

Wartime paradigms and the future of western military power

by Olivier Schmitt



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In *Wartime Paradigms and the Future of Western Military Power*, political science professor Olivier Schmitt invites us to reflect on the art of conceiving time within strategy¹.

According to him, since 1989 the Western world has locked itself in a new Wartime Paradigm under two characteristics: a praise of speed at the expense of patience, and reducing war to a “mere expeditionary tool for risk management”. For the last three decades, this paradigm, which was widely endorsed by the United States, has shaped the way we lead operations as well as our capacity choices and our defense architecture. In order to cope with the evolution of warfare - on the one hand, the spread of Anti-Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) postures, and on the other hand, the wide-ranging use of “hybrid” strategies and actions within “gray zone” it seems essential to renew our wartime model by assessing all the dimensions of time within conflicts (duration, frequency, sequence and opportunity).

Olivier Schmitt starts out with a reminder of the direct link that binds

1. O. Schmitt, “Wartime paradigms and the future of western military power”, *International Affairs*, Oxford University Press, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, vol. 96, n. 2, March 2020

strategy and time. Rather than an objective reality, time is seen as a construction by which the coordination between past, present and future (*regimes of historicity*) is understood. Our perception of time influences our conception and our conduct of war, through what he calls the *wartime paradigm*.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Western wartime paradigm has been at the crossroads between two imaginary constructions. The first of these is technological and conceptual: it highlights the acceleration of both time and speed, whilst strategy remains based on a project, which is forecast over the longer term. At a conceptual level, John Boyd's OODA loop² embodies this trend perfectly as it is often misunderstood. Some people place too much emphasis on its speed, however the synchronization of effects is what guarantees operational superiority. The second construction reflects a political imaginary, which stresses risks rather than threats and turns the military apparatus into a risk management tool.

This paradigm is by no means neutral and has shaped the way we approach war. By favoring a strategic posture, it prioritizes modular and expeditionary quick response forces that are able to “manage risks” in “forever wars”³. It has also promoted attempts to paralyze the adversary by relying on faster execution, as illustrated by the American concepts of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), of the Network Centric Warfare (NCW) or of the Effects-based Operations (EBO).

Olivier Schmitt continues his argumentation by describing the main factors of evolution of warfare, which set the limits of this wartime paradigm. These include:

- A2/AD postures, mainly implemented by China and Russia;
- the spread and dispersal of increasingly lethal and sophisticated technologies⁴;
- the use of “hybrid” strategies aiming to obtain gains by coordinating the effects of their diplomatic, military, economic, informational and legal actions, according to an overall dynamic which is ambiguous and often difficult to detect (therefore calling for an ability to anticipate, detect, understand, and set counter-actions when needed);
- the conflict over the electromagnetic spectrum, through electronic warfare, Positioning - Navigation - Time warfare (NAVWAR⁵), or through offensive cyberoperations (including information warfare);

2. Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act.

3. The ‘forever war’ is fundamentally a vision in which armed forces must be able to act fast, wherever, whenever and for as long as deemed necessary: it is in fact a vision of ‘forever policing’

4. What Audrey K. Cronin calls a ‘widespread lethal empowerment’ (A. K. Cronin, *Power to the people: how open technological innovation is arming tomorrow's terrorists*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019).

5. NAVigation WARfare.

- broadening warfare into exo-atmospheric space;
- a greater propensity for urban warfare, resulting in an increasing complexity in operational conduct.

According to Professor Schmitt, these changes in the character of warfare question the bases of the wartime paradigm in which we are locked. To this end, armed forces must free themselves from their solely risk management mindset to revert to the coercion⁶ and deterrence tools they once were. We must also relearn to master time and control its rhythm at all levels of war (*slowing down the pace of operations in certain areas and accelerating it in others*).

At a strategic level, information warfare and strategies of ambiguity require us, for instance, to slow down the pace of operations in order to obviate the trap of escalation. At the operational level, A2/AD postures also require relearning patience and attrition: “*Baiting’ the defence by testing it, eventually forcing the operators to fire expensive missiles, and waiting for the right opportunity to engage is one of the ways to achieve some limited air superiority in defence-rich areas of operations*”.

At a tactical level, whilst speed will remain an element of domination, its payoffs will likely decline as opponents scale up.

This article’s contribution to strategic thinking is all the more relevant and welcome as the military community is generally more inclined to view time in terms of speed rather than slowness or its other meanings. Olivier Schmitt’s words are an invitation to think outside the box of current strategic thinking and to stop repeating old mantras that limit our reasoning, such as “shorten the OODA loop”.

Rather than truncate our perception of time, we should reason through its four dimensions (duration, frequency, time, opportunity). Cardinal de Retz seemed to have understood this in his maxim, which perfectly fits into military strategy: “There is nothing in the world which does not have its decisive moment and the masterpiece of good operational conduct is to know and seize this moment”.

6. In the sense of « *exploitation of potential force* » as defined by Thomas C. Schelling in *The Strategy of Conflict*, published in 1960.