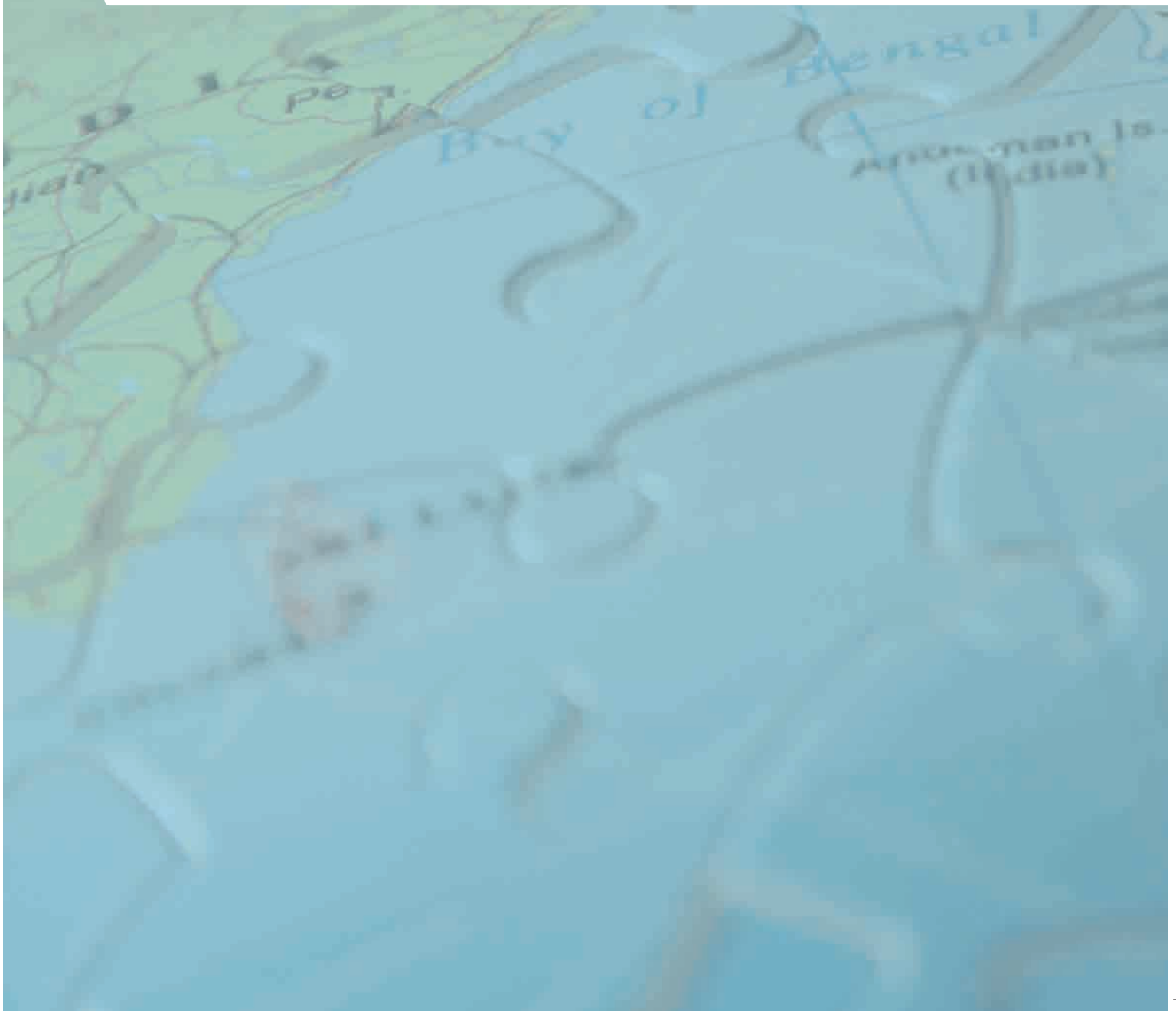


Chapter 12

The changing character of war

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Reader's Guide

War has been one of the key institutions of the practice of international relations, and has always been a central focus of the study of international relations. In the post-cold war period many observers have suggested that the nature of war is undergoing fundamental changes, or even that in some parts of the world at least, it has become obsolete. With the advance of economic interdependence through globalization, and the spread of democracy, some groups of states seem to have formed security communities where war between them is no longer a possibility.

Elsewhere, however, war has continued to exist, and to take a number of different forms. For some countries, such as the United States, the use of advanced technology to achieve dramatic victories against conventional armies has led to suggestions that a **revolution in military affairs** is under way. Other parts of the world, however, have been characterized by warfare in which non-state actors have been prominent, the military technology employed has been relatively unsophisticated, and atrocities have been commonplace. Such new wars, it is argued by many, are a direct result of the process of globalization.

Introduction

The British strategic thinker Basil Liddell Hart once wrote that ‘if you want peace, understand war’, while the revolutionary Marxist Leon Trotsky declared confidently that ‘you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you’. This advice remains appropriate in the contemporary world. Around 14,400 wars have occurred throughout recorded history, claiming the lives of some 3.5 billion people. Since 1815 there have been between 224 and 559 wars, depending on the definition of war that is used (Mingst 2004: 198). War has not disappeared as a form of social behaviour and shows no signs of doing so, though it is not necessarily an inevitable form of human behaviour and seems to have become effectively extinct in some parts of the world. Since the end of the **cold war**, the annual number of wars, the number of battle deaths, and the number of war-related massacres have all declined sharply compared with the cold war period. Between 1989 and 1992 nearly one hundred wars came to an end, and in terms of battle deaths, the 1990s were the least violent decade since the end of the Second World War (University of British Columbia, Human Security Center 2005: 17). Despite the overall decline in the incidence of war, however, in many regions it is very much present and is displaying some novel features in comparison to those typical of the cold war period.

Box 12.1 The obsolescence of war

A striking feature of war in some parts of the contemporary world is its absence. The North Atlantic region has been described as a **security community**, a group of states for whom war has disappeared as a means of resolving disputes between each other, though they may continue to use war against opponents outside the security community. One common characteristic of these states is that they are all democracies, and it has been suggested that while democracies will go to war, they are not prepared to fight against a fellow democracy. The assumption of this **democratic peace** argument is that where groups of democracies inhabit a region, war will become extinct in that region, and that as democracy spreads throughout the world, war will decline. However, there is a danger that some wars will occur as democracies attempt to overthrow non-democratic regimes to spread the ‘democratic zone of peace’, so that wars will be fought in the name of peace. In addition, for some observers, even non-democracies will be averse to fighting wars when both they and their great power rivals are armed with nuclear weapons.

In the contemporary world there are powerful pressures producing changes to national economies and societies. Some of these can be seen to reflect the impact of **globalization**, others are the result of the broader effects of **post-modernity**, but their cumulative effect has been to bring about significant political and social changes, which have in turn been reflected in changed perceptions of the nature of threats coming from the external environment. This in turn has influenced beliefs regarding the utility of force as an instrument of policy, and the forms and functions of war. In the past two centuries, the ‘modern’ era of history, war has traditionally been seen as a brutal form of politics, a way in which **states** sought to resolve certain issues in international relations, and an outcome of their willingness to amass military power for defence and deterrence, and to project it in support of their foreign and defence policies. The two ‘world wars’ of the twentieth century typified this approach to the instrumentality of war. In the post-cold war period, the kinds of threats that have driven the accumulation of military power in the developed world have not taken the form of traditional state-to-state military rivalry, but have been a response to rather more amorphous and less predictable threats such as **terrorism**, **insurgencies**, and internal crises in other countries that seem to demand the projection of military force to resolve them.

For some observers, the current era has seen a major evolution in the structure of international relations, with the dramatic political changes that followed the end of the cold war and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Changes in the **international system** on this scale are not common in history, and when they occur can be expected to have a major impact on the mechanisms by which the international system is governed. At the same time, and partly as a result of the evolution of the international environment, changes are also occurring in the domestic attributes of many of the states that make up the international system. There has, for example, been a notable increase in the number of democratic political systems, but in the same period many other states have disintegrated into civil wars and insurgency. The identity of the key players in international relations has also changed since the end of the cold war. The world has become temporarily subject to the hegemonic control of a single state,

the United States, so that the processes of globalization and **Americanization**, have become synonymous for many, who have responded with fierce cultural and political resistance.

The influential nineteenth-century strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that the fundamental nature of war is immutable. The characteristics or **form** of war typical in any particular age might change, but the essential **nature** of war could not. For Clausewitz, the novel characteristics of war were not the result of new inventions, but of new ideas and social conditions. It would not be surprising, therefore, to see that the processes of post-modernity and globalization, of an international system characterized by constant and even accelerating change, should be marked by changes in the forms of warfare being waged in the system. Evolution in the characteristic form of warfare might be expected from the changing perceptions of threat in the post-cold war era. If, indeed, wars are taking distinctive and perhaps novel forms in the post-cold war world, this is a reflection of broader changes in the international system, rather than war being the primary agent of those changes. Wars are a socially constructed form of large-scale human group behaviour, and must be understood within the wider contexts of their political and cultural environments.

In an era of unprecedented communications technologies, new fields of warfare have emerged. **Non-state actors** in the post-cold war period have moved to transform both cyberspace and the global media into crucial battlegrounds, alongside terrestrial military and terrorist operations, so that war is now fought on a number of dif-

ferent planes of reality simultaneously, and reality itself is subverted in the cause of war through sophisticated strategies of informational and electronic deception. The battlefield of the past has now become the **battlespace**, and it is three-dimensional in the sense of including air-power and the use of space **satellites**, and in some senses is non-dimensional in that it also embraces cyberspace and communications wavebands.

At the same time, the tangible capacity for war-making has also been developing. Military technology with enormous destructive capacity is becoming available to more and more states. This is important not just because the technology to produce and deliver **weapons of mass destruction** is spreading, but because highly advanced 'conventional' military technology is becoming more widely available. One of the effects of the end of the cold war was that there was a massive process of disarmament by the former cold war enemies. This surplus weaponry flooded on to the global arms market, much of it highly advanced equipment being sold off comparatively cheaply.

Key Points

- War has been a central feature of human history.
- Since the end of the cold war both the frequency and lethality of war has shown a sharp decline.
- War between the great powers in particular has become much more unlikely than in previous eras.
- Changes in the international system may be changing the character of war.

Definitions

Because war is a fluid concept, it has generated a large number of sometimes contradictory definitions. Many of these are so general as to not be particularly helpful in understanding it. Some have seen it as any form of armed and organized physical conflict, while for Quincy Wright war was 'a violent contact of distinct but similar entities' (quoted in Freedman 1994: 69). General descriptions of this sort are not particularly helpful in understanding contemporary war, the first because it is insufficiently specific and could equally describe gang warfare, the latter because it makes an unreasonable assumption about

the nature of the combatants. Violent crime is an important aspect of global human insecurity, killing more people each year than war and terrorism combined, but it is not war. More useful is Clausewitz's statement that it is 'an act of force intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will', and 'a continuation of political intercourse with a mixture of other means'. In Clausewitz's work, the meaning is clarified in context by the assumption that the reader understands that he is talking about large-scale military confrontations between the representatives of states. *Webster's Dictionary* reinforces this position by

defining war as 'a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations.' Unfortunately, in the current era, that is not something that can simply be assumed, because non-state groups have become prominent actors in contemporary warfare. A more useful definition in this sense is Hedley Bull's. It is 'organised violence carried on by political units against each other' (Bull 1977: 184). Bull goes on to insist that violence is not war unless it is both carried out by a political unit, and directed against another political unit.

It is possible to argue that war is simply any form of armed violence between groups of people, but it is valid to ask what sorts of goals are involved and how much violence is required for an armed clash to be called a 'war'. Is a clash between two street gangs in which several people are killed, really the same phenomenon as a military conflict between two or more states in which millions

are deliberately killed? Choosing a particular threshold can also seem arbitrary, as with the influential Singer and Small definition which requires a war to involve at least 1,000 battle deaths per year. By this token the **1982 Falklands/Malvinas War** between Argentina and the United Kingdom would barely qualify, though few would argue that that conflict was not a war. Some sense of scale is clearly needed, but perhaps Quincy Wright's less specific formulation is still reasonable, that war is 'a conflict among political groups, especially sovereign states, carried on by armed forces of considerable magnitude, for a considerable period of time' (Wright 1968: 453).

Key Points

- War in the contemporary era is not always easy to define.
- War is a brutal form of politics.

The nature of war

If, as some have argued, war has indeed taken on new forms in the post-cold war era, or perhaps has even seen an evolution in its essential nature, then it is necessary to compare these recent examples with traditional forms and interpretations of war in order to determine what, if anything, has changed and what are simply contemporary manifestations of an ancient phenomenon. This is not as straightforward an exercise as might at first appear. War is a form of organized human violence, and when conducted by states using significant quantities of personnel, materiel, and firepower, it is comparatively easy to recognize. But at the lower end of the spectrum of violence it begins to overlap with other forms of conflict, such as **terrorism**,

insurgency, and criminal violence, and clear distinctions and definitions become harder to maintain. War always involves violence, but not all violence can be described as war. Violence is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for a conflict to be defined as a war.

Wars are fought for reasons. The Western understanding of war, following Clausewitz, sees it as instrumental, a means to an end. Wars in this perspective are not random violence; they reflect a conscious decision to engage in them for a rational political purpose. They are rationalized by those who initiate them by appeal to belief and value systems.

War is a form of social and political behaviour. This was one of the central arguments of Clausewitz. It remains true at the start of the twenty-first century, but only if we operate with a broad and flexible understanding of what constitutes politics. As our understanding of politics, and the forms it can take, has evolved in the post-modern era, we should expect the same to be true of the character of war since that is itself a form of politics.

The political nature of war has been evolving in recent decades under the impact of globalization, which has increasingly eroded the economic, political, and cultural **autonomy** of the state. Contemporary warfare takes place in a local context, but it is also played out in wider fields

Box 12.2 Thucydides on war

In some ways wars have changed little over the ages. 2,500 years ago the Greek historian Thucydides observed:

'War is an evil, is something we all know, and it would be pointless to go on cataloguing all the disadvantages involved in it. No one is forced into war by ignorance, nor, if he thinks he will gain by it, is he kept out of it by fear. The fact is that one side thinks that the profits to be won outweigh the risks to be incurred, and the other side is ready to face danger rather than accept an immediate loss.'

(Thucydides [1954] 1972: Book IV)

and influenced by **non-governmental organizations**, **intergovernmental organizations**, regional and global media, and users of the Internet. In many ways, contemporary wars are partly fought on television, and the **media** therefore have a powerful role in providing a framework of understanding for the viewers of the conflict. One effect of the constant coverage of international violence by the global media may be to gradually weaken the legal, moral, and political constraints against the use of force by making it appear routine, and thereby reverse the moral questioning of war that was a feature of the second half of the twentieth century. The advent of such 'war fatigue' might make recourse to war appear a normal feature of international relations.

War is an extremely paradoxical activity. Human beings have the capacity for intense violence, but are also capable of complex **cooperation**. In one sense, war is very clearly 'made up of acts of enmity rather than cooperation, of imposition rather than negotiation, of summary killing rather than due process, of destruction rather than creation' (Francis 2004: 42). Or as Robert A. Heinlein put it (in Porter 1994: xiii), 'the army is a permanent organisation for the destruction of life and property'. Yet in another sense, war is clearly a profoundly social activity, an example of humanity's 'enormous capacity for friendly co-operation' (Bigelow 1969: 3). Michel Foucault called the institution of war 'the military dimension of society' (1996: 415). This is because the conduct of war requires a society to cooperate in performing complex tasks on a large scale. Societies can fight wars because they are able to cooperate at the internal level. On the other hand, they feel themselves compelled to fight other societies because they often find it difficult to cooperate at the external level. The very act of fighting outsiders may make it easier to cooperate internally. Unless a war is highly unpopular domestically, there is a sense in which a state at war is also a state at peace.

War is both highly organized and a highly *organizing* phenomenon. In the words of the sociologist Charles Tilly (1975: 42), 'war made the state, and the state made war'. The machinery of the state derived historically from the organizational demands of warfare, and modern states owe their origins and development to a large degree to the effects of earlier wars. The modern state was born during the renaissance, a time of unprecedented violence. The intensity of armed conflict during this period triggered an early revolution in military affairs, in which the

size of armies, their associated firepower, and the costs of warfare all increased dramatically. The need to survive in such a competitive and violent era favoured larger, more centralized political units that were able to control extensive tracts of territory, master complex military technologies, and mobilize the immense human resources required for success in battle.

The high point of this evolution was the Thirty Years War, which racked Europe from 1618 to 1648. By the end of that conflict **Europe** was entering a new phase of historical development, **modernity**, which would come to dominate international history for the next three hundred years before giving way to **post-modernity** in the late twentieth century. Modernity had many features and, as Clausewitz noted, each age has its own dominant characteristic form of war, which reflects the era in which it occurs, though there will also be other forms reflecting cultural and geographical realities. There was therefore a form of warfare that was typical of modernity.

The period of modernity was characterized by the rise of **nationalism** and increasingly centralized and bureaucratic states with rapidly rising populations, by the scientific and industrial revolutions, and by the growth of secular ideologies with messianic visions and an intolerance of opposing **metanarratives** and, broad overarching ideologies, such as Marxism. The warfare that was characteristic of the period reflected the forces of modernity, and its enormous transformational effects. States mobilized mass armies through centralized bureaucracies and the power of nationalism. They armed and equipped them with the products of industrialization and expected their populations to sacrifice themselves for the state, and to show no mercy to the opposing population that was being called upon to make the same self-sacrifice for its own motherland. The result was industrialized warfare on a massive scale, in which civilian populations as much as enemy soldiers were seen as legitimate targets, a process that culminated in the **nuclear** attacks on Japan in 1945.

At the same time, another feature of warfare during the modern period was that, at least in the conflicts between the developed states, it was governed by **rules**. An entire body of international law was developed to constrain and regulate the use of violence in wartime. Quincy Wright argues that war always involves a legal relationship which distinguishes it from mere fighting, even organized fighting. It is 'a condition of time in which special rules permitting and regulating violence between governments

prevails' (Wright 1965: 2). This is an important feature distinguishing war from other forms of violence. It is a particular *kind* of relationship between politically motivated groups. Wright insists, therefore, that war cannot be said to be occurring when the antagonists do not recognize each other as participants, but see the opponent simply as an obstacle to the achievement of certain goals, as a geographical barrier might be.

The intensity of war often unleashes or accelerates numerous forces for change, transforming industry, society, and government in ways that are fundamental and permanent. By weakening or destroying traditional structures, or by compelling internal reforms, war may create conditions conducive to social change and political modernization. The requirement to defeat the opponent's forces may lead to advances in **technologies** such as transportation, food manufacture and storage, communications, and so on, that have applications well beyond the military sphere. It was in this sense that, for the ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus, war was 'the father of all and the king of all'.

Historically, during the period of modernity, the conduct of war compelled governments to centralize power in order to mobilize the resources necessary for victory. Bureaucracies and tax burdens increased in size to support the war effort. But the strains involved in preparing for and engaging in war can also lead to the weakening or **disintegration** of the state, as happened with South Vietnam in 1975 and to some extent the Soviet Union in 1991.

Nevertheless, war, both in terms of preparation for it and its actual conduct, may be a powerful catalyst for change, but technological or even political modernization does not necessarily imply moral progress. Evolution in war, including its contemporary forms, may involve change that is morally problematic, as indeed is the case with the forces of globalization more generally. War is a profound **agent of historical change**, but it is not the fundamental driving force of history. There are a wide variety of factors that can contribute to the outbreak of war, such as nationalism, class conflict, human nature, and so on. These are the main drivers of change rather than war itself. War is not something imposed by an outside force.

The willingness to go to war comes from within states and societies.

For many analysts of war, war's **nature**, as the use of organized violence in pursuit of political goals, always remains the same, and is unaltered even by radical changes in political forms, in the motives leading to conflict, or technological advances (Gray 1999b: 169). For Colin Gray, if war's nature were to change, it would become something else, so he, like Clausewitz, insists that all wars have the same political nature, one fundamentally based on the idea that war is a **political act**, the use of force for conscious political ends.

For Clausewitz and Gray, there is an important distinction between the **nature** and the **character** of war. The former refers to the constant, universal, and inherent qualities that ultimately define war throughout the ages, such as violence, chance, and uncertainty. The latter relates to the impermanent, circumstantial, and adaptive features that war develops and that account for the different periods of warfare throughout history, each displaying attributes determined by socio-political and historical preconditions, while also influencing those conditions. Clausewitz also distinguished between the **objective** and **subjective** nature of war, the former comprising of the elements common to all wars and the latter consisting of those features that make each war unique.

A number of questions follow from this survey of war in relation to its contemporary and future forms. Does the current era have a dominant form of war and if so what is it? In what ways are the processes associated with globalization changing contemporary warfare? In what ways are the characteristics of post-modernity being reflected in contemporary modes of warfare? Does the prevailing ethical basis of warfare reflect early or late modernity, or is it recognizably new?

Key Points

- Contemporary warfare is being influenced by globalization.
- War requires highly organized societies.
- War can be a powerful catalyst for change.
- The nature of war remains constant, but its form reflects the particular era and environment in which it occurs.

The revolution in military affairs

Although many observers have suggested that the character of war is changing significantly, their reasons for coming to this conclusion are often quite different. One school of thought focuses on the so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA). The concept of the revolution in military affairs became popular after the dramatic American victory in the **1991 Gulf War**. The manner in which superior technology and doctrine appeared to give the United States an almost effortless victory suggested that future conflicts would be decided by the possession of technological advantages such as advanced guided weapons and space satellites. However, the subsequent popularity of the RMA concept has not produced a clear consensus on what exactly the RMA is or what its implications might be. Although analysts agree that RMAs involve a radical change or some form of discontinuity in the history of warfare, there is disagreement regarding how and when these changes or discontinuities take place, or what causes them.

The former US Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, defined an RMA as 'when a nation's military seizes an opportunity to transform its strategy, military doctrine, training, education, organization, equipment, operations and tactics to achieve decisive military results in fundamentally new ways' (quoted in Gray 2002: 1).

RMA proponents argue that recent breakthroughs and likely future advances in military technology mean that military operations will be conducted with such speed, precision, and selective destruction that the whole character of war will change and this will profoundly affect the way that military/political affairs are conducted in the next few decades. Most of the RMA literature focuses on the implications of developments in **technology**. In the conflicts in Kuwait (1991), Serbia (1999), and Iraq (2003), American technology proved vastly superior to that of its opponent. In particular, computing and space technology allowed the US forces to acquire information about the enemy to a degree never before seen in warfare, and allowed precision targeting of weapon systems. Advanced communications allowed generals to exercise

detailed and instant control over the developing battle and to respond quickly to developments. The speed, power, and accuracy of the weapons employed allowed them to be carefully targeted so as to destroy vital objectives without inflicting unnecessary casualties on civilian populations, though absolute precision and reliability proved impossible to achieve. Opponents lacking counters to these technologies found themselves helpless in the face of overwhelming American superiority. However, the RMA emphasis on military technology and **tactics**, while understandable, risks producing an oversimplistic picture of what is an extremely complex phenomenon, in which non-technological factors can play a crucial part in the outcome.

In addition, most of the literature and debate on the RMA has been American and has tended to take for granted the dominance conferred by technological superiority. The current RMA is based upon a particularly Western concept of war fighting and may well only be of utility in certain well-defined situations. There has been far less discussion of how the opponents of a technologically advanced state might use unconventional or **asymmetric** responses to fight effectively against a more technologically sophisticated opponent. Asymmetry works both ways. Asymmetric conflicts since 1990 have been fought by US-led 'coalitions of the willing' against Iraq (1991 and 2003), Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. Because of the extreme superiority in combat power of the coalition, the battle phases of these asymmetric conflicts have been fairly brief and have produced relatively few combat deaths compared to the cold war period. However, in the post-conventional insurgency phases in Iraq and Afghanistan, the asymmetry has produced guerrilla-style conflict against the technological superiority of the coalition forces.

A skilful opponent will always seek to capitalize on its strengths while minimizing those of the enemy. In any war, the outcome will be largely determined by the relative power of the combatants, which will influence the methods they use to fight the war. Some combatants may not even be trying to defeat the enemy armed forces as such,

Case Study The Iraq War, 2003–7



On 20 March 2003, US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq with the objective of locating and disarming suspected Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The coalition forces conducted a swift and overwhelmingly successful campaign, leading to the capture of Baghdad and the collapse and surrender of the Iraqi armed forces. President George W. Bush declared the official end of major combat operations on the 2 May 2003. While casualties during this conventional phase of fighting were historically low for a major modern war, the fighting quickly evolved into an insurgency in which guerrilla and terrorist attacks on the coalition forces and Iraqi civilian population were the norm. By the spring of 2007 the coalition had suffered around 3,500 deaths and 24,000 wounded. Estimates of total Iraqi war-related deaths ranged from conservative estimates of 60,000 to a maximum figure of 650,000.

The Iraq War illustrates a number of the themes that have been prominent in discussions of the possible future development of war. The rapid coalition victory saw the Iraqi armed forces shattered by the technological superiority of the advanced weapons and information systems of the United States forces, suggesting that a revolution in military affairs was underway.

The doctrine employed by the American forces was also vital. The allied success was the result not just of technological superiority, but also of a superior manoeuvre-oriented operational doctrine. The swift and comparatively bloodless victory for the American-led forces reinforced the view that in the post-cold war strategic environment, there were few inhibitions on the use of force by the United States. With the trauma of Vietnam laid to rest, war had become swift, decisive, and affordable for the United States, and the end of the cold war removed the threat of regional conflict escalating into a nuclear conflict with another superpower.

A central feature of the conflict was the American dominance of information warfare, both in the military sense of the ability to use satellite systems for reconnaissance, communications, and weapons targeting, and in the post-modern sense of the manipulation of the civilian communications and global media images of the war to produce an international understanding of the fighting that reflected what the US administration wished the watching world to perceive.

However, the conflict did not end with the surrender of the regular Iraqi forces, confirming, in turn, some of the arguments of the proponents of the 'post-modern' and 'new' wars theses. The ability to operate using complex informal military networks allowed the insurgency to conduct effective asymmetric warfare, despite the overwhelming superiority of the US military technology. In addition, the insurgents were able to use the global media to manipulate perceptions of the character and implications of the strategy of terrorism and destabilization. The techniques used by the insurgents were brutal, ruthless and targeted against the civilian population, in a campaign supported by outside forces and finance, and sustained by an overtly identity-based campaign, again reflecting features of the post-modern and 'new wars' conceptions.

but simply to manipulate violence in order to demoralize the opponent and lead them to make concessions. RMA authors also tend to work within a Westphalian state-centric model that overemphasizes the traditional state-to-state confrontation, and may not be particularly relevant in the intra-state insurgency warfare that has been prevalent since 1991.

The conflict in Iraq from 2003 onwards (see Case Study), raised major questions about the pattern of warfare likely after the RMA. Who are the most likely future opponents of states capable of adopting the RMA technologies? Does the RMA influence all forms of war or simply large-scale, conventional inter-state war? What about urban warfare or nuclear weapons? What is the likely response of opponents such as terrorists, insurgents, and armed forces unable to acquire RMA technology themselves?

Box 12.3 Asymmetric warfare

Asymmetric warfare exists 'when two combatants are so different in their characters, and in their areas of comparative strategic advantage, that a confrontation between them comes to turn on one side's ability to force the other side to fight on their own terms. . . . The strategies that the weak have consistently adopted against the strong often involve targeting the enemy's domestic political base as much as his forward military capabilities. Essentially such strategies involve inflicting pain over time without suffering unbearable retaliation in return.'

(L. Freedman (1998), 'Britain and the Revolution in Military Affairs', *Defense Analysis*, 14: 58)

The danger in the emphasis on technological aspects that is central to the RMA literature is that it can lead to an underestimation of the political and social dimensions of

war. The outcomes of wars are influenced by a wide range of factors in addition to technology, and in most parts of the contemporary world, the current and potential wars are not being influenced by the RMA technology which is possessed by only a handful of states. However, some conflicts are being influenced by elements of the RMA, such as specific technologies. The **conventional warfare** between India and Pakistan in the late 1990s involved highly advanced weapon systems and the use by India of satellite technology.

The increasing importance of information in warfare may be a validation of Clausewitz's argument that the form of war reflects the culture and technologies of the age. Alvin and Heidi Toffler (1993) argue that the way a society makes war reflects the way it makes wealth. Starting with the very invention of agriculture, every revolution in the system for creating wealth triggered a corresponding revolution in the system for making war. Therefore, to the extent that a new 'information economy' is emerging, this will bring with it a parallel revolution in warfare. In the Information Age, information is the central resource for wealth production and power, and the RMA is the inevitable outgrowth of basic changes in the form of economic production.

The proposition that military revolutions are the product of deep social, political, and economic changes connects organized political violence and society. What exactly that relationship is, however, is still debatable, with some seeing the RMA as the result of dramatic changes in technology and society generally since the 1980s, and others seeing the technological advances as the result of the state's need to maximize its military capabilities in the late cold war and post-cold war periods. Cause and effect are not easy to distinguish.

A major part of the appeal of the RMA concept in Western societies is that it suggests the possibility of using so-called **smart weapons** to achieve a quick, clean victory in war. The RMA technologies allow the battlefield to be controlled in a way that was not possible in previous eras,

Box 12.4 The revolution in military affairs: a cautionary note

Benjamin Lambeth warns that, "a revolution in military affairs" cannot be spawned merely by platforms, munitions, information systems and hardware equities. These necessary but insufficient preconditions must be supported by an important set of intangibles that have determined war results since the days of Alexander the Great—namely, clarity of goals backed by proficiency and boldness in execution. In the so-called "RMA debate", too much attention has been devoted to technological magic at the expense of the organisational, conceptual and other human inputs needed to convert the magic from lifeless hardware into combat outcomes.'

(B. S. Lambeth (1997), 'The Technology Revolution in Air Warfare', *Survival*, 39: 75)

so that the tempo of battle can be orchestrated and wars won without massive loss of life. To the extent that such an RMA is occurring, for the foreseeable future it is very much an American-led RMA, and reflects American understandings of how and why military affairs are conducted. The American approach has been to attempt to win wars quickly by applying overwhelming force, and to use the industrial and technological strength of the United States to minimize casualties. Yet the reality of war is that it is never clean or bloodless. Even in the age of smart weapons and space technology, war remains a brutal and bloody undertaking where political objectives are achieved through the infliction of human suffering on a major scale.

Key Points

- Dramatic technological advances mean that a revolution in military affairs may be underway.
- Few states currently possess such technology.
- The 'information age' is increasingly reflected in 'information warfare'.
- Opponents with little or no access to RMA technology are likely to use 'asymmetric warfare' to fight the war on their own terms.

Post-modern war

If war is a reflection of its age, as Clausewitz argued, then contemporary warfare should reflect key aspects of post-modernity. A number of authors have suggested that this is in fact the case, that the world is undergoing a dramatic

evolution into post-modernity and that this will inevitably lead to a radical redefinition of war itself.

Global society is moving from the modern to the post-modern age. This is a process that has been underway

for several decades and is the result of a wide range of economic, cultural, social, and political changes that are altering the meaning of the 'state' and the **nation**. It has been marked by a shift from production to information as a core output of advanced economies. As this happens, it will affect the character of war. In some parts of the world the state is deliberately transferring functions, including military functions, to private authorities and businesses. In other areas, these functions are being seized from the state by other political actors. At the same time, globalization has weakened the 'national' forms of **identity** that have dominated international relations in the past two centuries, and reinvigorated earlier forms of political identity and organization, such as religious, ethnic, and clan loyalties.

The greatly increased role of the media is one feature of this evolution. The media have become far more important in terms of shaping or even constructing understandings of particular wars. Media warfare has made war more transparent. Each side now goes to great lengths to manipulate media images of the conflict, and journalists have effectively been transformed from observers into active participants, facing most of the same dangers as the soldiers and helping to shape the course of the war through their reporting. This reflects a broader change. Just as 'modernity' and its wars were based on the mode of production, so 'post-modernity' and its wars reflect the mode of information.

Another post-modern development has been the increasing 'outsourcing' of war. Over the past decade more and more states have contracted out key military services to private corporations. Privatized Military Firms (PMFs) sell a wide range of war-related services to states, overwhelmingly in the logistical and security roles rather than direct combat. Hundreds of PMFs have operated in more than 50 countries since the end of the cold war. The growth of PMFs reflect a broader global trend towards the privatization of public assets. Through the provision of training and equipment, PMFs have influenced the outcomes of several recent wars, including those in Angola, Croatia, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone. PMFs played a significant role in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

For some authors in the late 1990s, the possibility of casualty-free or **virtual war** seemed to be becoming a possibility. Democracies in recent decades have shown a reluctance to tolerate heavy military casualties, which can undermine public support for the war-effort. From

the **NATO** perspective, the 1999 war against Yugoslavia over Kosovo appeared to be just such a conflict, a 'virtual' war in which the NATO forces attempted to employ their technological superiority in such a way as to reduce the risk of casualties to the absolute minimum. The increasing importance of information warfare and the need to dominate cyberspace and the airwaves also encourages the idea that war might become 'virtual' and lose its traditional connection to the clear and deliberate use of deadly force.

For the Kosovan and Serbian victims of ethnic violence on the ground and the Serbian victims of allied air attacks, the war was anything but 'virtual'. As Freedman points out in relation to the temptations of the RMA, the new technologies do not 'offer the prospect of a virtual war by creating a situation in which only information matters so that there is never any point in fighting about anything other than information. ... War is not a virtual thing, played out on screens, but intensely physical. That is why it tends to violence and destruction' (Freedman 1998: 78). War's very nature involves the use of violence.

Predictions of 'virtual war' seemed particularly utopian in the wake of the carnage in Iraq that followed the American-led invasion and the subsequent insurgency in 2003. There has been a trend in the past fifteen years towards forms of warfare that are notably savage at the smaller-scale level, and where the cumulative death toll has been extremely high. This has been a feature of some of the conflicts in Africa, for example, notably in Rwanda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Edward Luttwak has suggested that the world has entered a new age of post-heroic warfare 'easily started and fought without restraint' (Luttwak 1995: 110). Many other observers have also suggested that the wars since 1990 have been particularly barbaric, that they have been driven by irrationality and that they represent the expression of primordial hatreds that had been suppressed during the cold war and that re-emerged in the 1990s. The result was that wars seemed to be accompanied by an unprecedented level of ferocity or outright brutality.

In one important sense this is not particularly a feature of post-modern, or post-cold war conflicts. Modern war was more brutal and indiscriminate, and produced far greater casualties lists than has post-modern war to date, as the attacks on cities such as London, Hamburg, Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki during the Second World War clearly show. The twentieth century saw the advent of **total war**, which involved the complete

mobilization of the human, economic, and military resources of the state in the pursuit of victory, and which recognized few if any moral restraints in terms of who could be targeted if their destruction would bring victory closer. The effects of the industrial revolution, along with the advent of popular democracy and modern bureaucracy, had combined to 'nationalize' war to involve the whole of society. Raymond Aron (1954: 19) called this **hyperbolic war**, where the growing scale and intensity of war is driven by the pressure of industrial and technological advances.

The brutality and ethnic-cleansing characteristic of many contemporary wars are not only not historically novel, but they are in many ways a variant of the same totalizing mentality that dominated Western war-fighting during the era of modernity. In modern Western interstate war, as Foucault noted, wars 'are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilised for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity; massacres have become vital' (Foucault 1990: 137). Martin Shaw (2003: 23) uses the term 'degenerate wars' to capture the continuity of contemporary wars with the genocidal total wars of the twentieth century.

The conduct of war in some areas has seemed particularly barbaric because the combatants do not conform to the internationally accepted rules of war. But such conflicts may still be adhering to the rules of a local value-system. In the Liberian civil war, for example, animist religious beliefs lay behind many of the rituals involved in the killing. Much of the alleged ' motiveless' violence in recent conflicts has in fact been used to gain military advantage, rather than simply to inflict suffering upon the civilian population gratuitously or for economic gain. Most of the conflicts in the past decade have been fought by poorly trained, lightly armed forces. While often conducted with great brutality, these conflicts kill far fewer people than was true of the major conventional conflicts of the cold war period.

New wars

Mary Kaldor has suggested that a category of **new wars** has emerged since the mid-1980s. The driving force behind these new wars is globalization, 'a contradictory process involving both integration and fragmentation,

Box 12.5 Globalization and war

'The impact of globalisation is visible in many of the new wars. The global presence in these wars can include international reporters, mercenary troops and military advisers, diaspora volunteers as well as a veritable "army" of international agencies ranging from non-governmental organisations (NGO's) like Oxfam, Save the Children, Médecin sans Frontières, Human Rights Watch and the International Red Cross, to international institutions like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Union (EU), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations itself, including peacekeeping troops.'

(Kaldor 1999: 4)

The political nature of war is nevertheless being affected by globalization. Globalization has increasingly eroded the economic, political, and cultural autonomy of the state in recent decades. As complex transnational **networks** develop and increase, and flows of people, knowledge, and money become the pattern, wars have an increasingly global impact. Contemporary wars may be localized, but they invariably involve a wide range of international networks of actors such as non-governmental organizations, the media, foreign military forces, and **diplomats**.

Key Points

- Most recent conflicts have been characterized by the kind of ferocity that was typical of 'modern' war, but overall casualty levels have been much lower.
- The post-modern age has seen warfare take numerous, varied forms.
- 'Virtual war', with few casualties, is an attractive option, but is extremely difficult and probably impossible to achieve in practice.

homogenization and diversification, globalization and localization' (Kaldor 1999: 3). These conflicts are typically based around the disintegration of states and subsequent struggles for control of the state by opposing

groups, who are simultaneously attempting to impose their own definition of the national identity of the state and its population. Just as earlier wars were linked to the emergence and creation of states, the new wars are related to the disintegration and collapse of states, and much of the pressure on such states has come from the effects of globalization on the international system. In the past decade, 95 per cent of armed conflicts have taken place within states rather than between them. The new wars occur in situations where the economy of the state is performing extremely poorly, or even collapsing, so that the tax revenues and power of the state decline dramatically, producing an increase in corruption and criminality. As the state loses control, access to weapons and the ability to resort to violence is increasingly privatized and paramilitary groups proliferate, organized crime grows, and political legitimacy collapses. One of the effects of these developments is that the traditional distinction between the 'soldier' and the 'civilian' become blurred or disappear altogether.

For Kaldor, a significant feature of these conflicts is the combatants' focus on questions of **identity**, which she sees as being a result of the pressures produced by globalization. In the post-modern world there has been a breakdown of traditional cleavages based on class and ideology, and a greater emphasis on identity and culture. To the extent that war is a continuation of politics, therefore, war has become increasingly driven by questions of culture and identity. A major cause of the wars since 1990 has been the demands of various groups for national **self-determination**. Questions of 'identity' in a broader sense have also underpinned recent wars. It can be argued that Islamic fundamentalists are not fighting for control of territory or political power in the traditional Westphalian sense, but in order to defend or expand a particular cultural autonomy against the globalizing pressures of Westernization and secularism.

The relationship between identity and war is also shifting in terms of the **gender** and age of the combatants. The 'feminization' of war has grown as women have come to play increasingly visible and important roles, from auxiliaries in the late modern period, to direct front-line roles in the post-modern period, from uniformed military personnel to female suicide bombers. **Children** have also become more visible as participants rather than non-combatants in war. Helen Brocklehurst has drawn attention to the meaning and implications

of the increasing visibility of children as victims of war at many different levels. Child soldiers can be found on every continent, but have been particularly prevalent in recent African conflicts. In the civil war in Sierra Leone, nearly 70 per cent of the combatants were under the age of 18. Children fight in around three-quarters of today's armed conflicts, and may make up 10 per cent of current armed combatants (Brocklehurst 2007: 373). Nearly one-third of the militaries that use child soldiers include girls in their ranks.

Mark Duffield argues that the non-state dimension of much contemporary warfare is striking and that describing such conflicts as 'internal' or 'intra-state' is misleading since the combatants often are not attempting to impose a political authority in the traditional sense. The use of **statist** terminology is therefore too limiting, leading him to propose the alternative terminology of **post-modern conflict** (Duffield 1998: 76), although the use of the term in this way is also rather constraining. Sub-state threats do not trigger the full mobilization of the state's military and other resources in the way that an inter-state threat would. Because they often blur political and military threats, they are more difficult to counter within the traditional state-to-state strategic approach.

The assumption that 'war' is something that takes place between states is based on an acceptance of the 'Westphalian' **state system** as the **norm**. This was the case during the 'modern' period of history, from the mid-eighteenth century till the late twentieth century. This was the period when the 'state system' was most clearly defined, and historically there is a powerful linkage between the nature of the existing 'international' system, and the prevailing mode of warfare. Inter-state warfare in the modern era was therefore typical of that particular historical period. War was an armed conflict between opposing states, fought by uniformed, organized bodies of men. They were regulated by formal acts, including declarations of war, laws of neutrality, and peace treaties. As the state system evolves in response to post-modernity and globalization, typical forms of warfare can be expected to evolve also. Thus it is not surprising that commentators should speak of 'post-Westphalian war'. The sub-state features of many wars are prominent, as they are increasingly fought by militias, paramilitaries, warlord armies, criminal gangs, private security firms, and tribal groupings, so that the Westphalian state's monopoly of violence is increasingly challenged both from outside and

inside. This has been notable in conflicts such as those in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, **Sudan** and **Bosnia**. 'Paramilitaries' include armed police, border guards, internal security forces, riot squads, militias, and privatized armies. They are usually more heavily armed than police forces, but less well equipped than regular soldiers. Because of this they can be quickly raised, equipped, and trained, making them particularly prominent in recent conflicts. The growth of paramilitaries is one of the most notable features of the global conflict scene.

The relationship of terrorism campaigns to war is also important. The **war on terror** can be seen simply as a metaphor for an intense national commitment against Al Qaeda, but it can also be seen as a recognition that a long-duration military-terrorist campaign and the counter-measures taken by the target group are a form of warfare in the sense that Clausewitz described—a violent form of politics.

These complex interrelationships of non-traditional actors are not limited to insurgents or criminal gangs. Because of the prevalence of **humanitarian interventions** and the belief that economic development acts as a deterrent to war, aid organizations, UN agencies, armed forces, and private security firms are increasingly networked in areas such as the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. The causes of internal conflict are often related to poverty and underdevelopment, so that issues of **poverty**, stability, **development**, and peace have become increasingly seen as being linked in an overall pattern of insecurity. This has meant a greater willingness by developed states to see war as in many ways an issue of underdevelopment and political insecurity, and the presence of such social and economic insecurity as being in itself a justification for **wars of intervention**.

Many of the features of the new wars are not new in the sense that they have been common in earlier periods of history—ethnic and religious wars, for example, or conflicts conducted with great brutality. **Looting** and plunder have been a feature of most wars in history. Low-intensity conflicts have in fact been the most common form of armed conflict since the late 1950s. However, it can be argued that the initiators of the new wars have been empowered by the new conditions produced by globalization, which have weakened states and created parallel economies and privatized protection. These new wars are made possible by the inability of many governments to successfully exercise many of the functions associated

with the traditional Westphalian state. Such conflicts will typically occur in **failed states**, countries where the government has lost control of significant parts of the national territory and lacks the resources to re-impose control. Steven Metz has termed the countries falling into this category as the **third tier** states of the global political system.

This weakness of the state produces a significant difference in the economic support for the 'new wars' compared to their 'modern' predecessors. The new globalized economy is quite different from the centralized economies that were typical during the Second World War. The new war economies are decentralized and highly reliant on external assets. Participation in the war by the general population is usually low. Unemployment is generally high, providing a source of recruits seeking an income. The fighting units therefore finance themselves through plunder and the black market, or through external assistance, not through state taxation as in the 'old' wars. Criminal activities such as **hostage-taking**, trafficking of weapons, drugs, and people, and money-laundering are also used to support the war effort. Where foreign aid is

Box 12.6 'Third tier' states

Steven Metz groups the world's states into three 'tiers' for the purpose of predicting likely future forms of conflict. Those of the first tier are the states which have effective functioning economies and political systems, and exhibit high degrees of internal stability and external law-abiding behaviour. The democracies of the North Atlantic region are typical of this group. Second-tier states exhibit periodic instability, and may have areas within their territory where the government does not exercise internal **sovereignty**. However, the state is not in danger of collapse. Third-tier states are marked by crisis. There are considerable areas where the central government has lost control and non-governmental armed forces are operating. In such areas, the 'warlords' or other groupings neither exercise full control over the areas they dominate, nor contribute to the stability of the country as a whole, which is therefore essentially ungovernable. War in such areas will typically 'involve substate groups fighting for the personal glory of the leader, or wealth, resources, land, ethnic security or even revenge for real or perceived past injustices'. Such conflicts may involve groups representing different ethnic or communal groupings and 'the fighting will usually be undertaken with low-technology weapons but fought with such intensity that the casualty rates may be higher than in conventional warfare, especially among civilians caught up in the fighting'.

(Craig Snyder and J. Johan Malik (1999), 'Developments in Modern Warfare', in C. Snyder (ed.), *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (London: Macmillan): 204)

reaching the conflict zone, theft or extortion of the aid will also fund the fighting. Globalization also means that the combatants do not produce their own weaponry, as was typical in 'modern' war, but acquire it directly or indirectly through intermediaries on the global arms market, or through the disintegration of the state structures as in **Moldova** and **Chechnya**.

For some observers, the economic rationale, rather than politics, is what drives the new wars, so that war has become a continuation of **economics** by other means. It is the pursuit of personal wealth rather than political power

that is the motivation of the combatants. In some conflicts, therefore, war has become the end rather than the means.

Key Points

- 'New wars', following state collapse, are often conflicts over identity as much as territory.
- The new wars in fact follow a pattern of warfare that has been typical since the late 1950s.
- Such conflicts typically occur in countries where development is lacking and there is significant economic insecurity.

Conclusion

The end of the cold war has not significantly altered the dominant patterns of war that have been in place for the past fifty years. The 'new' forms of conflict are for the most part not new as such, but have received more Western attention since the end of the cold war. While they are often characterized by great brutality, the absence of

heavy weaponry and superpower support means that casualty levels are markedly lower than during the cold war. RMA technologies have dramatic potential, but have so far had little impact outside US operations. While war is less common and less deadly than in the 1945–92 period, it remains a brutal and inhumane form of politics.

Questions

- 1 To what extent is globalization a cause of war?
- 2 In what ways are wars examples of cooperative behaviour?
- 3 Why do some authors believe that war between the current great powers is highly unlikely?
- 4 What is the distinction between the *nature* and the *character* (or form) of war?
- 5 To what extent is a 'revolution in military affairs' taking place?
- 6 What is 'asymmetric warfare'?
- 7 How important is gender in understanding war?
- 8 What do you understand by the term, the 'new wars'?
- 9 What is the relationship between children and contemporary war?
- 10 Has war become more brutal since the end of the cold war?

Guide to further reading

Biddle, S. (2004), *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). An interesting and stimulating study of warfare since 1900, analysing the techniques and technologies which have aided the offence and defence to achieve victory in modern wars.

Blank, S. J. (1996), 'Preparing for the Next War: Reflections on the Revolution in Military Affairs', *Strategic Review*, 24: 17–25. An analysis of the post-1990 revolution in military affairs, which

argues cogently that in order to benefit from the technological advantages in the RMA, states must embrace necessary organizational and doctrinal changes.

Brocklehurst, H. (2006), *Whose Afraid of Children? Children, Conflict and International Relations* (Aldershot: Ashgate). A ground-breaking study of the place of children in modern warfare, exploring their roles as warriors, as victims, and as witnesses. The book raises searching questions about the meaning of 'childhood' and 'child' in the light of contemporary conflict.

Cohen, E. A. (2004), 'Change and Transformation in Military Affairs', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27(3): 395–407. An engaging article in which the author argues that the changes in the structures of military forces and the nature of battle mean that there has been fundamental change in the character of war in the past two decades.

Coker, C. (2001), *Humane Warfare* (London: Routledge). A challenging book which argues that the horrors of mid-twentieth-century warfare has led Western democracies to seek to fight 'humane wars' characterized by minimal civilian and military casualties on both sides.

Duyvestyn, I., and Angstrom, J. (eds) (2005), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass). A collection of excellent essays debating the changing nature of war in the post-cold war era.

Gray, C. S. (2002), *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass). A very good introduction to the RMA debates with useful historical case studies of earlier RMAs.

Ignatieff, M. (1997), *The Warriors Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt). An examination of the motivations of 'moral interventionists' such as aid workers, journalists, and peacekeepers, and those of the ethnic warriors with whom they engage in postmodern war zones.

Kaldor, M. (1999), *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, Press). Kaldor argues that key features of the conflicts waged since 1990 allow them to be termed 'new wars'. Sadly, the long history of warfare demonstrates that there is little that is genuinely novel about such conflicts.

Record, J. (2004), *Dark Victory: America's Second War Against Iraq* (Washington, DC: US Naval Institute Press). This is a study of the 2003 war against Iraq, which sees it as a long-delayed completion of business begun in 1990–1. Although it does not deal with the insurgency phase of the war, Record strongly advocated a comprehensive programme for post-war reconstruction as a key to long-term success.

Van Creveld, M. (1991), *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press). An analysis that is particularly strong in bringing out the socio-economic demands of modern warfare.

von Clausewitz, C. (1989), *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Clausewitz remains essential reading for the serious student of war.

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