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Set and Drift—"Peer Competitors, the RMA, and New Concepts: Some Questions"

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SET AND DRIFT

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Peer Competitors, the RMA, and New Concepts
Some Questions

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MY INTENT IS TO CHALLENGE contemporary notions about such things, now unclear or dimly perceived, as peer competitors, the revolution in military affairs (RMA), and new concepts of operations and organization. This constellation of futuristic ideas, long favored by the Secretary of Defense's Office of Net Assessment, is meant to be a guide for thinking and planning in all the armed forces. Cynics suggest that the original purpose of discussions about RMA was to give the United States an elegant way to do the unavoidable: i.e., to perform "intelligent triage" on its existing force structure. But the true value of challenging these notions is not to discredit them—they are very important ideas—but to try to give spectators of the RMA and its participants greater discernment of the strengths and limitations of current thinking.

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The Key Ideas

Technology has changed, or "revolutionized," warfare before. Commentary on this particular RMA, however, is infused with awareness that some revolutions in this age of information technology and the global marketplace may be unconfinable.[1] If an adversary adopts revolutionary technology or embraces more effective concepts of operations enabled by new technology before or better than the United States does, will the U.S find itself at a disadvantage? If so, and if the adversary were a "peer," the effects of being disadvantaged could be disastrous in a conflict involving military force.[2] The Office of Net Assessment is attempting to convince U.S. armed forces to consider the effects of such a revolution; to use the words of its director, Andrew Marshall, the United States must "get this right."[3] Indeed, we must get the future right; but there are problems with some of the notions entangled in the RMA.

A technologically advanced peer would pose serious difficulties for the United States, precisely because it *could* pose them. Dr. Henry Kissinger's latest book, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994, p. 813), issues this post–Cold War warning: "Geopolitically, America is an island off the shores of the large landmass of Eurasia, whose resources and population far exceed those of the United States. The domination by a single power of either of Eurasia's two principal spheres—Europe or Asia—remains a good definition of strategic danger for America, Cold War or no Cold War. For such a grouping would have the capacity to outstrip America economically and, in the end, militarily. That danger would have to be resisted even were the dominant power apparently benevolent, for if the intentions ever changed, America would find itself with a grossly diminished capacity for effective resistance and a growing inability to shape events." Thus, in Kissinger's view, a "peer" that dominates Europe or Asia must be resisted. Although the conception of a peer competitor is difficult to distinguish from the idea of a revolution in military affairs, for purposes of analysis it can be considered separately.

A cynic would assert that when a big and awkward organization like the Department of Defense cannot find a threat or an enemy sufficiently frightening to the electorate to justify a large, steady appropriation, creativity can provide what the geopolitical environment no longer does—a "peer" competitor. Whether that assertion represents a discovery or not, there are at least three problems with creating peer competitors.

First, the current definition of "peer" is tautological: that is, the peer is a mental construct, a mirror-image of the United States after the RMA is consummated. Thus, the more technologically capable the United States becomes, the more capable the imaginary peer; a more capable peer, in turn, begets the need for a yet more capable United States. In other words, the peer becomes

the imaginary replacement for the Soviet Union, with two important differences. First, the imaginary European or Asian peer is not a named state or coalition of states, and so it has no specific territory, competing internal-resource requirements or political objectives, or other constraints on its behavior. The peer is an abstraction, an ideal; whatever else the unspecified, mirror-image peer may be, it is unreal. To make it real, to call it "a resurgent Russia" or "an aggressive China," is impolitic. There is no lag time in the imaginary peer's technology acquisition and deployment cycle—the challenger arises unexpectedly. An actual or potential real peer has sharper definition; only an imaginary one presents these difficulties.

The second problem with the notion of a future peer competitor is the lack of a reasonable benchmark for "peer-hood." By what standards is it determined? If, as we have asserted, the idealized peer will be a mirror-image of the United States, it must be viewed as a shadow nation or coalition, evolving as the United States evolves, copying its technology, tactics, and blunders. If the U.S. believes that massively large land armies and scores of armored divisions using "dominating maneuver" are the essence of military power, the peer also believes that and fields just such a force.[4] If the United States believes that weapons in space constitute a revolution in military power, the peer has space weapons also. The obvious danger—that of creating an environment that forces a peer forward in self-defense—is ignored.

Even setting aside the possibility of provoking what might have been avoided, another pitfall with this way of thinking is that the United States may look only for dangers in symmetrical areas and in familiar combinations. It may look more at states than at non-state groups and at traditional sources of military power rather than at some seemingly innocuous area that can nevertheless be employed with malice. For example, such realms as genetic engineering may elude our attention, and such unfamiliar combinations of disciplines as biotechnology, altering human behavior, or even recoding DNA cannot be understood within the logic currently used to search for and assess peer competitors.

Goliath was scanning the horizon for Goliath and erred when he did not see a peer in young David. Might it be that by 2015 or 2020 there will be a different "gold standard" for strength or military power? Might it be that *any* nation or group having the ability to prevent the United States from meeting its objectives, or to meet its own objectives in spite of U.S. opposition, will become a "peer"? Could there be a single new technology or a handful of revolutionary, high-leverage approaches that the U.S. armed forces (increasingly separated as they are from nonmilitary society) will miss because they do not kill, crush, or otherwise render things dysfunctional? This would be a problem. As revolutionary as RMA advocates believe it to be, it may not be revolutionary enough to consider that the very measures of power may be shifting. Higher speed, greater

stealth, finer precision, and less (or more) lethality may not be the only changes emerging; the possibility of revolutionary changes arising in unexpected quarters with dramatic effects must not be precluded. RMA thinkers in the United States must also be able to imagine these contingencies.

The U.S. armed forces are structured for specific purposes and exist within the framework of the American democracy. During the Cold War, they had few doubts as to what those purposes were. However, what ends the armed forces serve today and will tomorrow is being debated. While the nation may tinker with the forces or their internal structures—moving, say, from the current federated force structure to a more integrated one—it is most unlikely that the United States will alter the structure of American democracy. Thus, the third problem with the notion of a peer is that the United States is difficult to compare with any other system. In the United States, Congress raises and supports the armed forces and declares war, but the president is the commander in chief; it is a wonderful system, but it may not thoughtfully be described as a rapidly responding one. It was not the intention of the nation's founders that it be so, and the nation has remained faithful to the founders' intent. The decision to resist Iraq with force of arms was not made quickly. Deliberations centering on how the U.S. should employ its armed forces against nations move slowly and are not isolated from partisan politics.

If in the future another nation, coalition, or group is able to decide and act more quickly than the United States, the U.S. could be denied the advantages that even an "almost-peer" possesses in warfare. The United States can and undoubtedly will, RMA or no RMA, fill its quiver with technologically superior arrows, but if it does not have the will to employ those arrows quickly and decisively it may find itself less effective in conflict than its opponents. When authentic peers are about to fight, the faster to act may paralyze the slower. Overall system speed is important.

For all these reasons, therefore, the notion of what really constitutes a peer bears closer scrutiny than it has received to date.

Is There a "Revolution" or Not?

The Office of Net Assessment defines the revolution in military affairs as "a major change in the nature of warfare brought about by the innovative application of new technologies which, combined with dramatic changes in military doctrine and operational and organizational concepts, fundamentally alter the character and conduct of military operations."[5] But is there a revolution? The Defense Intelligence Agency asserts, in its unpublished study "The Global Tides of 2014," that there will be no changes to the nature or character of military operations brought about by revolutionary technology.[6] The Chief of Staff of

the Army (apparently alone among the service chiefs) seems to think that there will be a revolution, yet others in the Army assert that while the revolution may change the conduct of warfare, it will not alter the nature or character of warfare.[7]

While there certainly may be a "military technical revolution" underway, it is doubtful that there is or will be a revolution in the "military affairs" of the United States. What are "affairs," anyway? The dictionary definition hints at the vagueness and lack of specificity of things described as "affairs." In the context of the current RMA discussion, the word seems to have been selected as a catch-all term, because nothing meaning precisely "more than just military technology" came easily to hand. "Affairs" is too broad to communicate much meaning; "military affairs," whatever they are, dare not intrude in American politics, a key element in how the U.S. fights and how it prepares to.[8]

If "affairs" is a meaningless word, "revolution" may be an overly dramatic one. For centuries, slow, evolutionary, and accretionary changes have characterized warfare. What in hindsight we call revolutionary changes—save for nuclear weapons—have been only small innovations fortuitously combined and employed. For all the time and resources humankind has spent looking for better ways to crush, pierce, burn, or infect humankind more precisely, more quickly, and from farther away, it may be that we have discovered nothing truly revolutionary—except, again, nuclear weapons. If used in warfare, however, nuclear weapons cure fewer ills than they cause. Even information operations and other nonlethal devices may be little more than a return to Sun Tzu's vision that "to subdue an enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."[9] Will these cause a revolution? The Defense Intelligence Agency's assessment, supported by the United States Air Force and the United States Navy at least, seems to suggest that there will not be a revolution.

What we are left with, then, is that there may or may not be a revolution on the horizon and that if there is it will produce technology which enables changes in military operations—not military "affairs." Without a better understanding of revolutions and the means necessary to engineer them, the whole RMA may be just so much arm-waving. But consider the possibility that it is *not* just arm-waving; indeed the important element in the RMA is the simple notion that technology, properly assimilated and employed, can increase military power. The idea of a peer only serves to remind us that people—states especially—have accumulated a long history of fighting peers, thinking about fighting them, and thinking about preparing for it—all of which tells us how much "stuff" we need to do that. Unfortunately, it may not tell us *what* stuff is needed or how to employ it most effectively.

New Concepts of Operations and Organization

Are the current concepts of operations and organization, general and specific, adequate to capitalize on the technological discoveries that will make

revolutionary improvements in warfare? Probably not. If they were, they would in themselves constitute a genuine revolution: the shackles would necessarily have been broken that are imposed by the current and unpredictable defense appropriation process, the acquisition system, by the existence of separate and competing services and of commanders in chief organized for operations in geographical areas of responsibility. If any one of these factors is left unaltered, the U.S. military remains fettered to its current ways of doing business.

Is it likely these shackles will be broken? No, it is not. An assertion is not a proof, and to provide the proofs that military "affairs" in the U.S. resist change is beyond the scope of this essay. But we may observe that combat power is the product of a system, that the elements constituting a system are interactive, and that the system tends to sustain equilibrium. RMA advocates, for instance, who point to the German concept of *blitzkrieg* must admit that the idea of "lightning war" emerged from a different system than that of the United States. The U.S. may dabble with new organizational forms at the operational level, but it is unlikely to change its system sufficiently to revolutionize its combat power.

Nonetheless, thinking about the possibility of an RMA is useful. Contemplating what the U.S. would require to meet its objectives if opposed by a peer competitor is essential. Striving to ferret out new technologies that could revolutionize warfare is extremely valuable. Searching for more effective organizational forms and employment concepts is obligatory. However, believing that there will actually be an RMA in the United States is probably foolhardy. The U.S. military is as averse to change as it is to risk. A revolution requires behaviors and attitudes that the U.S. system is not capable of summoning forth. That system cherishes evolutionary change, and so evolutionary change is what we should expect to see—except, of course, in our peer competitor.

Notes

1. V.K. Nair, *War in the Gulf: Lessons for the Third World* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991), p. 110. Nair writes, for instance, that "active measures to degrade attacking electronic systems should be cost effective and simple. For example, the most sophisticated system, such as that of the United States, could be totally disrupted by the projection of a suitable virus that would automatically find their [*sic*] way back into the computers on which the systems are dependent. Cheap, simple and effective avenues must be exploited on a priority." The suggestion that unconfinable information technology be used as a form of weapon by developing nations suggests the possibility that other nations will engage in, or will strive to engage in, advanced forms of command and control warfare.

2. Mary FitzGerald, *The Impact of the Military Technical Revolution on Russian Military Affairs*, vol. II (Washington, D.C.: The Hudson Institute, 1993). FitzGerald considers the effects of a United States RMA on an adversary.

3. Andrew Marshall's opening remarks to the players and spectators at Revolution in Military Affairs Space War Game Number One, "The Langrangian Heights," Washington, D.C., 18 July 1994.

4. Jeffrey McKitterick, et al., "The Revolution in Military Affairs," Science Applications International Corporation, proprietary draft booklet, July 1994, pp. 14–6

5. Ibid., p. 1.

6. U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), "The Global Tides of 2014," March 1994, p. 1. In the only "footnote" lies the Department of the Army's formal dissent from the assessment that

there will not be, or could not be, a revolution in military affairs. The Navy and Air Force at least tacitly agreed with the DIA position that there would be no revolution.

7. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., preface to Gordon R. Sullivan and James M. Dubik, *War in the Information Age* (Carlisle Barracks, Penna.: Strategic Studies Institute, 1994), p. iv. Tilford asserts that "Clausewitz is still relevant to the study of war because while the conduct of war will change, the nature of war will be the same."

8. Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest*, Spring 1994, pp. 3–17; and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book One, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 79.

9. USAF Air Intelligence Agency, *Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C.: October 1993). The Air Force Information Warfare Center was created on 1 October 1993; according to the Plan, its "primary role is to channel all electronic battlefield information toward *gaining information dominance* over any adversary" (emphasis added). See also Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Publication 3-13, *Joint Command and Control Warfare (C2W) Operations*, first draft 15 January 1994, second draft 1 September 1994. The drafts of this doctrinal publication were preceded by others: Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Memorandum of Policy (MOP) 30, *Command and Control Warfare*, 8 March 1993; JCS Publication 3-53, *Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations*, 30 July 1993; and JCS Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, 9 September 1993. See also "Information Dominance Edges toward New Conflict Frontier," *Signal*, August 1994, pp. 37–40; John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "Cyberwar Is Coming!", *Comparative Strategy*, April-June 1993, pp. 141–65; George Stein, "Information Warfare," *Airpower Journal*, Spring 1995; and Scott Shane, *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994). For nonlethal weapons, see Mark Tapscott and Kay Atwal, "New Weapons That Win without Killing on DoD's Horizon," *Defense Electronics*, February 1993, pp. 41–6; David A. Fulghum, "ALCMs Given Nonlethal Role," *Aviation Week & Space Technology* [hereafter *AWST*], 22 February 1993, pp. 20–2; "Nonlethal Weapons Give Peacekeepers Flexibility," *AWST*, 7 December 1992, pp. 50–1; "Army Prepares for Non-Lethal Combat,"*AWST*, 24 May 1993, pp. 62–3; and Art Pine, "Not So Deadly Weapons," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 December 1993, p. 4. There are many others.

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Eleventh Siena College Conference on World War II

The eleventh annual Siena College multidisciplinary conference on World War II will be held at the college 30–31 May 1996. The theme will be "A Dual Perspective" on the years 1936 and 1946. Papers are especially solicited on (for 1946) displaced persons, war crimes trials, literary and cinematic studies of the war, veterans affairs, the G.I. Bill, economic reconversion; and for 1936, on the rise of fascism, Japan and China, Italy and Ethiopia, the League of Nations, arms and armament, military doctrine, the Spanish Civil War, pacifism, and the impact of World War I. Replies and inquiries to Prof. Thomas O. Kelly II, Dept. of History, Siena College, 515 Loudon Rd., Loudonville, N.Y., 12211-1462, telephone (518) 783-2595, fax (518) 783-4293, e-mail kelly@siena.edu.