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## The downside of the cutting edge

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### Abstract:

Revolution in military affairs (RMA) has several drawbacks despite its offer of US military supremacy. It does not sharpen the judgment of military leaders so that problems to which high technology is inapplicable, may remain unsolved. A miscalculation of conflicts could result in a possible confrontation with giant powers such as China and Russia. Policymakers should therefore be wary of possible but unexpected effects of RMA.

### Full Text:

The American military loves organizational tradition at the same time that it hungers for technological progress. Notwithstanding the stereotype of hidebound Colonel Blimps refusing to recognize revolutionary changes - army officers clinging to horse cavalry for decades after the invention of tanks, pooh-poohing the combat potential of aircraft in the face of Billy Mitchell's sinking of the Ostfriesland, and all the rest - military leadership is usually enthusiastic about technological innovation, as long as it is an add-on for which they do not have to give up other cherished equipment and doctrine.

This conservative progressivism, let us call it, is often quite sensible. It is always hard to know in peacetime how combinations of new weapons and tactics will work short of the test of combat. As with a single species in a complex ecology, interdependence and competition make it impossible to predict the effects of altering one element of the combat equation on the net result of strategic and tactical interactions. War winnows out false promises as well as hallowed but obsolete old premises. It took the experiences of the London Blitz and the Allied bombing of Germany to dispel pre-war exaggerations of the apocalyptic potential of strategic bombing, and it took the first six months of engagement in the Pacific after Pearl Harbor to confirm the revolutionary significance of aircraft carriers for naval warfare.

Recognizing the meaning of military evidence, however, does not always occur even this quickly - or, in some cases, at all. This is because the lessons of war are often mixed, and cognitive dissonance can suppress learning. The American military worked at counterinsurgency for several years in Vietnam until the escalation of 1965 conventionalized the war. Then, despite seven years of large-scale combat effort - which proved strategically futile despite tactical successes in specific engagements - the end of the war solidified a consensus among professional officers that U.S. strategy had not been conventional enough. The lesson they learned was not that the military's plans and capabilities had been maladapted to circumstances, but that civilian policymakers had irresponsibly refused to unleash those capabilities and give even freer rein to the high firepower requirements that the strategy demanded.

Even were there no barriers to learning, the advent of nuclear weapons has made it less likely that a major war among great powers will last long enough for learning processes to unfold and be assimilated into doctrine. This is not because immediate use of weapons of mass destruction is inevitable, but because such weapons offer an alternative to stalemate or defeat in conventional combat. The carnage of the First and Second World Wars was prolonged because the stronger combatants could not win quickly and the weaker ones had no way to scare the stronger into backing off. Nuclear weapons give either side an option to try one of these other ways out. If both sides fear unlimited war above all else, they may instead choose to end the war by negotiation. If neither is willing to concede or compromise, however, the side that is weaker in conventional military capability has the greater incentive to up the ante, because the stronger can still hope to win at the conventional level.

Of course, there is no doubt that it is better to have technological superiority in conventional military power than not to have it. The side that has the capability for a quick outright victory may prevent war in the first place by deterring or coercing the enemy. But if war breaks out nevertheless, successful application of a decided technical advantage in the conventional sphere may only make the loser desperate, perhaps hysterical, and more likely to use unconventional weapons. Such a prospect highlights the risk of miscalculating the fit between technology and strategy in peacetime. That risk is not great at the moment because the United States faces no first-class adversary in the post-Cold War world. The risk will increase if, or when, a hostile great power emerges to challenge U.S. interests.

All these issues are evoked by what may be a developing revolution in military affairs - the "RMA" as it is known in Pentagon acronyms. There is much debate among professionals about whether a true revolution, as opposed to evolving incremental improvements, is underway, but there is no question that something significant is afoot.<sup>(1)</sup> There is also no question that, on balance, an RMA should offer an important net advantage to the U.S. military. Other great powers might manage to stay close behind in a technological race, but they are unlikely to catch up. One reason is that the size, professionalization, and recent experience of the U.S. military are uniquely conducive to maximizing the synergy of fusing information systems, weaponry, organization, and doctrine that is the key to a real RMA.

It is important not to let secondary problems divert attention from the benefits of an RMA. But it is also important to consider potential drawbacks because they are seldom noted; it is, after all, counterintuitive to think that superior military effectiveness could have any negative implications. While the value of an RMA outweighs its possible drawbacks, we must watch out for the latter if our aim is to effectively integrate military means with political ends - which should be the main purpose of any rational strategy.

### Strategic Expectations

The Gulf War experience has already encouraged many laymen to think that an RMA occurred some time ago, that it manifested itself in the combat of 1991, and that it promises to make future conventional wars quick, easy, and low cost. The only visual images of combat conveyed to the public during the six-week war were of laser-guided bombs making pinpoint hits. The easy triumph of U.S. technology has encouraged the belief that war can be bloodless, and the resolution, in some quarters, that only bloodless wars should be fought.

Military professionals are more aware of the limitations of U.S. performance in that war, and of how improbable it is that we will again be able to fight a war on operational terms set so completely by our own side. It is laymen in political leadership, however, who will make the decisions about where and when to fight again. It is also they, having seen in 1991 what appeared to be an easy victory that did not require as much redundant power as was actually deployed to the Gulf, who will determine defense budget levels. Publicity about the further progress of an RMA will do nothing to suppress overconfidence, and thus risks abetting a dangerous combination of greater nonchalance about going to war, and weaker commitment to maintaining hefty forces before we do so.

### Strategic Complacency

An RMA may not necessarily sharpen the judgment of military professionals, either. Faith in an RMA could reinforce the military penchant for defining missions and capabilities in terms of large-scale conventional warfare. The legacy of the Second World War in Europe instilled a commitment to large-unit operations and reliance on heavy firepower in the U.S. Army - what Andrew Krepinevich has dubbed "the Army Concept" - that the service as an institution insisted on applying in Vietnam, despite its limited relevance and ample counterproductive effects.<sup>(2)</sup> Similarly, military professionals could come to see a mature RMA as validating the Gulf War as a model for all wars.

The danger is that if the RMA becomes the Army, Navy, and Air Force "Concept" of the early twenty-first century, it could blind us to problems that are not susceptible to high-tech solutions. This might keep the United States out of foreign entanglements by hamstringing civilians who want to intervene in messy unconventional or semi-conventional conflicts - and that is good or bad depending on the case and one's point of view. But if the military is called upon nevertheless to act in such conflicts, an institutionalized commitment to high-tech operations may prove unsuitable to the task. We may then face unpleasant choices: failure and withdrawal (following precedents of intervention in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia); brutal conventional overkill (recalling Tacitus' line, "We made a desert and called it peace"); or ad hoc experimentation under fire (which risks failure at higher cost and friction in civil-military relations even if it succeeds).

When success engenders orthodoxy, as an impressive RMA could do, it brings insensitivity to the essence of strategy - its interactive nature - and promotes the Fallacy of the Last Move, the notion that solving a particular problem settles for good the circumstances that gave rise to it. Adversaries who cannot keep up with our methods and machines are at liberty to develop asymmetrical solutions, such as novel defensive countermeasures to precision targeting. And some enemies, such as the North Vietnamese, are bound to prove better in the future at low-tech counters to American technological prowess than did the Iraqis.

### Strategic Instability

The biggest danger in the future is not the sort of military challenges posed by medium-sized powers such as Iraq or North Korea. Rather it is the prospect of confrontation with a hostile great power such as a rich and muscular China, or a recovered and revanchist Russia. Conflicts with them over Taiwan or the new states of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine or Lithuania, could be more volatile than the disputes that catalyzed Cold War crises. It took fifteen years of dangerous maneuvers, probes, and crises over Korea, Berlin, and Cuba before the Cold War competition became routinized and relatively stable. Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Taiwan are far more substantial stakes than Berlin, Cuba, or the Korea of 1950. In the developing phase of a new Cold War, these grounds of conflict could make disastrous miscalculation and the resort to force more plausible than before.

If it comes to combat between the United States and a great power, a decisive American advantage at the conventional level of warfare (as represented in a developed RMA) would thrust the choice between defeat and escalation onto the adversary. This was precisely the position in which NATO believed itself trapped by the Soviet Union through most of the Cold War, and which prompted the doctrine of nuclear first-use that was the source of so much hand-wringing and friction among strategists, and between Washington and allied capitals.

The fact that NATO flexible response doctrine was never called to the test, and that we won the Cold War while resting on it, might

make it seem that such a doctrine presents no threat to stability, or even helps to secure it. If the doctrine was effective against Moscow, however, does the United States wish to have the tables turned on itself - to be subjected to and deterred by such a doctrine? Or, if we would not be deterred by threats of escalation, does that mean that the doctrine is incredible (as many during the Cold War thought)? Or might it mean that in assuming it to be incredible, and then proceeding to wage a conventional war without restraining civilian "interference", we would miscalculate and invite an adversary to actually implement such threats?

Such questions bedeviled both policymakers and analysts throughout the Cold War, and the fundamental disagreements were never resolved. A similar uncertainty would inevitably exist in a future where the tables were turned and would make pressing the U.S. conventional advantage risky. Thus an RMA is less of a sure solution to major strategic problems than it seems to many today. Indeed, it may make a nuclear exchange more likely, not less, notwithstanding the fact that, in this context, weapons of mass destruction would represent the adversary's primitive technological counter to U.S. high-tech conventional superiority. Would it be in the U.S. interest to give such an adversary - especially one fighting over stakes intrinsically more important to it than to the United States (such as Russia regarding Ukraine, or China vis-a-vis Taiwan) - an incentive to consider nuclear or biological escalation as the only alternative to losing? As Eliot Cohen rightly notes, "The revolution in military affairs may bring a kind of tactical clarity to the battlefield, but at the price of strategic obscurity."<sup>(3)</sup>

It is unclear how much of a revolution in military operational potential is really underway. Still less clear is what it all may mean, and we have not yet progressed very far beyond narrow, mostly technical considerations. Nearly all the discussion is about operational and tactical implications - as if the strategic implications must simply be those writ very large. A real RMA is good for the United States, but not in an unalloyed way. Potential unanticipated effects - on domestic political support for war and military expenditures, and on the possibilities of miscalculation and escalation in future conflicts both small and large - need to be considered by strategists as well as those responsible for overseeing the technical development of the RMA. After all, even the best tools are of little use to a craftsman with a blurred blueprint.

1 See, for example, Andrew Krepinevich, "Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions", and A.J. Bacevich, "Preserving the Well-Bred Horse", *The National Interest* (Fall 1994); and Paul Bracken, "The Military After Next", *Washington Quarterly* (Autumn 1993).

2 See Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

3 Eliot A. Cohen, "A Revolution in Warfare", *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1996), p. 53.

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