in military affairs

That American advances in capability were not matched, at least in the sense of being countered, does not establish a general rule that they cannot be, and it has indeed been suggested that the wide dissemination of technologies such as cruise missile design and production poses problems for the Americans.<sup>29</sup> The issue highlights the degree to which one of the real problems of both military history and military analysis is deciding how best to analyse and generalise from examples – but it is instructive. This is linked to an issue that divides analysts, namely how far recent and current changes in capability constitute a military revolution, or paradigm shift in military capability and warmaking, and, if so, with what results, and with what consequences, both in terms of analysing long-term trends in military capability, and in considering norms of behaviour within the international system.

The claims made for such a shift by military supporters, both in-post and retired,<sup>30</sup> civilian commentators,<sup>31</sup> and military-industrial companies, are bold, but yet also offer instructive clues about their limitations. For example, Northrop Grumman in

<sup>27</sup> T. Dodge, 'Cake Walk, Coup or Urban Warfare: the Battle for Iraq', in Dodge and S. Simon (eds.), *Iraq at the Crossroads: State and Society in the Shadow of Regime Change*, Adelphi Paper 354 (Oxford, 2003), pp. 59, 70–1.

<sup>28</sup> W. Murray and R. H. Scales, *The Iraq War: A Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> L. Guy, 'Competing Visions for the US Military', *Orbis*, 48 (2004), p. 709.

<sup>30</sup> R. H. Scales Jr., *Yellow Smoke: The Future of Land Warfare for America's Military* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); D. A. Macgregor, *Transformation under Fire: Revolutionizing How America Fights* (Westport: Praeger, 2003); W. K. Clark, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> For example, B. Berkowitz, *The New Face of War: How War Will Be Fought in the 21st Century* (New York: Free Press, 2003); N. Friedman, *Terrorism, Afghanistan, and America's New Way of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003).

its 2004 advertisements under the logo 'Share information. Share victory' for its ability to define the future ISTAR<sup>32</sup> battle space focused on the aerial vehicles and warships it linked in a blue world of sea and sky that left no room for the complexities of control on land.

If there is such a military revolution to match the greatly enhanced and partly redirected investment seen in American 'defence' (that is, military) budgets, then this indeed raises the question as to how far practices and theories of international relations will respond, or need to respond. At the same time, the very same issues are posed by other attempted revolutions in military affairs, in particular those sought by terrorist groups, and by so-called rogue states. In the first case, the attempt in 2001 by al-Qaeda to use terrorist methods for strategic ends, by crippling, or at least symbolically dethroning, American financial and political power, failed not least because it rested on a greatly-flawed assumption about the concentrated and top-down nature of American power; but it also indicated the extent to which the terrorist repertoire was far from fixed. Although it was true that al-Qaeda did not deploy weapons of mass destruction in 2001, its ability to make use of Western technology, in this case civilian aircraft, like its determination to ignore any boundaries between military and civilian, indicated the military as well as political challenge that is posed. Similarly, in 2004, a dependence on public transport was exploited in the terrorist attacks in Madrid. This terrorism is a more serious problem for international relations than those posed by particular states because the nature of a stateless entity is that it does not need to respond to the constraints that generally arise from claims to sovereign power, although such groups are also in a competition for legitimacy. The military equivalent is whether there is a territorial space that can be attacked or occupied.

As a result, however plausible it is to argue that there are terrorist states, nevertheless the challenge posed by terrorist movements is apparently greater, especially as they can seek to base themselves in 'failed states' where it is difficult to take action, short of full-scale military intervention, against them. Terrorism is part of a continuum described as criminal warfare and characterised as opportunistic warfare waged by pacts.<sup>33</sup> Although most terrorism is in fact aimed at states in the Third World, the challenge from terrorism is particularly notable for strong powers, especially the strongest, the US, as they have less practicable need to fear attack from other states, than weaker states do: even were the latter to be able to attack the US, the forces would very probably be defeated, and their territory could certainly be attacked.

This distinction between states, however, is challenged by the attempt by so-called rogue states to acquire weapons of mass destruction and, as seriously, related delivery systems. Although the regular forces of states such as North Korea and Iran probably lack the capability and ability in defence to defeat the conventional forces of stronger powers, which in this case means the US, and certainly could not stage an effective offensive war, such weapons would enable them to threaten these forces and, perhaps even eventually, home territory. The possession of such weapons by rogue states would also challenge the aspect of international aspirations and force projection represented by alliance systems.

<sup>32</sup> Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance.

<sup>33</sup> J. Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

If these are the key elements in the situation at present (with a number of developments the causative interaction of which is unclear), that situation does not in fact encompass the large majority of states in the world: most are neither leading military powers, nor 'rogue states'. Indeed, much of the conceptual problem with military analysis, as indeed with military history, stems from the extent to which it focuses on leading powers, with the corresponding assumption that other states seek to match, or at least copy, aspects of their warmaking capacity and methods: the notion of paradigm powers. This approach assumes a unitary tasking (and analytical methodology) that is in fact inaccurate.

For example, in many states, especially, but not only, in post-independence Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, the prime purpose of the military is internal control, with the army in particular as the arm of the state. In territorial terms, the challenge comes not so much from foreign powers as from domestic regional opposition to the state, some of it separatist in character, or from resistance that has a social dimension, such as peasant risings. The resulting warfare, most of which takes a guerrilla and/or terrorist character on the part of the rebels, is asymmetrical.<sup>34</sup> It can also overlap considerably with struggles against crime, specifically wars on drugs. Thus, in Mexico in the early 2000s, the army was used against the powerful drugs gangs, while a paramilitary Federal Investigations Agency was established to the same end. In functional terms, this might seem to have little to do with war as conventionally defined, but the firepower used by both sides was considerable. In Colombia, the left-wing FARC and the right-wing AUC paramilitaries are both involved in drugs.

The porous and contested definition of war suggested by its current usage, as in war on drugs or war on terror, let alone war on poverty, further complicates understandings of force and legitimacy, and makes it difficult to define the military.<sup>35</sup> If the 'war on terror' is crucial, then the Saudi security forces carrying out armed raids against al-Qaeda suspects in which people are killed are as much part of the military as conventional armed forces. Indeed paramilitaries play an important role in many states, not least in internal control. Similarly, troops are employed for policing duties, as in Quetta in Pakistan in March 2004 to restore order after a riot following a terrorist attack on a Shia procession.

The challenge to states from domestic opposition is 'internationalised', in so far as there may be foreign support for such opposition, or, with increasing effect from the 1990s, international humanitarian concern about the issue. On the whole, however, the nature of the conflict reflects an important aspect of international relations, namely the extent to which the use of force within sovereign areas is generally accepted within international legal constraints. This practice is seen as a challenge to humanitarian interventionist precepts, but the latter usually lack military capability unless they conform with the goals of great-power diplomacy.

The extent to which the conflation of humanitarianism with such goals sets a challenge to modern Western militaries has been apparent since the early 1990s. This challenge raises difficult issues of effectiveness, and ones in which the legitimacy of

<sup>34</sup> I. F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies. Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750* (London: Routledge, 2001); A. Clayton, *Frontiersmen: Warfare in Africa since 1950* (London: University College London Press, 1999), pp. 73–113, 155–208.

<sup>35</sup> For a critique, see G. Andreani, 'The "War on Terror": Good Cause, Wrong Concept', *Survival*, 46:2 (2004–05), pp. 31–50.

force plays a major role. The issue is also likely to become more of a topic in doctrine, though probably not to the same extent in weapons procurement.

If the state therefore emerges as a crucial intersection, between force and international relations, this is scarcely new, but serves as a reminder that the state and its military capability can be seen as acting in different ways and at several levels. The challenge for international relations theory is to address this variety. Current speculation about the relationship between force and international arrangements needs to address the future, not least because concepts of legitimacy and practices of legitimization in part depend on the likelihood of future consent. The pace of technological change is also a factor. New weapons systems create problems for judgment that reflect competing norms in international relations. To take the case of space-based anti-ballistic missile systems, its advocates stress its defensive character, but its critics include those who resist the idea of militarising space.<sup>36</sup>

### Looking to the future

In the early 2000s, again reflecting normative dissonance, the key issues in international relations were variously presented as the response to unilateral American proactive interventionism, rogue states and terrorism, and it is likely that they will continue to be issues, but it is improbable that they will continue to so dominate the agenda as they did in the early 2000s. Even then, this agenda was in some respects misleading, as there were other conflicts and confrontations that were of great importance, not only for humanitarian reasons: the war in Congo, but also the serious rivalry between India and Pakistan. The apparently dominant agenda of the early 2000s reflected American interests, perceptions, and commitments, and the response of others to the US,<sup>37</sup> an important aspect of the extent to which the Western perception of developments (as of military history) can crowd out other changes worthy of attention.

It is unclear whether this perception will remain valid in future decades, not least as China becomes a more prominent, and probably more assertive, state, but also because the majority of conflicts in the world do not involve Western powers, and it is unclear how far they will feel it necessary to intervene in them. This, indeed, has always been the case, other than during the brief heyday of Western imperialism. China is often discussed by theorists in terms of a likely future confrontation with the US, not least on the basis of a 'neo-realist' assumption that states naturally expand and compete when they can, and that China's ambitions will lead it to clash with the US.<sup>38</sup> This, however, is less plausible than a regional ambition on the part of China that would involve India, Japan and Russia more closely than the US. Indeed, the US would have a choice over how far to intervene. This serves as a reminder that the world international system involves a number of complex regional situations, with

<sup>36</sup> M. E. O'Hanlon, *Neither Star Wars nor Sanctuary: Constraining the Military Uses of Space* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> C. S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); R. J. Pauly and T. Lansford, *Strategic Preemption: US Foreign Policy and the Second Iraq War* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

the US taking the leading role not because it is able to dominate the other powers (as might be implied by the word hegemony), but rather because, aside from its largely uncontested regional dominance of the Americas and the Pacific, it is the sole state able to play a part in these other regional situations.

At this point, history and the future combine to underline the problem of conceiving of the relationship between force and legitimacy in Western terms; allowing of course for the great variety in the latter. Such a conception can be seen as central to modern discussion, as the theories and analytical terms employed are those of Western intellectual culture and legal analysis. Indeed, one way to present the interventionist wars of the 1990s and 2000s was as conflict intended to preserve the normative structures that derive from Western assumptions. This was especially true of the language surrounding humanitarian interventions.<sup>39</sup>

### **The problem of definition**

Reality, however, has a habit of defying ready classification, especially if in normative terms. This reaction by reality is generally conceptualised in terms of a non-Western reaction against Western norms, but, while correct up to a point, such an approach underrates the distinctions between Western powers and norms, and also between their non-Western counterparts. If the West, for example, is understood in terms of societies of European origin, that encompasses, over the last century, the leading capitalist state (the US), the leading imperial power (Britain), the centre of Communism (the USSR), the standard-bearer of National Socialism (Nazi Germany), and France, which played a major role in the language and customs of diplomacy and earlier in the ideals of liberty and justice, as well as a variety of other countries ranging from Argentina to Bulgaria.

To see these states as taking part in a system bounded by common norms is implausible, and therefore a challenge to the notion of the Western way of war. Indeed, serious differences in goals and attitudes helped vitiate international co-operation and understanding. These differences could also limit successful war-making. Thus, the racist ethos of Nazi Germany led to harsh occupation policies that sapped consent and encouraged resistance, and therefore lessened the value of military success in so far as it was measured by the occupation of territory. Nazi practices also made war-exit a much harder goal, thus contributing to the situation already seen in World War I: German tactical and operational proficiency were undermined by strategic flaws that in large part rested on assumptions of legitimacy simply resting on force and in no way being dependent on consent.<sup>40</sup> These assumptions contrasted greatly with those in the US and Britain, and this was seen in the postwar reconstructions of West Germany and Japan, which differed considerably from those attempted (under wartime conditions) by the latter powers in states they had defeated and conquered.

<sup>39</sup> N. J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> V. G. Liulevicius, *WarLand on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 247–77.



## Conclusion

Over the last century, military strength and the intimidatory and coercive potency it offered, acted as the facilitator to differences between Western powers, but was not inherently responsible for a failure to make international institutions work, nor for an inability to keep the peace. In the case of the 'non-West', there was, particularly with the foundation of the United Nations in 1945, an apparent opening up of such institutions, and the related practices of international law and human rights, to encompass states across the world. This extension, however, did not transform pre-existing Western-derived norms about international and domestic conflict, but, irrespective of that, these norms were challenged by practice across much of the world. Thus, it would be mistaken today to look back to a golden age of apparently successful restraint, whether under the auspices of the competitive bipolarity of the Cold War or the normative policing of the UN, that has been allegedly challenged by the modern combination of new attitudes to international relations and particular practices in military power.

Instead, we should note that there has always been a degree of instability born of a combination of aggressive goals and contrasts in capability. This essay suggests that, in studying this relationship, it is important to treat the nature of force as an independent variable, and one that has played a major role, not only in the equations of international power, but also in the attitudes that help mould its purposes. As an independent variable, its development and interaction with international norms does not necessarily correspond in any clear-cut causative pattern to the development of the international system. To pretend otherwise would be to offer a facile systemic relationship that would be inappropriate. Instead, it is necessary to make this topic a subject for research while remembering, at every stage, to allow for the diversity of military and international environments around the world.