

REVISTA INCLUSIONES

HOMENAJE A ROSA MARÍA VALLES RUIZ

Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales

Volumen 7 . Número Especial

Abril / Junio

2020

ISSN 0719-4706

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WARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY: THEORETICAL APPROACHES, REALITY, AND PROSPECTS

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Fecha de Recepción: 13 de diciembre de 2019 – **Fecha Revisión:** 19 de enero de 2020

Fecha de Aceptación: 16 de marzo de 2020 – **Fecha de Publicación:** 01 de abril de 2020

Abstract

This article substantiates the need to study wars of the 21st century in the context of the formation of the latest models of warfare. The author reviews the fundamental changes occurring in the theoretical aspect of the approach to this problem. Using military scientific concepts, the author explains the latest approaches and concepts of war and the new (asymmetric) paradigm of military operations, as well as considers their place in the military doctrines of different countries. In the context of new theories of war, the article touches upon some aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In conclusion, the author attempts to systematize the features of postmodern wars and reflects on the possible prospects for the development of this social phenomenon.

Keywords

21st century – Modern era – Military science –Political security

Para Citar este Artículo:

Guliev, Bebir. Wars of the 21st century: theoretical approaches, reality, and prospects. Revista Inclusiones Vol: 7 num Especial (2020): 248-260.

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PH. D. (C) BEBIR GULIEV

Introduction

The 21st century is characterized by radical changes in the system of world order and the uncertainty of the prospects of the existing geopolitical situation. The sharp changes in the military and strategic balance under the influence of events taking place in the Middle East and other hotbeds of conflict, the expansion of the “nuclear club” (Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea), the emergence of new centers of military and political force, international terrorism, and an unprecedented scale of sabotage had an impact on the content and form of hostilities at various points of confrontation¹.

The nature of modern wars, or postmodern conflicts, is completely different from previous wars. The conflict of the Cold War has lost its ideological core. As a result, the likelihood of a more or less major armed conflict in Europe has weakened. However, other causes of conflict took the place of ideology, which changed the geography of conflicts².

The phenomenon of modern warfare, first of all, is a comprehensive and integrated strategy. This is evidenced by the use of such terms as “combined war” or “complex war”³. At the same time, in postmodern wars, there is no traditional “front line” and the parties fight for “decisive points” and particular goals. Each of the warring parties is trying to take control of these goals.

Methods

The analysis of postmodern military conflicts and the theoretical forecast of military conflicts in the near future show that the main focus in military operations is put on the time-space-information triad relations. The third factor (the information factor) is one of the most important features that characterize the conflicts of postmodernism. In this article, we look at this problem through analysis of the main approaches to modeling the military and political processes of the leading strategic centers and analysts of the world, as well as based on specific military actions in individual regions.

Results

Theoretical aspects of models of postmodern and traditional wars

Each period in the history of military affairs has certain technological and political properties and a corresponding model of war.

Various works and military encyclopedias give different and rather vague definitions of the essence of the concept of war. For example, war is characterized as a socio-political phenomenon, which is one of the forms of resolving socio-political, economic, ideological, as well as national, religious, territorial and other contradictions between states, peoples, nations, classes, and social groups through military violence⁴. However, it is clear that

¹ H. Anthony, Cordesman, Terrorism: U.S. Strategy and the Trends in Its “Wars” on Terrorism. 2018. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/>

² O. A. Westad, Has a New Cold War Really Begun? Why the Term Shouldn't Apply to Today's Great-Power Tensions. 2018. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>

³ S. E. Miller y J. F. Kennedy, The Evolving Nuclear Order: New Technology and Nuclear Risk (Andalo, 31st ISODARCO Winter Course, 2018).

⁴ D. Tucker, “Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why the Conventional Wisdom is wrong”, Homeland Security Affairs Vol: 4 num 5 (2008). Available at: <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/122>

military violence did not include, for example, the informational and psychological impact on a competitor/enemy, or sanctions (economic, scientific, technical, etc.)⁵. It is believed that all social aspects of this social phenomenon should be taken into account.

In other cases, military operations that correspond to the concept of war, formulated in military-theoretical works, for certain reasons are officially evaluated as “anti-terrorist operations”, “operations to establish the constitutional order”, etc.⁶

On the other hand, concepts such as the war on terrorism, psychological and information wars, gas wars, water wars, environmental and diplomatic wars, sanctions, or, finally, demographic wars are not necessarily accompanied by the application or the threat of armed violence. From a military scientific point of view, these concepts do not fit into the traditional concept of war and this, in the sense of the existing scientific concepts of war, can be considered justified. The wars that took place in the 20th century were armed conflicts of global proportions. Virtually all major industrial countries participated in these wars. It is important that the two world wars and the forty-year “cold war” revealed the internal contradictions of Western (European) civilization, which, in addition to the mainstream political trends, i. e. liberalism and democracy, brought about such extreme ideologies as fascism and communism.

Even Japanese militarism and the Japanese state itself arose following the Western model. In the 20th century, the wars waged by Western countries, divided into two camps, against non-Western enemies were perceived as secondary. Thus, the beginning of World War II is officially counted from the German attack on Poland and not the Japanese attack on China. Most non-European civilization states were politically undeveloped, technically backward, and weak in the military sense. Starting in the second half of the 20th century, Western countries began to suffer defeat in remote regions of the world (Suez, Algeria, Vietnam, Afghanistan). However, third world countries as a whole, despite having turned into the main platform for the “free hunting” of leading powers, continued to remain at the military and political periphery. Significant progress in revealing the unusual nature of new wars occurred after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It was then that the transformation of approaches and views on war took place. Since then, researchers and politicians in many countries have begun to pay attention to the nature and political aspects of the new generation of wars⁷.

Strategic features of postmodern wars: speed and asymmetry

In the 21st century, another factor came into use in military strategy along with “attack” and “defense”, namely, the factor of speed. Another interesting point is that the wars between the leading countries, continuing decades after the Second World War, have gone down in history. Today, in most cases, the leading countries use their forces against weak countries. This indicates a radical change in the nature of modern military conflicts.

⁵ G. Lafree; Michael A. Jensen; Patrick A. James and Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, “Correlates of violent political extremism in the United States”, *Criminology*, Vol: 56 num 2 (2018): 233–268.

⁶ M. Gladwell, *G. David and Goliath: How outsiders defeat favorites* (Moscow: Alpina Publisher, 2014).

⁷ T. A. Trevor y E. Goepner, “Step Back: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror”, *Policy Analysis*, num 814 (2017). Available at: <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/step-back-lessons-us-foreign-policy-failed-war-terror>

From the foregoing, it can be inferred that the scientific study of wars of the postmodern period can develop based on the conceptual systems of military science, modern political science, and geopolitics⁸.

Along with the information factor, which plays a decisive role in modern wars, it is necessary to keep the political factor in sight. Since, based on the latest achievements in the field of the military and technical revolution, unfair political decisions are being made regarding military operations, sanctions are being introduced, and this is an inherent property of new generation wars.

Finally, an integral feature of the postmodern period is the submission of the adopted sanctions, such as decisions on military operations, the policy of double standards.

One of the important merits of K. Clausewitz as a classical theoretician of war (1780–1831) consists precisely in the fact that he first described war as a continuation of state policy using violent means, i. e. weapons of war⁹.

The German scientist Herfried Münkler in his book “Nothing to kill or die for...” notes, that Clausewitz described the war as a “genuine chameleon”, always variable and changing its appearance depending on the various socio-political conditions in which it is waged. Clausewitz clarified this metaphor, highlighting three elements of the war: 1. Violence, as its initial element; 2. Creativity, the mission of strategists; 3. The rationality of decision-makers¹⁰.

This is not only the definition of war as a category of military and political science but the starting point of a systematic analysis of war when state policy is seen as the determining imperative of war. It is the political goals of the state that constitute the backbone factor of its military organization. According to Clausewitz, political intentions are the goal, war is only a means, and one can never think of a means without a goal¹¹.

Clausewitz divided the political goals of the war into limited goals (partial limitation of the sovereignty of the enemy) and unlimited goals (complete political annihilation of the enemy). If political goals are implemented by the political system, then military goals are achieved by the military¹². For example, strategic nuclear deterrence of the threat of aggression by “nuclear balance” (“balance of intimidation”) is a political goal and in the case of aggression, defeating the enemy’s economy in retaliation should be attributed to military (strategic) goals. However, the apparent contradiction of goals does not violate that deep unity, internal connection, and interdependence between the effectiveness of the nuclear balance and the effectiveness of a retaliatory strike¹³.

⁸ Damián Suárez Bustamante, “Transmodern Warfare and Transmodern Peace: Two Forms of Conflict Transformation in the Transmodern Era”, *Peace Research*, Vol: 46 num 1 (2014): 85-106

⁹ Clausewitz Carl von *On War*, Edited and translated by Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Pare. Princeton (N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Munkler Herfried, Karsten Fischer, “Nothing to kill or die for...” – Überlegungen zueiner politischen Theorie des Opfers», in *Leviathan* Vol: 28 num 3 (2000): 343–362.

¹¹ Clausewitz Carl von *On War*...

¹² Clausewitz Carl von *On War*...

¹³ S. E. Miller y J. F. Kennedy, *The Evolving Nuclear Order: New Technology and Nuclear Risk*. Andalo, Italy, January 8, 31st ISODARCO Winter Course. 2018.

It should be noted that Clausewitz, while analyzing the classical form of warfare, did not pay attention to the “speed and information” factor and this once again proves the need for the formation of a postmodern theory of war¹⁴.

The range of tools used in modern wars, along with the speed factor, varies from traditional propaganda and agitation to the use of the latest technical means. The combination of new technological tools with the methods of informational and psychological impact allowed us to formulate the concept of effects-based operations¹⁵.

The essence of these operations is the rejection of the physical destruction of the enemy. The main attention is paid to changing the behavior of the enemy to such a level that they begin to adjust psychologically to possible results from surrender and abandonment of armed resistance. At this time, new means of influence do not exclude the use of force but the main attention is paid to the use of non-violent means such as information, psychological pressure, etc.

At the same time, the use of diplomacy and the provision of economic and political pressure on the enemy are envisaged. Such an approach, in essence, means the use of force, however, not only to destroy the enemy’s armed forces and material infrastructure but also to influence their psychological state, even their thinking.

Researchers highlight several benefits of effects-based operations

In a purely methodological aspect, “effects-based operations make it possible to plan military operations in a more multifaceted, flexible, and potentially resource-saving way. Another advantage of effects-based operations is the ability to select goals efficiently and establish correlations of their priority. Another strength of effects-based operations is their ability to make optimal use of all the components of their state’s power, namely the political, economic, military, and diplomatic components¹⁶.

The experience of recent years has shown the high effectiveness of this kind of targeting. However, problems quickly emerged when sanctions were simply applied too late.

Discussion: asymmetric warfare – “weak contenders for victory” or?...

The theoretical understanding of wars and armed conflicts of the 21st century poses new challenges for researchers. One of them is to find an answer to the question: in the face of a huge technological gap and multiple differences in military and economic power, how can a weak side defeat a strong opponent?

One can understand the features of modern warfare better using the so-called asymmetry factor¹⁷. The term “asymmetry” attracts more and more attention of researchers; however, it is often used inaccurately¹⁸.

¹⁴ Clausewitz Carl von On War...

¹⁵ J. Soeters. The Quest for ‘Evidence-Based Soldiering’. The Armed Forces: Towards a Post-Interventionist Era? 2013. 191-201.

¹⁶ M. Beckley, “Economic Development and Military Effectiveness”, Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol: 33 num 1 (2010): 43-79

¹⁷ J. Čajić, “The Relevance of Clausewitz’s Theory of War to Contemporary Conflict Resolution”, Connections, Vol: 15 num 1 (2016): 72-78.

Historically, there was the idea of the possibility of defeating large armies with little strength, This was reflected in the legend of the confrontation between David and Goliath in the valley of Elah three thousand years ago¹⁹.

In other words, in modern warfare, the mobilization of all possibilities for a correct assessment of the potential for victory has led to the formation of an asymmetric paradigm.

In modern interstate relations, there are mainly two motives in the occurrence of conflicts: 1. the struggle for the survival of small states, 2. the ambitions of the great powers that claim to be the hegemon²⁰.

Asymmetric political strategies manifest themselves in the military and political sphere, in conducting asymmetric military operations, and in the appearance of asymmetric threats.

It should be noted that many researchers find strategic and tactical similarities between the models of classical war and partisan wars, the theoretical foundations of which were developed by Mao Zedong. Mao Zedong abandoned the principle of accelerating hostilities since his “peasant army” could not defeat a large army, he chose a long, exhausting war as a strategy for guerrilla warfare. Thus, he tried to turn his weakness into a strength to cause exhaustion in the enemy (for example, during the Vietnam war)²¹.

In contrast, in asymmetric wars, the parties at war show the same pace

In the process of resolving wars and conflict situations, the adversaries use well-known strategies such as “coercion” (the policy of using force), “deterrence”, “delay”, and “balance of fear” (deterrence and constraint). All of them are objects of detailed analysis. An interesting point is the revision of these concepts in the framework of the new theory of war.

Here we need to focus on the concepts of “asymmetry of strength” and “asymmetry of weakness”. If in the first case the main goal is to accelerate the war, in the second case, on the contrary, one tries to extend and delay its settlement.

Advances in military information and the use of high-precision technologies have changed the nature of asymmetric wars in terms of speed and time. Asymmetric wars often arise when the other side feels the danger from its superior enemy and cannot respond to it symmetrically, that is, using typologically the same forces and means of projecting the threat that the enemy uses.

The events of September 11 showed that no technology can preserve a superpower against threats. The whole world watched live how in this terrorist act the speed factor was used as a weapon against the enemy.

¹⁸ J. Čajić, The Relevance of Clausewitz's...

¹⁹ M. Gladwell, G. David and Goliath: How outsiders defeat favorites (Moscow: Alpina Publisher, 2014).

²⁰ Varkey Paul, Thazha Asymmetric conflicts: war initiation by weaker powers (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

²¹ Varkey Paul Thazha Asymmetric conflicts: war initiation...

Some ideas and factors determine the dryness of the fourth generation wars, that is, causing an asymmetric war. Each time, the transition to a new generation was marked by an ever-increasing dispersal of forces on the battlefield²².

The second is a decrease in dependence on a centralized logistics system. Dispersion, coupled with the ever-increasing importance of speed, will require a high degree of readiness to maintain existence at the expense of the surrounding terrain and the enemy. The third element that the fourth generation is likely to inherit is a greater emphasis on maneuver. The fourth key idea will be the focus of actions on achieving internal collapse of the enemy's forces and not on their physical destruction. In general, it seems that fourth-generation warfare is likely to be highly dispersed and largely undefined²³.

Some authors consider the course of the German offensive against France in 1940 as an example of asymmetric military operations, as the offensive was conducted through the unprotected territory of Belgium and not by breaking through defensive fortifications on the Franco-German state border. To us, this example does not look convincing. The German offensive of 1940 was, nevertheless, to a greater extent an example of how the lack of political will leads to the failure of the campaign than the case of asymmetric hostilities. The Wehrmacht had weapons systems of the same type as those that were in service in France. At the tactical level, there were differences between France and Germany in the degree of preparedness for the effective use of military potential and not asymmetry²⁴.

Other researchers note that for the first time, the concept "fourth and fifth-generation warfare tactics" (G4WT and G5WT) was used at the Pentagon in the 1980s to describe the threats that arose after the Cold War and emanating from the radical non-state military organizations (RNSMO) in legally incompetent states²⁵.

The events of recent years show that the strategists of the two most combat-ready armies, the Israeli and the American armed forces, failed to predict the main format of future wars. This is a partisan war. The problem cannot be solved without establishing real and effective control over the territory²⁶.

At the working level, the US military defines asymmetric threats as an attempt to neutralize or limit US power advantages by attacking selected vulnerable positions in the US using methods not typical of US forces.

Asymmetric threats require completely new strategies to counter them. An analysis of the work of Pentagon military experts shows that in recent years, the US military and political leadership have managed to obtain significant practical results from the effective

²² J. Haley, "An Evolution in Intelligence Doctrine: The Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Mission Type Order", *Air and Space Power Journal*, Vol: 26 num 5 (2012): 33-48.

²³ L. V. Deriglazova, *Asymmetric conflicts: an equation with many unknowns* (Tomsk: Tomsk University Press, 2009).

²⁴ J. Soeters, *The Quest for 'Evidence-Based Soldiering'. The Armed Forces: Towards a Post-Interventionist Era?* 2013. 191-201.

²⁵ A. Trevor Thrall y C. Dorminey, "Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy", *Policy Analysis*, num 836 (2018).

²⁶ E. Stepanova, *Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects*. SIPRI Research Report 23 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

use of the new confrontation strategy in a global world. The most important forms and methods of such confrontation are terrorism, guerrilla warfare, 'color' revolutions, provocation of economic crises, etc. An essential element in increasing the effectiveness of a new type of confrontation is the strategic informational confrontation used to control the behavior of the opposing side²⁷. The obtained practical results initiated a new wave of interest on the part of foreign military experts in the problem of improving the scientific and methodological foundations of the confrontation in the conditions of deep transformation of modern society under the influence of globalization and understanding of the concept of the 'fourth generation of confrontation' (4GW)²⁸. The interest in this topic was already shown back in the early 90s (the term '4GW' first appeared in literature in 1989) and was associated with attempts to develop a new military strategy to achieve military and political goals in a global world. Today's surge in interest in the topic is due to practical experience gained in implementing the 4GW strategy in US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan²⁹.

The revolution in military affairs (RMA) in its technological manifestations changes the nature of military operations, both in large-scale conflicts and in wars of low intensity. However, changes in the system of military operations connected with the RMA do not automatically entail changes in the nature of the military conflict. Technology itself has little effect on how military force is used in politics. Consideration of only the technological factor is not enough for a theoretical understanding of the political aspects of modern warfare, and the development of practical recommendations for military planning³⁰.

The tendency towards "privatization" of the military-power powers of states is also noticeable: the use of civilian contractors to ensure law and order in Iraq has begun to spread (not advertised by Washington). The state is interested in removing some of the functions associated with the use of military force³¹.

G4WT and G5WT. The use of G4WT and G5WT is initially based on the separatist or unrecognized RNSMO³². Hence the concept of asymmetric wars, when the concepts of asymmetry of strength and asymmetry of weakness should be separated³³. The military and economic superiority of one of the parties is self-evident.

²⁷ Minniti Fabrizio. Hybrid Warfare and Hybrid Threats. 2018. Available at: <https://eeradicalization.com/hybrid-warfare-and-hybrid-threats/>

²⁸ T. Benbow, "Talking 'Bout Our Generation? Assessing the Concept of "Fourth-Generation Warfare", Comparative Strategy, Vol: 27 num 2 (2008): 151.

²⁹ Darden Keith, Keeping the "New Cold War" Cold: Nuclear Deterrence With U.S. and Russian Nuclear Force Modernization. PONARS Eurasia logo. 2018. Available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo>

³⁰ Polk William, Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism, and Guerrilla War, from the American Revolution to Iraq (Harper, 2008).

³¹ Simon Murden, "Staying the Course in 'Fourth-Generation Warfare': Persuasion and Perseverance in the Era of the Asymmetric Bargaining War", Contemporary Security Policy, Vol: 28 num 1 (2007).

³² D. Tucker, "Terrorism, Networks, and Strategy: Why the Conventional Wisdom is wrong", Homeland Security Affairs Vol: 4 num 5 (2008). Available at: <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/122>

³³ Patrick A. Mello, Asymmetric Warfare. The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology, edited by George Ritzer, 2nd edition, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell. 2014. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2571255>

In light of this, the asymmetry of weakness can be seen in the example of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly stated Azerbaijan's readiness to restore territorial integrity following the principles of international law. I. Aliyev said that, "Our biggest compromise is the commitment to peace negotiations. But we must use these opportunities to create a new situation"³⁴.

When considering the conflict in a new aspect, one can observe several, sometimes radically distorted, approaches applied by researchers in understanding the essence of asymmetry.

Some authors use the concept of asymmetry to explain and justify the position of Armenia, which, as one of the parties to the conflict, tries to maintain the status quo and takes an unconstructive position in peace talks. "The threat of the use of force in most cases is more effective than its implementation"³⁵. Using the example of the Karabakh conflict, it can be said that maintaining the status quo, using the strategies of "containment", "balance of fear", and "asymmetry of interests" is more important for Armenia than for Azerbaijan. A new war would become a question of victory or defeat, "life and death", for Armenia, especially for Nagorno-Karabakh. The further existence of this country depends on its victory.

It turns out that the asymmetry of weakness serves the interests of the weak side, which is interested in prolonging the conflict and maintaining the status quo. One of the theorists of asymmetric conflict, asymmetry of interests plays an important role in the strategy of using force and coercion³⁶.

Naturally, the position stating that "strong actors are less interested in victory" is very controversial. The conclusions made by Armenian researchers come down to finding consolations from the expected defeat.

Conclusions

Thus, systematizing the main trends and features of the wars given in the article, we can point out the following:

- Privatization of the military-power powers of states, tendencies of commercialization of wars by military-industrial complexes;
- Transnationalization of wars. In these wars, due to the globalization of international terrorism, state borders do not play any role and, at the same time, they are not interstate wars (for example, the self-proclaimed ISIS);

³⁴ Interview of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev to the Euronews channel. Speeches, speeches, interviews and statements of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. 2010. Available at: <http://files.preslib.az/>

³⁵ P. C. Bratton, "When is Coercion Successful? And Why Can't We Agree On It?", *Naval War College Review*, Vol: 58 num 3 (2005), 99.

³⁶ Aaron Edwards, "Deterrence, coercion and brute force in asymmetric conflict: The role of the military instrument in resolving the Northern Ireland "Troubles". *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, Vol: 4 num 3 (2011): 1-16.

- Use of high-precision technology to hit targets;
- Open use of wars between entities that do not have a legitimate state status (guerrilleros);
- Demilitarization of war (warfare without manpower, using drones (unmanned aircraft), etc.);
- Growing importance of information superiority as the most effective and promising means of achieving military and political goals;
- Reduced dependence on a centralized logistics system;
- More emphasis on maneuver;
- Focus on the achievement of the internal collapse of the enemy's forces and not on their physical destruction;
- Hostilities will be largely undefined; the dividing line between peace and war will be blurred until it disappears completely.

Along with the information factor, the political factor must also be taken into account. Thus, relying on the latest achievements in the field of the military-technical revolution, unfair political decisions are made regarding military operations, sanctions are imposed, and this is a property inherent in the new generation wars.

Finally, the submission of the adopted sanction-decisions on hostilities to the policy of double standards has become an integral feature of the postmodern period.

Speaking of the wars of the 21st century, it should be noted that the processes currently underway in world civilization speak of the approach of large-scale military conflicts. We can say that a striking example is an increasing scale of the arms race, which is observed in almost all regions of the planet and especially in the Asia-Pacific region and the Arab world.

We can observe changes that lead to significant shifts in the existing “center – semi-periphery – periphery” system, which can also cause significant regional and global conflicts. A space that has dire consequences for the Greater Middle East project is engulfed in war. The Asia-Pacific region is gaining more weight, the BRICS structure has emerged (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), Russia is taking the first steps to integrate the post-Soviet space, and Iran and Turkey are claiming the role of regional leaders (and possibly global role, if it comes out to lead the Islamic world). The Gulf Cooperation Council follows the path of Western Europe, forming the foundations of a unified financial and economic policy and military system. The attempts of the self-proclaimed ISIS, which acquired the most brutal form of international terrorism in the 21st century, to create the Great Caliphate created the conditions for testing new forms of war. The tactics of coalition forces in the war against terrorist groups, the combination of the traditional “strategic three-element system” (air – land – sea) with various innovations, and the desire of most major countries of the world to conduct joint operations using the results of the military information revolution also belong to the aforementioned innovations.

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