*Article*

Armed Forces & Society
2014, Vol. 40(2) 332-356

DOI: 10.1177/0095327X12466228
afs.sagepub.com



# How the Transformation of Military Power Leads to Increasing Asymmetries in Warfare? From the Battle of Omdurman to the Iraq Insurgency

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**Abstract**

As captured by neorealist theory, military power became increasingly relative through into the twentieth century, leading to a concentration of power within and between states—and enabling the buildup of huge colonial empires hardly a century ago. Yet since 1945, due to the overproportional effectivity gained by weaker and in particular nonstate actors it has become less relative, leading to a dispersion of power—resulting in an often violent decolonization, the problems US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces have faced in Iraq and Afghanistan in dealing with comparatively small insurgencies and a growing number of failing states. Military power has a selective function: the more relative it is, the more it restricts patterns of conflict as well as the number and nature of actors relevant to international and domestic security. Today, it is because military power is becoming less relative that security policy has to adapt to increasingly asymmetric challenges.

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**Keywords**
transformation of warfare, military power, asymmetric conflicts, international security

Instead of traditional military threats emanating from peer competitors among states, since the end of the Cold War the security strategies of nearly every larger power have increasingly focused on new kinds of asymmetric threats: the growing peril of terrorism, the dangers resulting from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the rising difficulties of regular force in prevailing in "low-intensity operations" or "new wars,"[1] and the related challenges of state failure. All these new threats have one quality in common: the growing overproportional impact the use of force can have, in particular, if deployed by weaker actors against stronger ones.

For centuries, the prevalent experience of Western powers with warfare emerged from interstate conflicts among their equals while they enjoyed an asymmetric superiority over different actors, as the process of colonial expansion showed well into the twentieth century. Since 1945, however, in an increasing number of conflicts, asymmetric differences now favored weaker and also technically less advanced actors. That warfare is increasingly shaped by asymmetric forms of conflicts has already been argued by many authors since the end of the Cold War.[2] My own analysis tries to elaborate on one problem: Being a characteristic rather than a cause, asymmetry requires rather than offers an explanation itself. If conflict scenarios change, it is insufficient to analyze only the patterns of warfare or the strategies followed by different actors. What has to be explained is why they change in efficiency. In my view, the reason underlying this process can be best understood as a transformation of military power (MP).

The growing relevance of asymmetric threats implies that MP becomes less relative. It can be understood as being relative the more it depends on the proportional distribution of material resources among actors: economic and demographic potentials—with the available technologies creating advantages for more advanced actors. The proportional possession of these resources defines which actors are termed as strong or weak in this article. To assert that MP is becoming less relative is a challenge in particular to structural neorealism. It contrasts, for instance, with a formula John J. Mearsheimer has produced for measuring MP[3] and generally with Kenneth Waltz's theorem that the relative distribution of capabilities determines the power and accordingly the security of actors.[4] Methodologically, however, my analysis follows one proposition of neorealist theory: that MP has a selective effect. It can be used in order to pursue all sorts of rationales. But as a means, it decides which actors and rationales prevail or can affect the security of others.[5]

This selective effect has a far reaching impact on all theories concerning the international and domestic security of states. The more relative MP is, the more restrictive

this selection becomes; for an actor then has to match an opponent's strength to become a potential threat; and the more it favors stronger actors and a concentration of power both within and between states. The less relative MP becomes, the more effective the use of force by weaker actors will be, hence favoring a dispersion of power. Relativity implies similarities between the actors also with respect to strategy and structure. If power is relative, relevant actors have to compete successfully for the same kind of resources and consequently to adapt their behavior to a common standard of efficiency. The less relative power becomes, not only more but also different kinds of actors and models of rationality will gain relevance. Although the resulting loss of calculability affects neorealist theory most directly, it also indirectly affects liberal or constructivist approaches that focus on the function of actors as influenced either by their internal structure or by their interaction.

Without disregarding other forms of power and in particular the significance of "soft power,"[6] my analysis is confined to the examination of MP. Even with regard to an understanding of MP close to neorealist propositions, the literature on this subject has largely been "built on weak foundations."[7] And this is all the truer when it comes to more asymmetric capabilities. In fact, there is not nor can there be a general formula for MP. For as demonstrated later the same material resources can constitute a different MP if used by different kinds of actors. But it is possible to define the factors which constitute MP and explain how its quality can change. MP is about capabilities, not strategy. As strategies determine the actual effectiveness of warfare, MP determines its potential effectiveness. But this effectiveness does not depend on abstract resources alone but also on how they can be used. What MP is boils down to the tactical options it allows for and the strategies that can be built upon them. My argument is that the strategic and tactical options of different actors are determined by two kinds of factors that change over time: The evolution of technology on one hand and social structures and values on the other hand.

Technology can but does not need to be a simple multiplier of MP favoring the more advanced actor. Its evolution can also create options that favor the weak even if they are less advanced. Social structures and values determine, first, the amount of sacrifices a society is capable of bearing and to what extent it can actually mobilize its human resources to create MP. They also determine, second, their capability to use violence, and, third, the rules and ways in which a social organization can actually deploy force. Each of these factors can be a multiplier or divisor of MP. To demonstrate these propositions, I will in the first part of my article explore the impact of technological progress, before proceeding to the second part to examine the impact of social structures and values on the quality of MP.

## The Evolution of Technology and the Transformation of MP

In this section, my argument falls into three parts. At first I want to point out how the evolution of technology made power increasingly relative in modern times (subsection The Increasing Relativity of MP in Modern History). In the second part,

it will be argued that the impact which the use of force can have is becoming increasingly asymmetric today, thus making MP less relative. This will be demonstrated by comparing military options in a colonial war such as the British Sudan campaign in the late nineteenth century with those in a twenty-first century insurgency such as in Iraq after 2003 (subsection The Rise of Asymmetry in Recent Times). Third, the resulting change in the effectiveness of MP for strong and weak, state and nonstate actors will be analyzed (subsection The Ambivalence of MP Today).

## *The Increasing Relativity of MP in Modern History*

MP became increasingly relative with the effective use of gunpowder. The previously available weapons required far more skills, practice, and experience from a warrior. That they "economized on training" was initially the reason why firearms increasingly replaced other weapons on the battlefield.[8] Manpower gained importance for MP and with it also the economic resources required to pay and equip soldiers. The result was a massive growth of armies. Consequently, the feudal order was increasingly replaced by the emerging modern state.[9] To be sure, this growth also followed the expansion of administrative capabilities.[10] So, it is still the subject of debate among historians whether the introduction of firearms triggered a military revolution or was just part of a long-term evolution of military affairs, whether technology was a driving force or whether "military change arose from the absolutist state rather than causing it."[11]

Gunpowder also altered the balance between the defense and the offense. Before, fortifications offered a comparatively cheap and effective way of enhancing the ability of the weak to resist the strong. In the Dark Ages, the walls of each city or castle could limit the power of rulers. But the development of increasingly effective artillery rendered nearly all these walls obsolete. Although soon new fortresses were invented, which offered no less protection, they became so costly that the number of actors capable of fighting wars was to be reduced greatly to include only the larger of the newly formed territorial states.[12] Within their countries, rulers could now increasingly subdue all other feudal powers, establishing the monopoly on the use of force characteristic for the modern state.

As a result, warfare became the prerogative of the state adopting a trinitarian structure, as it was now being waged by governments with regular armies that were clearly distinguishable from the civilian population.[13] As power was concentrated within states so it began to be concentrated between them. Until the World Wars, the evolution of firearms allowed relative firepower to increasingly become the most decisive factor in war. The growth of armies triggered by the French and fostered by the agrarian and the industrial revolutions prompted states to increasingly exploit their demographic and industrial resources to generate MP.

In particular, military developments that increased the superiority of the offense over the defense supported a concentration of power.[14] As the proponents of the offense–defense theory have pointed out, the evolution of technology repeatedly

favored either defensive or offensive strategies thus decreasing or increasing the security dilemma of actors.[15] However, these were rather gradual differences that occasionally sped up or slowed down the process; for until into the twentieth century, the advantages or disadvantages that the offense or defense would offer remained embedded in an overriding trend that allowed MP to become increasingly relative by reinforcing the might of the stronger over the weaker.

One consequence was the global dominance established by Western powers until 1945. Another was that the number of relevant actors in terms of MP continued to decrease, so that before the World Wars only a handful of great powers still possessed the capability to wage wars against each other. This process reached its climax in 1945, when the five powers that became the permanent members of the security council of the United Nation ruled virtually the whole world with their possessions, dominions, and zones of influence. During the Cold War, a dualist power structure even seemed to emerge, but in fact a process of refragmentation had begun that resulted in an increase both in the number of states and the relevance of violent actors within states. This development proceeded from the partisans of the World War II and the Chinese Civil War, through the wars of decolonization to the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan and a growing number of states failing because of armed conflicts.

## *The Rise of Asymmetry in Recent Times*

What is asymmetry in warfare? The term has been criticized for being of little analytical value if meaning just an inequality of means or approaches directed against the weak points of an enemy.[16] In this sense, asymmetry would be nothing more than the "essence of the practice of war."[17] To be a useful concept, it has to embrace two additional characteristics. First, in a conflict one side must be able to use means or tactics which the other side does not possess or cannot employ themselves. Second, their use must result in a greatly disproportionate impact.[18] In a symmetric conflict, the stronger side for employing more resources and consequently suffering more from friction can generally be expected to bear the greater costs. But in the actual fighting, the weaker side would ideally sustain losses in a reciprocally disproportionate manner for being exposed to the enemy's superior firepower. The measure for the effectiveness of an asymmetric strategy is therefore the extent to which it can alter this ratio.

The potential influence of technologies on the efficiency of strategies can be demonstrated with a simple thought experiment. Let us presume a conflict scenario in which fifty fighters on one side are standing against five on the other, all of them armed with muskets. Due to the limited accuracy, range, and shot frequency of the musket the smaller group can perhaps hit two or three of their opponents in an ambush but hardly avoid a counterattack that would probably wipe them out completely. In such a case, the MP of both sides would be quite relative. However, if all fighters were armed with automatic weapons and modern explosives, the smaller group—using guerilla tactics—can keep a greater distance, avoiding identification and effective counterattack and inflicting much higher casualties on their

enemies, perhaps even destroying them completely if they landed the first shot. In this case, the relative firepower would remain exactly the same but the conflict scenario could become much more asymmetric.

Ivan Arreguin-Toft has shown that the number of asymmetric conflicts in which the weaker side won increased since 1945.[19] His explanation focuses on the interaction of different strategies: as Western militaries were adapted during the Cold War to the scenario of a conventional war in Europe they faced difficulties engaging an enemy that fought in a different manner.[20] I would not deny the significance of that point, but I will argue that it is only part of the problem. My argument is that it is not so much the interaction between strategies that has changed but their respective effectiveness.

How the evolution of technology has influenced the evolution of MP can be demonstrated by comparing the recent Iraq insurgency with a colonial war such as the British Sudan campaign of 1898–99. In both cases, Western forces which were adapted to conventional interstate warfare faced insurgencies that were driven—at least for the most part—by similar fundamentalist ideologies. The Sudanese fighters had also been no less ruthless or willing to make sacrifices than those in Iraq. In both cases, the Western forces were much more advanced technologically than their opponents, the Americans in Iraq even more so than the British in Sudan.

All the more striking are the differences with respect to manpower, outcome, and the pattern of conflict. At first, just a look at the numbers of employed forces reveals very different pictures of what MP could achieve in both cases. While the insurgents in Iraq seem to have comprised barely more than a few 10,000 actual fighters at any one time,[21] the Mahdi army in Sudan mustered over 50,000 warriors at the battle at Omdurman alone. Against them the British deployed 8,000 of their own and twice as many Egyptian troops.[22] In Iraq, the United States alone deployed up to 160,000 soldiers, with the Iraqi security forces providing a further few hundred thousand troops over time.[23] Thus, the ratio of manpower was at least thirty times more favorable for the coalition in Iraq. But whereas the British were victorious in a comparatively swift campaign, the coalition in Iraq failed to secure effective military control for a much longer time. So, why were the British more successful in less time with a much smaller force against a larger insurgency?

At first glance, the answer seems to be simple: the coalition in Iraq fought a kind of guerilla war after the victory against Saddam's regular army, while the war in Sudan was decided in open battle. But to take these differences in strategy as an explanation for the different efficiency of MP would be to confuse causes and consequences. For it only leads to a more fundamental question, why did the insurgents in Sudan not employ a similar strategy to the insurgents in Iraq? The most basic answer is, they lacked the necessary tactical options. Technology limited these options with respect to four factors: weapons, communications, transportation, and infrastructures.

First, most of the firearms the Mahdist army possessed were rather simple weapons, with accuracy, range, and shot frequency that would have generated less impact while exposing the fighters to a much greater risk even if they had attacked the British in more asymmetric ways, as is the case with today's insurgents in Iraq.

Moreover, the insurgents lacked the explosives which in recent times in Iraq have caused a large portion of the coalition's casualties in the form of improvised explosive devices. Second, today insurgents can use wireless communication to detonate explosives from a safe distance and to exchange information. Modern media carry news quickly all over the country, potentially mobilizing resistance and enabling fighters to react to changing situations. Thus, no central organization is needed to keep an insurgency going. But with wireless communication limited to the range of sound or messengers and even with hardly any wired communications it is difficult to imagine how the Mahdist army could have mobilized and coordinated its forces in any other way than by concentrating them and consequently by facing the enemy in an open battle.

Third, the available transportation limited the speed with which information and also troops could travel, attack, and retreat. With the available transport in Sudan, supply needed more central organization and required a concentration of forces, too. But the more an opponent concentrates his forces and is dependent on centralized structures, the easier it is to target and to destroy him. Today's streets, cars, and even public transport have greatly accelerated the insurgents' potential movements and enable them to target the enemy far outside their own territories. Fourth, the evolution of infrastructures has made it much more difficult to control a territory by MP. As in most parts of the world, most people in Sudan were not only cutoff largely from anything but local information and lacking in the transport necessary to participate in anything other than local conflict but also bound economically to the land from which they lived. Many of the goods they needed or produced had to be traded through a few economic centers. Because of the necessity to defend them, the Mahdi army was forced to fight the British on the spot. Whoever controlled these centers could control, tax, and administer the whole country.

Under these circumstances, it was comparatively easy to establish an effective military control with comparatively small forces over comparatively long distances. To rule it was not necessary to have an omnipresent force. Revolts could be isolated locally and suppressed by sending in troops when required because the insurgents could usually neither move away nor hide effectively. But today a much denser network of infrastructures has greatly increased the mobility of people while reducing their economic dependency on centralized structures. Thus, the difficulties of establishing or maintaining military control of a territory have risen greatly. While infrastructures a century ago generally supported the rule of stronger actors, they now add to their vulnerability as their expansion increases the number of potential targets.

From this analysis, two conclusions can be drawn. First, because of the respective development of weapons, communications, transportation, and infrastructures, it is unlikely that the insurgents in Sudan would have been more successful if they had followed the same strategy as the insurgents in Iraq. But also in late nineteenth century Iraq, even an insurgency on a much larger scale would probably have been defeated far more easily by a Western army, as Iraq was less remote, supplies would have been easier to provide and the landscape would have posed fewer problems for

troop movements or logistics while offering little protection for insurgents. When the British actually were confronted with a large-scale insurgency in Iraq in 1920 they in fact needed more troops to subdue it than they did in Sudan because the Iraqi rebels possessed far more modern firearms. But the British were still able to suppress the revolt within a few months by mainly conventional military tactics.[24]

The second and more general conclusion is that in the past and in the present asymmetric and in particular guerrilla wars have been effective largely for different reasons. Before the World Wars, they proved to be effective—although hardly ever successful in the end—in such distant theaters as the American Revolution, the Spanish insurgency against Napoleon, the British–Afghan wars, the Boer war, and the Rif war.[25] But they did so only because they could take advantage of two factors: terrain and logistics. In all cases the remoteness, profile, or size of the country impeded the movements of regular troops and caused a high dependency on long lines of supply, while the spread of settlements could even require a wide dispersal of troops. It was these conditions that made superior forces vulnerable to guerrilla tactics.

Today, however, modern means of communication, transportation, and reconnaissance have largely reduced the problems that can arise from the difficulties of terrain and logistics. Supply lines remain particularly vulnerable to ambushes and a preferred target for insurgents. But the proportion of this problem has changed. In today's Iraq, whole armies are not at risk of starving to death because they could be cutoff from supplies, as happened to the Napoleonic armies in Spain. In today's Afghanistan, large forces do not face the threat of attrition because of being cutoff from communications and reinforcements over periods of weeks, as happened to the British in their Afghan wars of the nineteenth century. But at the same time, the technical means now available to insurgents are increasingly effective against forces superior in quality and quantity even independently of the specific advantages of the terrain. Although precisely the weaknesses that made regular forces vulnerable to guerrilla strategies in the past have been largely reduced, asymmetric warfare has become a global threat freed from the geographical restrictions of the past.

## *The Ambivalence of MP Today*

For centuries, the evolution of firepower had strengthened the might of the strong over the weak. But now the growth of destructive forces made available by the evolution of firepower has led to the increasingly disproportionate effectiveness weak actors can display against strong ones. Today, strength results in vulnerability as much as in superior firepower. The consequence is not only that conflict scenarios are generally becoming more asymmetric between strong and weak actors but also that there is an increasing ambivalence of MP between the asymmetric advantages of the strong in conventional warfare and the asymmetric advantages of the weak in unconventional warfare.

In conventional warfare, a general symmetry exists in particular between comparatively strong actors with respect to their mutual vulnerability. For the stronger

an actor is, the more dependent he is on political, economic, and military infrastructures which can be attacked, but not defended, by asymmetric means. In order to be able to fight off an enemy's military force or to strike back against him, states generally continue to compete for similar military capabilities. Consequently, the armaments of all major states remain adjusted to wars between regular forces. But the evolution of military technology has also brought about asymmetries in capabilities between states. The transformation toward network-centric-warfare which especially in the 1990s was hailed as a revolution in military affairs[26] has provided the United States in particular with a vast superiority over all other regular forces in conventional warfare.

However, as much as these developments created asymmetric advantages for strong actors, they forced weaker actors increasingly to resort to asymmetric means themselves. For this reason Arthur Cebrowski, who has gone down in history as the preeminent proponent of network-centric warfare, once described the rise of asymmetric warfare as "largely our own creation."[27] But it was also the evolution of technology that enabled the weak to resort to asymmetric means. For it increasingly produces comparatively cheap and less sophisticated weapons systems which provide capabilities to strike back even against the most sophisticated forces.[28] Consequently, the asymmetric advantages of the strong even among states do not necessarily translate into domination over an opponent any longer.

What is more, efficiency in conventional warfare increasingly means inefficiency in unconventional warfare. Some modern technologies that increase the means of surveillance while offering an immediate strike capability such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) can increase the pursuit pressure on insurgents. But in general since the efficiency of today's highly sophisticated weapons systems mainly stems from a combination of intelligence, processing of information, and the precision of weapons, they largely lose their advantages against an enemy that can avoid identification by fighting in an asymmetric way. In addition, the more advanced the weapons systems are, the higher the costs and maintenance efforts have become and their numbers as well as the numbers of combat troops in general have been sharply reduced in nearly all armies. Yet, as the earlier comparison between military control in colonial empires in the nineteenth and insurgencies in early twenty-first century has demonstrated, far more troops would actually be required to establish military control today.

In consequence the quality of MP is changing with respect to at least four major aspects. Throughout history, MP has embraced the capability to protect against attacks or to conquer territories. Today, the evolution of firepower has resulted in weapons that can destroy their targets more effectively, over longer distances, and with more accuracy than ever before. But the better weapons can hit, the less protection they offer. So MP, first, increasingly cannot provide for defense any more but at most can serve as a deterrent. MP between strong actors becomes increasingly limited to a capability to punish each other, instead of exercising and expanding power over one another. If in a war among states an actor can destroy most of an enemy's infrastructure and military, this does not simply lead to conquest any more as even comparatively minor resistance can impede control of an occupied territory.

It follows that, second, MP can serve increasingly less as a direct instrument of rule.[29]

Therefore, the evolution of MP as well as the growing vulnerability of the strong increasingly benefits, third, mostly nonstate actors in conflicts with states. The modern state which emerged as an effective monopolizer of force is no longer its most effective bearer. Consequently, also within the state the monopoly on the use of force, though it may still find observance as a normative claim, is increasingly difficult to actually enforce against violent resistance. Furthermore, the rationale for using MP with its respective effectiveness has changed differently for different kinds of actors. In particular, the relation between costs and benefits of warfare has moved in opposite directions for weak and strong actors. For strong actors, not only in wars against their equals, the costs are outweighing potential gains more and more. Also in wars against weaker actors, the amount of resources they need to employ in order to compensate for the increasing effectiveness of asymmetric strategies is growing. While wars have become more expensive for the strong, they have become cheaper for the weak. Since the proportional amount of manpower and resources weaker actors need to resist stronger ones is decreasing, the economic threshold enabling them to wage war is, fourth, lowering. So it has become even easier for weaker actors to obtain the necessary resources by means of violence. Hence, the economy of the ''new wars'' largely relies on looting and plundering, benefiting only the violent few whose gains stand in stark contrast to the damage done to the society as a whole[30]—thus demonstrating even in this regard the asymmetries to which the transformation of MP has led.

## *Résumé*

In conclusion, a rough formula for the influence of technology on the evolution of MP can be drawn up. In general terms, proportional advantages for strong or weak actors as well as for different strategies can be linked to the capabilities for protection or attack which existing technologies can offer by lowering or raising the impact and reach of an individual's fighting potential. As far as the capability to protect outweighs the capability to attack it favors weak actors following defensive strategies. If there is a more balanced relation MP becomes more relative, favoring the stronger. But if the impact of attack outweighs the capability to protect, it favors weak actors that follow asymmetric strategies based on aggressive tactics.

In reality, such differences in the quality of MP are gradual. Strength will always be an advantage as opposed to weakness, but compared with other parameters strength and weakness can be much more or less decisive. Besides the technological foundation of MP only describes a potential that defines the theoretical possibilities for what MP can be. What it actually is, results from the relation between technological capabilities and the social and normative restrictions of an actor.

## Social Structures and Norms as Determinants of MP

From the beginning of early modern times until the World Wars, the impact of social structures and norms on the ability to generate MP can appear to be negligible for two reasons. First, as the technological foundation of MP made it more relative the potential extend of this impact decreased gradually. During this time, second, Western powers rose to global dominance which, due to an intense and long-term competition among themselves, had become closely adapted to each other with respect to the social foundation of MP. Today, however, the increasing asymmetries in the technical foundations of MP go hand in hand with increasing asymmetries in its social foundations. To substantiate this point, I will first refer to the question of whether differences in the casualty awareness in recent asymmetric wars can be explained better by a shift of norms in particular in Western societies or by relating them to the interests at stake (subsection Towards a Postheroic Society?). In a second step, I want to demonstrate that in a long-term historical perspective the readiness to sacrifice and military participation in societies has differed largely (subsection Casualty Awareness and Military Participation in Historical Perspective). Third, I will point out that these differences result from social factors—influencing the readiness to sacrifice, the readiness to use force, and the resulting styles of warfare—which serve as variable determinants of MP (subsection Interests, Society, and Norms).

### *Towards a Post-Heroic Society?*

The evolution of the technological foundations of MP is a condition without which weak actors in contemporary conflicts such as in Iraq and Afghanistan could not be effective. But this reason alone cannot explain it either. For the United States still commands such an overwhelming superiority of resources that for the insurgents any chance of success depends on a comparative lack of determination on the other side. This, however, was already true for most low-intensity conflicts fought and lost by a Western power since 1945. In these wars, the superiority of the stronger actors was effectively outweighed by an even greater disparity of commitment between the opponents. How can this difference be explained? Opinions on this have generally separated into two schools of thought.

The first school argues that a change in social structures and values has raised thresholds for casualties in modern societies. One explanation for the difficulties of Western powers in prevailing in asymmetric conflicts today attributes them to the constraints imposed on the ability to use force in modern democracies.[31] However, although liberal democracy and a reluctance to resort to force may have mutually supported each other's evolution, their relationship appears to be rather one of coincidence than of causality; for this reluctance would have only evolved over time. In the World War I, democratic France was by no means less prepared to accept casualties than autocratic Russia.

Another explanation focuses on the influence of demographic change. Connections have been drawn between the extent of a "youth bulge" and the readiness in societies to use force and to sacrifice.[32] According to Edward Luttwak, declining birth rates and rising life expectancy have produced an increased sensitivity to casualties. That this development has not been confined to democracies is indicated by the importance given to the aim of minimizing losses by the Soviet strategy in Afghanistan.[33] Luttwak and Herfried Münkler[34] assert a shift in values toward a "post-heroic" mentality, meaning that the willingness to sacrifice—or "heroism"—largely lost its earlier esteem in society. For Michael Howard, loyalty toward country and nation has declined so much in postindustrial and increasingly transnationally interconnected societies that it no longer generates the same readiness for sacrifice as in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.[35] In any case, the consequences of a post-heroic aversion to war would be that support for war declines with the rise of casualties as formulated first by John Mueller with respect to the Vietnam war.[36] That comparable drops in support for the Iraq war occurred after much smaller losses demonstrates in his view that the casualty aversion has actually increased over time.[37]

The second school holds that a willingness to use force and to sacrifice is related to interest—or the perception of interests within a society. Andrew Mack argued after the American withdrawal from Vietnam that in such cases a significant difference in the intensity of the interests of the actors involved is the decisive factor leading to a much more limited willingness of the stronger actor to make sacrifices.[38] So a disproportion of resources would be compensated by an even greater disproportion of interests. The relevance of relative capabilities for the constitution of MP would not however be called into question. Similar approaches to explain casualty aversion have been based on a rational expectation theory according to which the public weights casualties against the interests at stake.[39] As such a consideration depends on attitudes about the rightness or wrongness of the war as well as the likelihood of success,[40] it depends also on how they are presented by political leaders and the media as well as on the level of political information of the addressees.[41] It also appears that Western governments have tended to overestimate the public's casualty aversion.[42]

The proponents of a growing casualty aversion can argue citing two historical facts: first, a growing aversion to war can be followed particularly in the developed world throughout the entire twentieth century, with the two World Wars providing particular impetus to this trend.[43] Second, at least since the Vietnam War there has not been a military engagement of any Western power, which has resulted in relative casualty rates similar to those suffered by them in European and Colonial wars before. But this also means that both schools lack empirical evidence in the form of a major test case. Thus, authors who see interests as a decisive factor have to rely on opinion polls, which suggest that willingness to accept casualties seems to grow as vital interests appear to be at stake.

But opinion polls are questionable evidence, too. First, interest perceptions can be subjective and it is possible that casualty awareness does not only follow them but

that people reconsider interests with raising casualty rates. In fact studies on recent public opinion in the United States suggest that support for the use of force depends on whether the objectives themselves are perceived as aiming rather to prevent losses than to seek gains.[44] Second, linking casualty awareness to vital interests in particular is suggestive and can thus be misleading. It is suggestive because it implies the tautological conclusion that people are willing to sacrifice for what they see as worth sacrificing for. And it is misleading because the notion of vital interests suggests that there is some absolute standard making people willing to sacrifice for it to the end. But in modern Western history at least, for states and nations even major wars were vital only in exceptional cases. Most of them were about the redistribution of power, of some territories or resources—until the next contest. This is not to say that societies did not fight for what they perceived as vital interests. But in most cases, perceived vital interests are just as relative as any other interest.

The third problem concerns the application of rational expectation theory. It suggests that there is a rationale linking interest or lack of interest to casualty aversion. But this raises the question of how to specify objectively what interests societies are willing to use force and to sacrifice for. Even if opinion polls show a specific relation between interests and casualty thresholds in a given society, this does not prove that the relation would be the same in another society or at another time. But because data on relevant opinion polls hardly cover more than a few contemporary decades, they do not allow identification of a more general standard linking the intensity of interests to a corresponding willingness to make sacrifices.

Quantitative research on the relation between interest perception and casualty thresholds in public opinion has demonstrated that support for military engagements does not simply depend on casualty numbers but also on interest perceptions. But this finding does not prove that there is no overall tendency toward a growing casualty aversion. To assess to what extent casualty aversion shapes the military capability of societies, the analytical scope has to include much broader historical comparisons. The narrower the time frame of an analysis, the more it appears plausible to link casualty thresholds to interest. But as the following examples shall demonstrate, the broader the historical perspective gets, the more plausible it becomes that social factors determine a society's willingness to sacrifice and the military participation related to it.

## *Casualty Awareness and Military Participation in Historical Perspective*

To be sure, there are examples—most notably the World Wars—in which only demographic and economic potentials seemed to limit a society's military capabilities. But precisely because they were the most extensive wars in modern history they could well be just an exceptional case, a "monstrous cultural aberration."[45] A lack of empirical evidence forbids any definitive assessment of whether a similar readiness to sacrifice would be reproducible today. But the historical evidence indicates that such an assumption cannot be taken for granted. Because of a lack

of data matching modern opinion polls, long-term comparisons have to rely on much less specific findings of military history. These findings, however, can suggest that this readiness was only the result of a very peculiar social evolution.

It was a historical peculiarity of the Western dominated power system in modern times that it remained over a long period shaped by a balance and consequently by an intense competition for power. In contrast to the empires of Rome and Asia, no Western state could successfully ignore or subdue the market forces that came to shape the foundations of MP. Thus, they were exposed to a permanent pressure for innovation and adaption.[46] As a consequence, successful competitors not only needed to increasingly become equally capable of mobilizing their demographic and economic potentials for MP, they also needed to become closely adapted to each other with respect to the social foundations of MP. The result was an increasing militarization of Western societies until the World Wars. But this required both institutional and social preconditions.

The institutional one was the emergence of the modern state with its bureaucratic institutions, including a professional army establishment. Before its emergence, the capability to mobilize resources for war depended much more on its social order; for social orders had been primarily constituted through the possession of MP, which therefore was limited by how inclusively or exclusively it was organized. By restricting the possession of force as an instrument of rule social orders could allow for a higher or lower military participation ratio.[47] One consequence of the emergence of the modern state was that the possession of force was increasingly transferred from social classes to bureaucratic institutions capable of managing an expansion of military participation until the state could virtually organize whole societies for war.

Such a mobilization for war, however, was also dependent on social preconditions: primarily, a society's social cohesion and its members' willingness to serve. The common goals social groups are willing to fight and to sacrifice for, are not physically given, but socially constructed and dependent on the strength of a common identity. The social cohesion necessary for the growth of military participation in Western societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was provided by the rise in national identities and loyalties. In this sense, social cohesion was particularly crucial for the mass mobilization of the World War as it required a high degree of voluntariness. No compulsory system could ever have mobilized millions of young Europeans if most of them had not considered military service to be their duty. The casualty rates in particular of the World War I are less a reflection of the interests involved but of the readiness to accept sacrifices in the societies affected.

At a time when the citizen forces of ancient Rome had been replaced by professional soldiers, the apostle Paul took it for granted that none of his contemporaries would serve in the army at his own expense.[48] But, as Keegan noted,[49] this was precisely what millions of young Europeans did in the World Wars when they relinquished income and safety to serve at the front. This willingness to serve, however, rested on a social compulsion, too: the power of social values that effectively obliged men to fight for their country in the event of war or else lose the respect of

their families, friends, and wives. Do the same nations share the same values today so that families and friends would also urge men to fight rather than to stay at home?

The lack of a test case forbids any definitive answers to how Western societies would respond today to a major war or perceived vital interests as in the case of the World Wars. But it is possible to compare how the willingness to use force and to sacrifice evolved in minor wars, when nonvital interests are at stake. In this respect, it is revealing to compare the Boer war 1899–1902 with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq a century later. This comparison seems justified because the British hardly had a greater interest in annexing the Boer republics than the United States has in military success in Iraq or Afghanistan. With respect to security, the Boer republics obviously posed less of a threat than what might materialize today from terrorism or even weapons of mass destruction in the latter cases. Moreover, the Boers were less perceived by the British as an enemy than Saddam Hussein, Al Qaida, or the Taliban today by the United States, as indicated by the fact that many of their leaders soon joined the British colonial administration and later the government of the Union of South Africa.

Nevertheless, the British put up with casualty rates that far exceeded those of the United States in Iraq or Afghanistan. Whereas in Iraq and Afghanistan US annual death rates have been well below 1 percent, during the Boer war around 2.5 percent of the British troops perished due to disease and around 1.4 percent were killed[50] in action annually. Comparing the respective populations of both countries, the overall British casualty rate was around twenty times higher, her losses equivalent to a six-digit number of deaths for the United States today. Moreover, the Boer war saw volunteers sign up from all over the empire, often even paying their own expenses themselves.[51] Where is the run to the recruiting offices when it comes to the contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? The comparison between the Boer war and today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provides only an indication of how much the willingness to use force and to sacrifice to pursue their interests can differ significantly over time or between different societies. But in conclusion, the willingness to use force and sacrifice does not appear to be simply a function of interests. On the contrary, it is rather this willingness in a society that decides what kind of interests this society, its political organization, or its leaders can pursue.

## Interests, Society, and Norms

There is at least one fundamental problem preventing the willingness to sacrifice from being sufficiently explained by linking it to interests—or, to be more precise, to objective interests aimed at the possession of material potentials in terms of economic resources or political power, as the term will be understood in the following. To sacrifice for the pursuit of interests can make sense for collective actors such as states; for in war they face either an existential threat or only relative losses. But for the individual soldier the risk is existential in any case, whereas even an existential threat to their collective actors need not constitute an existential threat to themselves.

Relative risks can be weighed against interests, but existential risks cannot, especially if there is no existential threat; for one needs to live to have any interest.[52] In most wars, particularly in the Western world, the security and well-being of a soldier, his family, and possessions were not endangered by one's side victory or defeat but by his own participation in the war.

Although the willingness to fight can be used to pursue interests, it must precede them. For this reason, Martin van Creveld argues that this willingness has to be backed by a culture of war which is ultimately rooted deep in human nature.[53] Human nature, however, cannot offer a comprehensive explanation but can only constitute a general predisposition; for as van Creveld himself asserts, the extent to which the culture of war actually occurs as well as the aims it serves can vary significantly between both individuals and societies.[54] For this reason John Keegan concluded, too, that why and how men fight is predominantly determined by cultural causes rather than political interests but focused in this respect on the impact of social structures, norms, and ideas.[55] The criticism this argument has found—mainly that the concept of culture is vague and that hardly a clear dividing line between interest-based political and cultural reasons can be drawn[56]—underlines rather than contradicts a relevant conclusion: the impact of the social environment on MP is by necessity vague, because there is no common denominator for the how and why of warfare in military history. This is also the point I want to plausibilize: social factors shape the actual disposition to warfare and thus the MP of actors individually with respect to at least three factors. The first is the readiness to sacrifice. The second is the readiness to use force. The third are social norms and structures that determine an actor's specific style of warfare.

First, the readiness to sacrifice can differ significantly between societies because it depends on social developments; for anthropologically, the desire to avoid the vital risk of a direct fight rather than the readiness to take it seems to be the far more common condition of human behavior. Hence, in primitive warfare, battles are usually highly ritualized, limiting the number of casualties. What made it a very bloody affair was ambushes aimed at the killing of enemies when they were defenseless.[57] To enter into a direct fight between warriors requires overcoming considerable reluctance. As a methodical way of war, the decisive battle fought out in direct combat was a later invention that can be attributed to the Greek hoplites and has even been interpreted—controversially—as a feature of a specific Western way of war.[58] Anyway, these examples indicate that the extent to which people are prepared to take risks in war depends primarily on socialization, not interest.

Second, the readiness to use force in a society appears to be likewise influenced by the evolution of civilization. A reluctance to kill, for instance, can hardly be explained anthropologically; for it hardly exists in primitive warfare where mass killings in the form of massacres are a usual occurrence leading to much heavier casualty rates than in any modern war.[59] In modern societies, by contrast, where violence and warfare are a much more exceptional experience to mould socialization, armies need to rely on an intense physical and psychological conditioning to

secure their soldiers' willingness to fight and kill.[60] Studies indicate that the readiness to use force cannot only be very unevenly shared between different societies and times, but also within societies, with most of it applied by "the violent few."[61] In most contemporary conflicts, most violence stems only from small minorities of people.[62] The same goes for the genocides of the twentieth century in which the atrocities committed by comparatively few perpetrators contrast sharply with the passiveness of vast majorities.[63] These findings are an additional reason to conclude that the decision to use force does not evolve just as a rational means to an end.[64]

As with the readiness to sacrifice, the readiness to use force is a constraint of MP. During and after the Iraqi insurgency of 1920, British forces systematically used punitive military action against the civilian population to forestall further resistance.[65] Whether such methods would be successful today may be questionable. But it can well be argued that normative restrictions have significantly impaired the efficiency of counterinsurgency in Iraq after 2003.[66] However, using force in a generally more ruthless way is simply no longer an option that would conform to the values of Western societies and militaries.[67]

Third, the extent to which a society is willing to sacrifice as well as the extent and the ways in which it is ready to use force translate into and are constrained by social values. Whereas the individual use of force normally violates social norms, its collective application generally needs to be carried out in accordance with them; for the forms of violence that war permits against enemies are incompatible with the domestic life in whatever kind of social unit that is waging it. As an exemption from what is allowed in peacetime, warfare requires a legitimization provided by rules that distinguish the deeds of warriors from those of criminals. Fundamental disregard for these principles threatens the legitimacy and cohesion of the social order. This applies not only to the values of a society as a whole but also to the conduct of military forces. As social organizations their coherence depends, inter alia, on structures and doctrines based on traditions, mentalities, and values.[68]

Such structures and norms translate into specific styles of warfare limiting the adaptability and efficiency of militaries in conflicts with different forces. One recent example is the difficulties doctrine and the organizational structure of the US forces posted in Vietnam to adapt to effective counterinsurgency strategy, while the British were comparatively more flexible in Malaya.[69] Long periods of competition can lead to a close adaption between prevailing actors, making differences in the style of warfare almost vanish—as it was the case for centuries in European military history. However, this does not mean that actors in general would be able to adapt and prevail in low-intensity conflicts or against the emergence of different kinds of challengers in the short run; they are probably the less capable of doing so the more complex they are socially. But if actors are not adapted by a similar coevolution, differences in the style of warfare can be more decisive than the distribution of resources and was thus often a selective criterion that determined the survival or demise of actors. It is not simply military efficiency that determines how men fight but, again, rather the other way around that how they fight can limit their chances of military success and thus also their MP.

If the readiness to use force and to sacrifice as well as the resulting style of warfare can differ largely among actors, they can be understood as a major contributing factor in the difficulties state actors in general and Western powers in particular have faced in many asymmetric wars in recent times. A declining readiness to make sacrifices and to use force effectively reduces an actor's MP toward an opponent with a greater threshold for casualties. In such cases, the mutual assessment of each other's MP between actors can also change; for enemies will reckon less with an actor's resources than with his limits of tolerance. This was evidently the case with Osama bin Laden, for whom fighting the United States only made sense because he saw them as a paper tiger.[70] Western powers, on the contrary, need to compensate for lower tolerance levels with an asymmetric superiority. The technological development of their militaries largely aims at minimizing casualties, which is not simply identical with efficiency in warfare, given alone the disproportionate expenditure it can require. The implications of this inequality in the readiness to use force and to make sacrifices for MP are linked to its technological foundations. The more relative it is in this respect, the more the potentially greater aggressiveness of a weaker actor or a minority can be checked by the greater resources of stronger actors, the majority, or a central authority. But the less relative it is, the easier it becomes for the few or the weak to take on the many or the strong.

## Résumé

War was, as Clausewitz wrote, always as much a moral as a physical struggle. But today as from a Western point of view the kinds of actors posing a potential threat, their means and strategies as well as their respective willingness to resort to violence and to make sacrifices in armed conflicts are increasingly diversifying, the moral factor is becoming even more decisive. Since a growing casualty aversion effectively reduces an actor's MP toward an opponent with a greater threshold for casualties, it probably reduces the effectiveness of Western military deployments no less than the evolution of technology does.

What, to sum up, is the impact of social factors on MP? An actor's ability to mobilize his resources for war is limited by his readiness to resort to force and to make sacrifices. But since this is subject to long-term social and cultural transformations, it can be quite unevenly distributed both between and within societies. The effect of such differences is increased or decreased by the technical aspects of MP. The more relative the technical capabilities, the less an actor's greater aggressiveness can alter the balance of power. Today, however, it is rather the other way around, and the disproportionate effectiveness offered to weaker actors by the evolution of technology encounters a growing disproportionality of readiness among actors to use force and to make sacrifices. Both factors together accelerate the asymmetry of conflicts by favoring not only the weaker but in particular the more aggressive.

## Conclusions

In the present probably the most fundamental transformation of MP is taking place since the invention of effective firearms more than half a millennium ago. While the ''gunpowder revolution'' made MP increasingly relative and thus depended on demographic and economic resources, its current transformation reverses this trend. The technological evolution is providing weaker actors with the chance of exerting an increasingly overproportional impact of force. Social developments have resulted in a growing disparity in the readiness to use force and to make sacrifices as well as the related style of warfare among actors. The consequence is an increasing asymmetry favoring weaker but more aggressive actors between and within societies. As a result, while Western powers expanded easily such as in nineteenth century Sudan they today face significantly greater obstacles overcoming even comparatively small insurgencies like in twenty-first century Iraq.

The function of MP changes differently for different actors. Between states the ability to wage wars remains a function of MP but decreasingly as a direct instrument of rule. Peer competitors among states can actually carry more destruction faster to each other than ever before, but they can only decreasingly enforce their will on an opponent through the occupation and control of territories. Under such circumstances, the relation of costs and benefits has generally become more unfavorable to war between them. Furthermore, states are no longer either the sole or the most efficient bearers of MP, because the command over larger resources no longer translates into military superiority so easily.

Today, the evolution of MP leads not to a concentration but to a dispersion of power. This also means that the social and political order can be threatened by ever smaller groups of violent actors. It is a consequence that interstate wars are increasingly replaced by intrastate conflicts or asymmetric wars against nonstate actors. Thus, the evolution of MP weakens the monopoly on the use of force characteristic for the modern state. However, it would be too far-fetched to interpret the stability of societies as a mere function of MP. Like MP, the domestic as well as the international security of states depends on the respective social fabric and in particular on the readiness to use force and to make sacrifices within and between societies. Thus, the evolution of MP need not necessarily lead to the failure of the modern state. What it allows us to conclude is that it increases the vulnerability of the modern state to violent opposition and failure.

As long as MP was generally relative, a theory of MP could largely neglect an actor's individual function; for due to intense competition the prevailing actors had become closely adapted to each other with respect to not only their political, social and military organization, and economic systems but also their strategic culture and accordingly the model of rationality they followed. Strength in terms of resources and progress mattered, and actors who could not cope with that were over time either marginalized or eliminated. For the powers that prevailed under these circumstances, an efficient pursuit of power and the resources necessary to generate it practically had

to become an end in itself. This effect shaped the rational choice models—aiming at making gains or preventing losses in terms of material interests—and the related image of the rational actor in international relations theory.

The applicability of this model of rationality, however, does not depend on rationality as a general standard of behavior. For even disregarding its potential boundaries, rationality is about means, not aims; aims finally rely always on axiomatic premises. Which of them may be relevant cannot ultimately be predetermined by theory but depends on the impact they can generate. If MP becomes less relative, possible impacts become disconnected from competitiveness in terms of quantity and quality of capabilities. Consequently, more and more different actors and models of rationality can gain relevance. As a result, the scope with which ideological and normative differences as well as simple material profit can have an impact on the emergence and conduct of conflicts is increasing. It is the impact that is new, not the motives.

This analysis demonstrates the selective function of MP. Not only the quantity but also the qualities of MP determine the kind of actors and conflict scenarios that can pose a threat to international as well as domestic security. The more relative it is, the more restrictive this selection becomes and the more variables can be neglected in any formula of MP itself. Such a reality has been largely captured by Waltz Neorealism as the intentionally most parsimonious theory of international politics. If MP, however, becomes less relative and thus less selective, it is no longer possible to cover its function with a similarly unified theory.

With the quality of MP the challenges for theory also change. The more relative it is, the more its analysis can remain on the level of comparable capabilities measuring their proportional distribution. But if MP becomes less relative, fewer factors can be neglected and the formula of MP is more complex. In order to cover these factors a theory has to include two deeper levels of analysis. In the first level, the qualities of capabilities have to be examined, not their proportional distribution, but the proportionality or disproportionality of their potential impact in war in comparison with the relative strength of actors. The potential impact determines the effectiveness of tactical options and strategies.

Whereas the potential impact only opens up such options abstractly, their practical usability is restricted by social factors. Therefore, the influence of social structures and norms on MP has to be examined in the second level; for they define an actor's individual thresholds with respect to his ability to mobilize his resources in war, the sacrifices he can bear and the ways in which he can actually use force. As these thresholds can differ individually, the formula for MP can look different for different actors. This can imply that it can only be assessed specifically in comparison between opponents. Moreover, all these factors are open to evolutionary change. Any theory that tries to cover the whole of the history of warfare must either fail or be limited to such general observations that it is practically useless. But the more specific a theory is, the more limited can be the time to which it is applicable. If theory needs to comprehend evolutionary changes, it has to take an evolutionary approach itself, broadening or narrowing its focus to include or exclude different levels and factors of MP.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

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68. Compare the related debate in Armed Forces and Society, Guy L. Siebold, "Key Questions and Challenges to the Standard Model of Military Group Cohesion," *Armed Forces & Society* 37, 3 (2011): 448-68; Charles Kirke, "Group Cohesion, Culture, and Practice," *Armed Forces & Society* 35, 4 (2009): 745-53; Anthony King, "The Word of Command: Communication and Cohesion in the Military," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, 4 (2006): 493-512.
69. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 191-219; for the debate on the reasons of US military failure in Vietnam see James McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam? Soldiers, Civilians, and U.S. Military Strategy," *International Security* 35, 3 (2010/11): 95-123, at 95-100.
70. John Miller, "Usama bin Ladin: 'American Soldiers Are Paper Tigers' Interview," *Middle East Quarterly* 5, 4 (1998): 73-9.

## Author Biography

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