

# Ancient Wars of the 21st Century

The evolution of war  
by LtCol Michael D. Reilly

**W**estern academics and military theorists are currently engaged in a debate about the nature, character, and conduct of modern warfare. On one side of the discussion are those like Everett Dolman, Professor of Comparative Military Studies at the USAF School of Air and Space Studies, who argue that modern technology ushers in a “new way of war.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Dolman argues that weaponizing space could counter virtually every imaginable threat—from hegemonic competition with China to individual terrorist cells in the Middle East. On the other end of the spectrum, academics and military professionals like Mary Kaldor, Feargal Cochrane, and Shannon Beene argue that the fundamental nature of war has changed because of the post-Westphalian erosion of the nation state, which no longer holds a monopoly on violence. Mary Kaldor, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, contends that the core aspects of Clausewitzian war theory are “no longer applicable”<sup>2</sup> as warfare has shifted from a “contest of wills” to a “mutual enterprise” where “both sides need one another in order to carry on the enterprise of war therefore war tends to be long and inconclusive.”<sup>3</sup>

The vital point for Marines to understand during these debates is that the character and conduct of 21st century warfare continues to evolve, but the nature of war remains unchanged. Compared to the Clausewitzian vision of interstate conflict, modern warfare is increasingly characterized by the erosion of the state’s sovereignty and monopoly of violence coupled with the continuing effects of de-colonialization in develop-

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**Political purposes will remain the underlying cause of future conflict. (Photo by Cpl Jesus Sepulveda Torres.)**

ing nations, the vacuum created by the fall of the Soviet Union, and the reality of a globally-interconnected society. These ancient wars of the 21st century are best described as a transnational asymmetric mixture of globalization and radicalized tribalism, enabled by high-speed communications and modern weapons, employing ancient and barbaric tactics, sustained by criminality and foreign aid, and located in geographic areas of instability characterized by weak or failed states where

poverty is endemic and the majority of the population has little to no access to the political system.

War’s basic nature remains a contest of wills between two or more competitors for a political purpose involving violence, friction, chance, and uncertainty. Clausewitz defined war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>4</sup> This elegant definition is both simple and comprehensive. Clausewitz envisioned two wrestlers using force with the goal of throwing

the opponent “in order to make him incapable of further resistance.”<sup>5</sup> The warfare Clausewitz theorized involved conflicts between nation states, but the application of his theories transcend 19th century combat and are still applicable today. Clausewitz’s contention that “war is merely the continuation of policy by other means”<sup>6</sup> remains valid for modern conflicts and demonstrates the continued need for a strong relationship between the government, military, and populace.

On the high end of the spectrum, Dolman, the Air Force’s self-identified first space theorist, postulates that space-based weapons will change the way wars are fought and extend the “era of US hegemony” by deterring adversaries through “the omnipresent threat of precise, measured, and unstoppable retaliation.”<sup>7</sup> In his view, space is the ultimate high ground and a vital domain to be controlled. All of Dolman’s prophecies of space-based, high-tech omnipotence may come to fruition, but they do not change the nature of war. Although technology changes the conduct and (potentially) the character of war, it does not alter the nature of war as a violent contest of wills

the Clausewitzian desire for decisive action with the modern phenomenon of perpetual conflict. This perpetual conflict arose from the conclusion that any attempt to compel the will of the enemy through symmetrical means, when the enemy is represented by the “whole population,” results in the annihilation of those people. This “unlimited character of war,” Kaldor argues, is the result of the widening of “barriers” as exemplified by the Holocaust and use of atomic weapons.<sup>10</sup> Following this logic, only mass and mutual annihilation can result from using symmetric military force “to compel an opponent to fulfill our will.”<sup>11</sup>

Kaldor “reformulates” the modern definition of war as “an act of violence involving two or more organized groups framed in political terms.”<sup>12</sup> By this definition, war is characterized as either a classical “contest of wills” or a “mutual enterprise” where each participant needs the other to justify their identity and obtain local power or economic advantage.<sup>13</sup> The difference between each “type” of war depends on the “specific political, economic, and military logic.”<sup>14</sup> This is an interesting hypothesis as some conflicts in post-au-

ity. Alternatively, it may be true in some conflicts that each side needs the other to justify its existence or purpose (like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict). But both sides in these mutual enterprises are driving toward a political end-state, so these conflicts still qualify as war, albeit prolonged ones.

Doug Porch, Distinguished Professor, U.S. Naval War College, lumps “new wars” into a brand of conflicts along the long lineage of “small wars” that date back to the 19th century as a “discrete category of warfare.”<sup>16</sup> Porch succinctly frames the argument proposed by new wars advocates by stating that COIN (counterinsurgency)

proponents and their ‘new wars’ offspring claim that the propensity of conventional soldiers to treat COIN as inferior ... is self-defeating, because counterinsurgency has become the norm of conflict ... future war will mean asymmetrical conflict which ... means that Clausewitzian analysis of the interaction of war, armies, and society, and its impact on strategy formulation are henceforth old think.<sup>17</sup>

Porch counters and dismisses any notion of the changing nature of war by noting that

COIN [including the new wars proponents] offers a doctrine of escapism ... into an anachronistic, romanticized, Orientalist vision that projects quintessentially Western values ... onto non-Western societies.<sup>18</sup>

In essence, these new wars are not so new and do not require specialized forces (like cosmopolitan law enforcement brigades, specialized COIN forces, or radical changes to Marine Corps organization and training). History, he argues, demonstrates that “any good soldier can handle guerrillas.”<sup>19</sup>

The Marine Corps does not need a face lift. The current operational concepts under consideration have potential, but any reorganization of forces or overhaul of training standards must take into account the unchanging nature of war as well as the current changes in the conduct of warfare. Any force construct based upon an assumption that future conflicts will take place exclusively within the realm of “irregular

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for political purposes. Even the most dangerous threat course of action, like Dolman’s prognostication of a “coming war with China,” does not change the nature of the war from a contest of wills to something else.<sup>8</sup> If anything, this type of interstate conflict reinforces the timelessness and adaptability of Clausewitzian theory as technology does alter the conduct of war, but not its nature.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Kaldor acknowledges that Clausewitz allows for limited and unlimited war with obtaining peace as the final objective of both types: either by destroying the enemy or by achieving limited objectives and negotiations.<sup>9</sup> She contrasts

thoritarian states demonstrate aspects of criminality or ethnic cleansing with no clear political goals or desired end state. Even if true, however, Kaldor’s view of warfare would not constitute a change to the nature of war. She even admits that “war does imply organized violence in the service of political ends.”<sup>15</sup> The nature of war, therefore, remains a violent (or threat of violent) struggle between belligerents for some political purpose—even if that purpose is ethnic cleansing. For example, a violent conflict for purely economic reasons (like the cartel competition in Mexico) would not qualify as war. Rather, it is better defined as violent criminal activ-



**Regardless of future weaponry, war will continue to be a contest of wills. (Photo by Cpl Jesus Sepulveda-Torres.)**

warfare” is doomed to fail. Great care must be taken to ensure that the current advocacy for a distributed force capable of “persistent presence,” and long-term foreign internal defense or security force assistance missions does not detract from the Marine Corps’ ability and agility to thrive along the full range of military operations.

states.<sup>21</sup> This is an important change that impacts the policy, strategy, and operational design needed to mitigate or intervene in these conflicts. It is critical that policy makers and senior military leaders grasp the implications of committing forces into such asymmetrical and ancient operational environments as there is usually no quick or simple

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Warfare, the actual conduct of war, is constantly changing based upon any number of factors. Improvements in technology or the use of violence by non-state actors does not change the fundamental nature of war. War continues to be a violent struggle—a deadly contest of wills—for a political purpose. Kaldor even concedes that “new wars are also fought for political ends and ... war itself can be viewed as a form of politics.”<sup>20</sup> It appears that modern warfare is increasingly characterized as persistent, undeclared guerrilla-style conflicts between societies as exposed to short, declared actions between

solution to these complex societal problems. Even though warfare is constantly evolving, the nature of war remains the same. Clausewitz is prophetic and timeless in admonishing the “statesman and commander” to determine the “kind of war” waged and not fall into the trap of entering the desired war and not the real one.<sup>22</sup> That’s the real secret to the Marine Corps’ future success in highly complex and ancient battlefields of the 21st century.

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**Notes**

1. Everett Dolman, “A Debate About Weap-

ons in Space: U.S. Military Transformation and Weapons in Space,” *SAIS Review*, (Online: Winter-Spring 2006), available online at <https://muse.jhu.edu>.

2. Mary Kaldor, “Inconclusive Wars: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant in these Global Times?,” *Global Policy*, (Online: October 2010), available at <https://globalpolicyjournal.com>.

3. Ibid.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Everett Dolman, “New Frontiers, Old Realities,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, (Online: Spring 2012), available at <https://www.au.af.mil>.

8. Ibid.

9. “Inconclusive Wars.”

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Mary Kaldor, “In Defence of New Wars,” *Stability*, (Online: March 2013), available at <https://www.stabilityjournal.org>.

15. Ibid.

16. Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Press, 2013).

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. “In Defence of New Wars.”

21. Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002).

22. *On War*.

