**Multi-domain warfare: The form of war conflict changes from traditional military confrontation to "military +" confrontation**

Source: People's Forum Academic Frontier, May, 2021

Author: Lin Dong

2021-08-18

<https://www.rmlt.com.cn/2021/0818/622309.shtml>

**【Abstract】** Since the end of the Cold War, comprehensive security issues have become prominent, fundamentally expanding the scope of war. The growth of the "arm of power" of war has expanded the vulnerability of national security. Soft targets such as politics, society, economy, and culture have become the fatal weaknesses of the war system, and the focus of war has shifted from the military system to the social system. The rise of non-traditional security and its interweaving with traditional conflicts have expanded the subject and scope of war, made the social characteristics of war more prominent, and accelerated the formation of the conflict form of hybrid warfare. War in the era of globalization has far exceeded military confrontation and expanded to non-military fields, presenting a new form of multi-domain strikes in politics, military, economy, society, and culture, forming a higher-level and larger-scale system confrontation.

**【Key words】** Multi-domain warfare, war form, "military +", non-traditional security

**【Chinese Library Classification Number】** E0          **【Document Identification Code】** A

**【DOI】** 10.16619/j.cnki.rmltxsqy.2021.10.007

**Lin Dong is a professor and doctoral supervisor at the National Security College of the National Defense University. His research interests are modern warfare and new military transformation. His major works include Beyond the Age of Military Service: Systematic Scientific Thinking on New Military Transformation and Strategic Coordination and National Defense in the New Era (paper).**

Since the end of the Cold War, comprehensive security issues have become prominent, fundamentally expanding the scope of war. The goals, methods, and even basic attributes of war, such as the subject of war, are breaking through traditional cognition, thus changing the form of war from a "political-military" conflict model to a "military + political, economic, social, and cultural" comprehensive conflict model, and war has begun to undergo structural changes.

**The growth of the "arm of force" of war has shifted the vulnerability of national security. Soft targets such as politics, society, economy, and culture have become the fatal weaknesses of the war system, and the focus of war has shifted from the military system to the social system.**

The advancement of weapons has led to a sharp expansion of the targets of military strikes. The Kosovo War in 1999 was the first to do so, allowing us to witness a strange scene in which the "devil" did not "enter the village" and the army was not defeated, but the country lost the war. While we marvel at non-contact combat and zero casualties, we also find that a new form of asymmetric warfare has been born, that is, the way of war has shifted from mainly attacking military hard targets to attacking political, economic and social soft targets. In this information-based local war that has attracted much attention, long-range precision weapons and ammunition have provided conditions for modern warfare to directly destroy the economy and disrupt society, rather than having to destroy the army or occupy land to achieve the purpose of war. From the Kosovo War to the Iraq War, we can see that attacking political and economic targets can achieve political goals more easily and quickly than attacking military targets, which closely links national security with social livelihood and economic infrastructure. Fundamentally, this is due to the rapid growth of the force arm of war due to the advancement of weapons.

In fact, war is a complete system composed of multiple systems such as politics, military, economy, society and culture, and each system is interconnected. According to the view of system science, the systems under the war system conform to the principle of wooden barrels, that is, if one system is broken, the war system will collapse. Therefore, in the early 1990s, John A. Worden, a colonel of the US Air Force, systematically proposed the "Five-Ring Target Theory" of modern warfare based on Clausewitz's theory of combat center of gravity, that is, dividing the center of gravity of the war system into a target system composed of five target rings. The first ring is the political leadership, which is the core ring; the second ring is the production system, that is, the war potential; the third ring is the infrastructure; the fourth ring is the people and morale; the fifth ring is the military system, which is the outermost ring.

Looking back at the long history from cold weapons to mechanized warfare, wars unfold in the innermost and outermost rings discussed in Worden's "Five-Ring Target Theory", and are often understood as a contest between armies. In the more than 14,000 wars recorded in history, the general rule is to win the war by first destroying or defeating the enemy's army, and the focus of the war is on the military system. This is because from the cold weapon era to the hot weapon era, neither side in the war has the military power to directly attack the enemy's politics, economy, and society, so it can only gradually achieve the purpose of the war by first breaking through the enemy's border and then occupying the enemy's depth. Therefore, only by breaking the enemy's army's hard "shell" first can we touch the enemy's economic, social, cultural and other intermediate layers' "soft ribs", and finally crush the enemy's political layer, thereby winning the war. Large-scale ground decisive battles are decisive, and decisive battles are often fought in the field. For this reason, countries focus their national defense on building a strong army to guard the territorial borders and fight wars. Once one side's army is destroyed or defeated, its hard "shell" collapses, and the war ends. The outcome of a war may be a stalemate on the battlefield like the Korean War, with the two sides ending the war through an agreement; or one side may gain absolute military superiority and initiative like in the two world wars, ultimately achieving a complete military victory and thus ending the war.

However, today's warfare has become more complex, and long-range precision strikes have become the driving force behind changing the form of warfare.

As the development of air forces made long-range bombing possible, fierce rear-area air raids between the Allies and the Central Powers occurred during World War II. Cities, especially political, economic, and cultural centers, began to become strategic targets, causing civilian casualties in the war to far exceed those of armed personnel. "The burden of war has increasingly shifted from armed forces to civilians. Civilians are not only their victims, but also increasingly become targets of military or military-political actions. The contrast between World War I and World War II is significant: only 5% of the casualties in World War I were civilians; this figure increased to 66% in World War II." [1] From Germany's strategic bombing of Britain in the early days of World War II to the missile attacks on cities in the Iran-Iraq War, although there have been new developments in air strikes on the enemy's political, economic, social, and cultural targets under high-tech conditions, due to the poor accuracy of long-range strikes at the time, only low-efficiency operations could be carried out. For example, carpet bombing and blind missile attacks could not pose a fatal threat to the enemy's political, economic, and social life, but could only weaken the enemy's war potential and cause limited damage to social and economic life, and therefore were in the position of auxiliary war operations. As for Britain's bombing of Germany during World War II, between 1940 and 1945, a total of 307,000 aircraft were dispatched, dropping 1 million tons of bombs, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Britain also lost 8,000 aircraft, but it only weakened Germany's war economy by 20%.

As long-range precision strikes gradually became the dominant force in wars, the selectivity of war targets achieved a major breakthrough. In the subsequent Kosovo War and Iraq War launched by the United States, the challengers, from Milosevic to Saddam, were all prepared to fight army against army on the battlefield. However, the United States had already dismantled the opponent's war machine to carry out parallel strikes. It no longer destroyed the enemy army by peeling off the shell, but cut off the enemy's army shell together with the political, economic, and social core it defended, and then directly "ate" the soft targets. In the Kosovo War, the United States paralyzed the social and economic life of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia through 78 days of air strikes. Looking at the 802 target groups in the air strikes on the 46th day, "only 25% were Serbian military targets, another 15% were air defense targets, and 60% of the ammunition was thrown at factories, infrastructure, oil facilities, roads, bridges, railways and dual-use military and civilian command and control facilities" [2]. The air strikes caused the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's economy to regress to the state at the end of World War II, forcing it to compromise. In the Iraq War, the United States used the "decapitation operation" as a guide, quickly achieved a decisive victory, and declared the war over in 40 days. As a result, the party in the traditional war form can only attack the enemy's military force, a hard target, while the party entering the new war form can attack all the enemy's soft and hard targets; one has a rear, while the other has no rear. This has created the greatest asymmetry in modern warfare. The traditional war form is obviously at a disadvantage in the face of the new war form, and the balance of war has completely tilted towards the latter. In a nutshell, the "five rings" of the war system have become active at the same time, and the focus of the war has shifted to the multiple structures of politics, military, economy, and society. The focus of military strikes has shifted from the traditional enemy's military force to the shortcomings of the state machine. The purpose is to cause the other party to fail politically, rather than to achieve a complete military victory.

**The rise of non-traditional security and its interweaving with traditional conflicts have expanded the subject and scope of war, made the socialized characteristics of war more prominent, and accelerated the formation of hybrid warfare conflict forms.**

Since the end of the Cold War, the rise of non-traditional security has impacted national and international political systems, and has socialized the subject of war. The traditional view of war is that war is "the highest form of struggle used to resolve contradictions between classes, nations, countries, and political groups at a certain stage of development" [3]. This basic conclusion is being broken. Unequal non-governmental organizations have never been as active between countries and even on the international political stage as they are today. This can be said to be an inevitable result of economic globalization. Today's increasingly escalating international issues show that some extremist organizations have obtained the support of global resources and have become transnational, transregional, and even global violent organizations. They are located within society and can launch global attacks on a country or a nation from all over the world.

The globalization of terrorism is much faster than economic globalization. As for Al-Qaeda, its branches once spread over more than 60 countries around the world, with 120,000 members of different skin colors and nationalities. It is a violent organization with a wider coverage than the US military. Its use of the international Internet to transmit intelligence and organize terrorist attacks was proposed earlier than the US military's network-centric warfare, with more actual combat and more mature tactics. The "9.11" incident changed the history of human warfare. We saw that the United States, which has the most powerful army in the world and has never been invaded by foreign troops, was invaded by terrorist organizations. In terms of scale, the activities of a dozen terrorists were at best a tactical action, but they caused material losses to the United States similar to a small war, and caused unprecedented war fear in the spiritual world of Americans. Americans believe that they have suffered a terrorist war. This makes us realize that another unconventional war has been born.

After the September 11th incident, the increasingly serious proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and cybercrime have shaped a new template for future wars. Terrorism has, to a certain extent, driven wars to shift toward social targets, and is transnational and regional, and therefore has a broad social nature. As the country most threatened by terrorism, the United States can use its military, police, and secret agents to strengthen domestic security, but it is difficult to effectively protect its overseas interests. Traditional war subjects - countries compromise with each other to limit the violence of war, establish a mutually restrictive United Nations, and formulate the Hague Convention, etc. However, emerging non-traditional war subjects - extremist organizations and cyber hacker organizations are working to transcend these restrictions. Nuclear warfare, biological warfare, and chemical warfare are transforming from the ultimate means of military confrontation to the primary means of terrorist unrestricted warfare, and terrorist organizations or hacker organizations are more difficult to identify than guerrilla organizations in the usual terrorist sabotage, explosions, attacks, and hijackings. They are neither an army nor a base, but as long as 100 extremists trigger dozens of dirty bombs across the country or use the Internet to destroy power grids, energy, and transportation, you have to admit that this is a war.

The development of science and technology with dual military and civilian uses has increased the threat of asymmetric war. In the science and technology development plans released by the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. National Science and Technology Council in 2004, the intersection of the two sides has reached more than 70%. In addition to information technology, the development and utilization of civilian biochemical technology, civilian nuclear technology, and civilian laser technology have brought huge economic benefits while generating huge risks, becoming a powerful weapon that can be used by non-governmental organizations and even individuals. The problems of non-traditional warfare and "unrestricted warfare" brought about by the rise of terrorism and various extremism are causing a significant expansion of the means and forms of war. In particular, the "three forces" - separatist forces, terrorist forces, and extremist forces are linked to each other and merged, changing the traditional model of "peace movement" and "armed struggle" in the past. They hold up the banner of religion, take the path of terrorism, and seek national division. The wars and conflicts that may result from this will not be as simple as riots, unrest, and armed separatism, but may very well be a new comprehensive form of war. Therefore, we are currently facing another war challenge of a comprehensive conflict form that is asymmetric in both form and content, which will be much more complicated than dealing with the rebellion in the early days of the founding of New China.

In 2008, Frank Hoffman proposed the concept of "hybrid warfare", which was later incorporated into the "US Army Regulations". "Hybrid warfare" points out that future hybrid threats come from "dynamic and diversified combinations of regular forces, terrorist forces and criminals, or a combination of all these forces and criminals that combine to form a complementary effect". As a result, the US military proposed the "four-block combat" training model - one block for regular street fighting against traditional troops, one block for anti-terrorist operations, one block for quelling riots, and one block for rescuing terrorist attack sites and restoring public order.

**In the era of globalization, wars have gone far beyond military confrontation and have expanded into non-military areas, presenting a new form of multi-domain strikes in politics, military, economy, society, and culture, forming a higher-level and larger-scale system confrontation.**

For a long time, the human concept of war has been constrained by the means of war. Because the confrontation between armies dominates the conduct of war, war is narrowly understood as a confrontation between military systems. Although struggles in the economic, social, and cultural fields have always existed, they mostly participate in wars indirectly because they do not have the conditions for direct confrontation, providing backstage services in the rear of the war and being subordinate to military struggle. One of the most distinctive features is that there is a clear front-end and back-end boundary between the confrontation in the military field and the struggle in the economic, cultural, and social fields.

The information revolution has made the means of warfare far beyond the military scope. Confrontations in non-military fields have fully stepped onto the stage of war and conflict, and have been integrated with military confrontations at a faster pace, forming a confrontation at a higher level and on a larger scale. Just like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq launched by the United States, military strikes, judicial actions, economic sanctions, and the mobilization of international public opinion have been used in a multi-pronged manner, thus transforming the form of war from a political-military confrontation model to a comprehensive confrontation model of politics, military, society, economy, and culture. The latter can be called a "military +" war form, and its essence is a confrontation between national systems based on the military.

Especially since the advent of the era of globalization, whether it is an interventionist war launched by a hegemonic country or a terrorist war launched by the "three forces", the focus of war has been the pluralistic structure of the military system and the social system. With the deepening of economic, social and cultural exchanges and penetration among countries, socialized mass production has shifted to global layout and global circulation, and it is increasingly difficult for a country or a nation to be isolated from the international community, making diversified conflicts generally direct and having a strategic impact on national security. In terms of the fragility of the focus of war, it is often much easier and faster to break through the enemy's tolerance limit for economic losses and civilian lives than to destroy the enemy's army. At the same time, the means of destroying the enemy's social system are much richer than destroying the enemy's military system, and are far more than just military strikes. Compared with the two US-Iraq wars, the Gulf War tested the combat effectiveness of the US military's command and control warfare theory, while the Iraq War was the practice of the deterrence war theory. In the Gulf War, under the guidance of the control warfare theory, the United States invested 500,000 troops and achieved a decisive victory on the Kuwait battlefield through military strikes, but did not hurt the Saddam regime, and the political goals achieved were extremely limited. However, in the Iraq War launched again 12 years later, the United States initially put into practice a war that integrated military strikes and psychological strikes. The goal of this war was to intimidate the enemy. To this end, the US military no longer destroyed the enemy's television and communication systems as it did in the Kosovo War, but controlled the enemy's media to make propaganda for itself, and combined with fast-paced, high-intensity, short-cycle decapitation operations and leapfrog attacks, the millions of leaflets dropped by the US military to disintegrate the will of Iraqi soldiers and civilians to resist quickly took effect. Under the powerful psychological deterrence of the US military, Iraq's seemingly tough government and seemingly powerful Republican Guard "evaporated overnight", allowing the US military to capture Baghdad, one of the world's top ten cities, with only 3,000 light armored infantry, almost without bloodshed. Therefore, some people say that this war was a victory of psychological warfare.

Today's national security is much more fragile than before. Confrontation in non-military fields is coming to the forefront of war and conflict, and is accelerating its integration with military confrontation. The integration of soft and hard confrontation makes war present a comprehensive form of system confrontation, and it will become the norm of future wars. Future financial warfare, information warfare, propaganda, and international sanctions will be enough to put a country in trouble and lead it to decline, and military strikes on this basis will make it easier than before to make the other side reach the limit of war tolerance. In the future, with the integration and development of soft and hard confrontation methods, it will be difficult for people to identify whether diplomatic, economic, social or cultural conflicts in war serve military strikes, or whether military strikes serve diplomatic, economic, social or cultural conflicts. Today, the diversified conflicts caused by economic globalization are reflecting the future war environment. As Hami J. Morgenthau said in his book "Politics among Nations", the purpose of future wars is not to capture the territory of other countries or control their economic life, but to subdue and control people's minds as a tool to change the power relationship between the two countries. Some experts in my country also believe that a cultural war has emerged in which military strikes serve cultural expansion. "Under the wave of globalization, international politics, economy, diplomacy, science and technology, and media have all become means of expanding powerful cultures... The anti-Mexican wave in Yugoslavia was a cultural war directly instigated by Western countries." [4]

The "military +" war form is manifested as multi-domain warfare. In fact, the field of national security is diversifying, and new security fields are evolving into new fields of war; the threat of war and conflict is multi-faceted, and only a comprehensive form of warfare can effectively resolve it. The "military +" war form is multi-domain warfare, where police and soldiers fight side by side, military strikes and judicial actions, economic sanctions, global strikes, and international public opinion mobilization are all used in a multi-pronged manner.

**Notes**

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, War and Peace, The Guardian, March 2002.

[2] Center for Strategic and International Studies, The Kosovo War (Part 2): Lessons from the Kosovo Aviation and Missile Campaign, translated by the Foreign Military Studies Department of the Academy of Military Sciences, Beijing: Military Science Press, 2000, p. 100.

[3] Selected Works of Mao Zedong, Volume 1, Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2008, p. 171.

[4] Li Jijun, “China’s National Security under Globalization: National Defense is the Pillar, Economy is the Foundation, and Culture is the Stronghold”, Outlook Weekly, No. 13, 2004.

Editor: Gui Yan