

Future conflicts due to urbanisation



Conflict in future will increasingly take place in the urban environment. Using examples since 1991 analyse the validity of this statement.

Over the previous two decades there has already been a plethora of urban based conflicts, ranging from Baghdad and Fallujah to Gaza and Aleppo and with the statistics showing urbanisation will rise so sharply in the coming decades that ‘ over 70 percent of the global population will reside in cities by the year 2050’, it will be somewhat coincidental that conflict will become more common in urban areas. ^[1] The Chief of Staff of the US Army, General Milley, was recently documented saying ‘ future war will be largely fought in urban terrain’ but still many debate whether Western militaries will indeed fight in confined spaces such as cities due to the obvious disadvantage that they cannot best utilise their mechanised units. ^[2] However, as understandable as this theory is, it is mistaken. The enemies main tasking is to nullify the others outstanding advantage, and one way of doing that is to fight in a close-quarter, built up environment to neuter movement and strength. Further, humans are centred around built up, populated areas for social and professional reasons, hence in theory, conflict will indeed follow. This has been seen in recent years via the terror attacks on major cities around the world, namely London, Paris and Boston to name a few. Lastly, conflict in urban areas has already had a prominent role in the late 20th and 21st century, so it is somewhat a given to expect it to play an even large role in future conflicts especially with the growth of non-state actors.

The last major conflict fought was that of the Afghanistan campaign, an operation which was predominantly fought in a rural setting, however, as has been seen by the recent terrorist acts, warfare and conflict will increasingly

take place in that of an urban setting due to the nature of the enemy – Guerrilla forces. Saskia Sassen says ‘irregular combatants are at their most effective in cities’ due to the machine based weapons Western powers have today, it is one of the only ways for the enemy to gain the upper hand.[3] So as conventional warfare fades in the near future, it would definitely seem that conflict will increasingly take place in an urban environment especially in the long run. It is somewhat coherent to assume a militaries’ modernisation will ‘compel adversaries to challenge supremacy in the very places we seek to avoid – areas of severely restricted terrain’.[4] So as urbanisation expands year on year, this will undoubtedly include urban environments. Operations within this closely inhabited and hostile terrain, inevitably means hostile forces can use deception, speed and the art of surprise that is harder to use in a more open area. The Russian Chief of the General Staff spoke of this type of direct approach – ‘Frontal engagements of large formations of forces at the strategic and operational level are gradually becoming a thing of the past. Long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals.’[5] It can then be said, it is highly more likely Guerrilla forces will use the intricate and difficult nature urban environments provide in the future.

Urbanisation and the growth of the population inevitably makes war in an urban environment much more likely, especially with the expectation that around 70 percent of the world population will live in cities by 2050. It is also noted by professionals, much of this growth will occur in ‘Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, geopolitical areas that are challenged by rampant poverty and

violence.’[6]The fact such a large proportion of world economic growth and output is initiated from cities and when these ‘challenged areas’ which struggle with the likes of income disparity, poverty and corrupt governments become such an influence, it will ‘significantly bolster their strategic importance.’[7]As quoted earlier, General Miley further went onto say ‘war is about politics and it will be fought where people live; in an urbanised world, large urban areas are the battlefields of the future.’[8]

Urban warfare in the 20th century was not on the same scale as that of the 21st. Although it was far increasing from the days of solely conventional warfare, with battles such as Hue City and Stalingrad, already the 21st century has seen many more, starting with the utter annihilation of the Russian city of Grozny, in 2000 leading to further urban operations during the War of Iraq seeing fighting in Baghdad and Fallujah in particular. Such recent conflicts give the idea that urban warfare is by no means about to leave the forefront of the militaries mind. As it has been said, ‘war and lesser forms of conflict do not organise themselves for anyone’s benefit.’[9]The fact Western militaries are now primarily fighting non-state actors adds another dimension. This leads to insurgents using urban environments as a way to defend. They can fortify every building and create tunnels within and between properties so to avoid detection alluding further dimensions. Additionally, while countries such as the US increase their military spending, it is somewhat logical for adversaries and non-state actors to use the more complex terrain that is an urban environment. This is ‘rather than to continue their modernisation efforts for linear force-on-force conflict.’[10]An American columnist and policy advisor has gone on to write ‘

for all our technological sophistication, warfare has never truly moved past sticks and stones – and even today, their bone-breaking power remains surprisingly potent... the most successful countermeasures are low-tech – and historically, this has been demonstrated just as often as has the opposite.’[11]Therefore, it is unnecessary for adversaries to attempt to match the Western powers development. Rather their best plan of action is to utilise what is already ‘ natural’ and settle with an urban environment as it ‘ offers tactical advantages to the defender that is otherwise inferior at the operational and strategic level.’[12]By conduction operations within an urban environment, tactical formation presented by the attacker will be unable to manoeuvre with any ease and further, commanders will find it increasingly difficult to bring together their forces at vital times due to the confused and tight nature of an urban environment. This will therefore negate any technological advantage a more Western military has over the non-state actors meaning it becomes increasingly more likely they will utilise these areas.

Finally, the low cost technology now on the market is for Guerrilla fighters is a vital component for warfare becoming more urban in the future. Now, organisations such the Taliban and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) can use technology bought online such as drones and mobile phones to counter more advanced military technology. By modifying drones into bombers, and using phones to judge distances for snipers, while transforming cars into vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and then driving them into crowded areas as was seen in the Afghanistan War 2001-2013. All these small things very much negate the scientific and technological advantage

that the West has over these Guerrilla forces hence making it far more likely that forces such as ISIS will continue to fight in urban areas in the future as was seen in cities such as Raqqa and Mosul which they took over from a much better organised and formed force in the Iraqi Army (IA). Mosul in particular is a very recent example of these tactics in use, with ISIS using snipers seen in propaganda to pin down the IA and then harassed and channeled them down areas plagued with IEDs so to take mass casualties. Had this been an open area it would have been a much harder to do due to the varying escape routes. The use of drones by ISIS in Mosul was also remarkable with a reported ' up to seventy attacks a day'.^[13]All these tactics are highly effective and take away a huge amount of risk towards the defending personnel as they can be out of a direct line of fire. This will lead to it being more commonly used and leading to a push towards the urban environment becoming a more common area of operation.

Urban conflict will inevitably become more prominent in the near future. As cities grow more influential and act as such a vital component to a country. It is therefore feasible to assume that the urban environment will become a more common area for operations than in the 20th Century. Urban fighting will be far more extreme and destructive than conflict in open spaces and it will further give the enemy an upper-hand but the West especially must be ready for such circumstances. To close, a quote from Spiller. ' Human behaviour has always been equal to the savagery of war, no matter how extreme. And in the beginning, no other form of early combat posed the test of intense, prolonged, unremitting violence as did combat in and against cities.'^[14]

[1] J Kalan, “ Think Again: Megacities,” *Foreign Policy* 206, May-June, 2014, 69; Halvard Buhaug and Henrik Urdal, “ An Urbanization Bomb? Population Growth and Social Disorder in Cities,” *Global Environment* , 23(1), 2013, p1

[2] C Lee, (2017, March 21). “ Milley: Army Will Have to ‘ Optimize’ for Future War in Urban Environments,” *Inside Defense*. Retrieved from <https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/milley-army-will-have-optimize-future-war-urban-environments>(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[3]<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jan/30/new-war-rise-endless-urban-conflict-saskia-sassen>(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[4]http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/on-the-likelihood-of-large-urban-conflict-in-the-21st-century#_edn2(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[5]M Galeotti. (2014, July 4). The ‘ Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[6]H Buhaug & H Urdal. (2013). An Urbanization Bomb? Population Growth and Social Disorder in Cities. *Global Environment Change*, p1-10.

[7]Kalan, J. (2014). Think Again: Megacities. *Foreign Policy*, 206, 69-73; Harris, Marc; Dixon, Robert; Melin, Nicholad; Hendrex, Daniel; Russo, Richard; Bailey, Michael, Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a Complex and Uncertain Future, June 2014, 21, <http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e2/c/downloads/351235.pdf>; Shunk, D. (2014, January 23). Mega Cities, <https://assignbuster.com/future-conflicts-due-to-urbanisation/>

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[8]Lee.

[9]R Spiller. Sharp Corners: Urban Operations at Century's End. Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

[10]Abadi, Mark, " The Only Chart You Need to See to Know That the US Spends More on Its Military Than the Next 11 Countries Combined, Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-military-spending-dwarfs-rest-of-world-2016-5>(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[11]Brooks, Rosa (2016). How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, p. 329-331.

[12]Spiller.

[13]<https://mwi.usma.edu/guide-islamic-states-way-urban-warfare/>(Last accessed: 28 Dec 2018)

[14]Spiller, 38