Beyond Armageddon? The Shape of Conflict in the Twenty-First Century
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If one was to look back at strategic planning in the 1990s perhaps 50 years hence, there would probably be two key elements in that caricature. The first would be the furrowed brows of senior strategists as they seek to come to terms with that frightening word ‘uncertainty’. They cannot quite put their finger on what the problem is, nor can they find enough props to give them greater confidence. But, it is their responsibility, to use Sir Michael Quinlan’s words, to guard against ‘the possibility that matters do not go well’. And in the world of the 1990s, there are many ‘worst case’ scenarios that cannot be completely set aside.

The second part of the caricature would almost certainly be a pile of glossy brochures and magazines jam-packed with advertisements for new high-tech weapons systems and designed to seduce the world’s armed forces across the threshold in the new age of information warfare. Little space would be devoted to the van Crevelds and Tofflers in the debate – those who have actually taken the time to step back to try and assess just how fundamental the changes occurring in warfare really are. It is not that their ideas aren’t considered worthy of noting but that they keep getting pushed aside by ‘real’ security problems such as an emerging China, the dangers of anarchy on the borders of Europe, or demands for a ‘peace dividend’. The immediate agenda for many is to halt the free-fall – not to let the known foundations of defence planning crumble.

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In many respects, this caution is quite understandable. Not only is the current strategic outlook extremely complex but the changes that are taking place are generally subtractions from the old strategic constructs of the Cold War. There are few clear leads as to the direction of, or time scales for, any future transformation of the security environment – and the leads that do exists are not ones that can provide a confident focus for national defence planning. The lessons of the Gulf War, for example, remain fraught with ambiguity.

On the one hand, it can be dismissed as a quite unique clash of political, military and technological capabilities. On the other, it can be portrayed as
revealing fundamental weaknesses in conducting conventional military operations unless one is able to master the new dimensions of warfare highlighted in what has become known as the 'revolution in military affairs'.

What does need to be understood, however, in an environment characterised by complexity and fluidity is that how planners interpret developments is conditioned very much by the strategic lens through which they view them. In this respect there can be no doubt that the current approach of most developed nations is shaped by two key elements. The first is the well established practice of planning on the basis of what specific threats could emerge within particular time frames. Even those who have moved away from specific threat-based planning in the aftermath of the Cold War generally remain preoccupied with the components of threat – geography, capability, instability, and possible motives for the use of military force. They tend to discount the other elements in the new security agenda.

The other element is a very traditional approach to what the use of military force is all about. Reduced to the bare minimum, it is the belief that, along the continuum of conflict, the ultimate justification for possessing a defence capability is to be able to prevail head-to-head in sustained, joint intensive operations. In reality, a lack of resources means that many fall short of that goal but that does not generally negate it as an important principle in their defence planning construct. It will most often appear in the guise of 'the expansion base' or concepts of inter-operability and alliance.

The critical question is whether the problems planners are encountering in coming to terms with the current and prospective strategic environment can be put down simply to the absence of a threat or whether they reflect a much more fundamental strategic change which challenges the very analytical assumptions on which overall security planning is based. If it is the former, the current approach of 'steady-as-she-goes' – of seeking greater efficiency dividends, guarding against the advance of technology, while basically waiting for a new order to emerge – would appear prudent. But if that is not the case, and defence planners are confronting a major shift in their strategic paradigms, then there are significant costs and risks in continuing with a business-as-usual approach.

Most analysis to date has unfortunately done little to illuminate this issue. It has been content to speculate about alternative political futures, justifying either an optimistic or a pessimistic outlook on the relative weight given to economic linkages or military technologies. Neither argument, however, is wholly convincing and, in the absence of authoritative guidance, defence planners are tending to fall back on the enduring features of conflict as it has evolved over the last few hundred years. Indeed, it can be argued that the competition for ascendancy between liberal and realist interpretations is