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Radikale Veränderung versus nachhaltige Entwicklung

Aufgrund der hohen Performance amerikanischer Hightech-Waffen im Golfkrieg 1991 sowie der rasanten Entwicklungen in der Kommunikationsindustrie haben viele Sicherheitsexperten postuliert, dass eine Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) entweder unausweichlich sei oder bereits begonnen habe. Die Überlegungen zur RMA gehen davon aus, dass die Weiterentwicklung von Präzisionswaffen, Echtzeitdatenübertragung und weiteren modernen Technologien gemeinsam mit Veränderungen in der Kampforganisation und Doktrin auch Einfluss auf die Führung künftiger Kriege und insofern auch auf die Grösse und Struktur der US-Streitkräfte haben können. Der vorliegende Artikel stellt dabei die Frage nach der Radikalität und Vollzugsgeschwindigkeit anstehender Reformationen und bettet diese in einen historischen Kontext ein.

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Michael O'Hanlon*

The opportunity cost of RMA

In the abstract, it is unobjectionable to favor innovation. But the prescriptions of some RMA proponents would have major opportunity costs. RMA proponents tend to argue that more budgetary resources should be devoted to innovation – research and development (R&D), procurement of new hardware, frequent experiments with new technology – and, to the extent necessary, less money to military operations, training, and readiness. The recent Bush administration budget proposal for 2003 adds money to all accounts, but if the budgetary situation tightens in the years ahead, defense innovation could be put in direct competition with readiness, global military engagement, peacekeeping, and perhaps even some classic deterrent missions. An overly ambitious innovation strategy could therefore have important, and possibly dangerous, effects on U.S. security policy.

New technologies afford new concepts

Given the budgetary and opportunity costs associated with rapidly pursuing a revolution in military affairs, some caution is in order. Before developing a modernization agenda, it is worth remembering what can go wrong with a rush to transform – and also what important innovations can occur even if no RMA is formally declared or pursued.

History tells us that radical military transformations only make sense when technology and new concepts and tactics are ripe. At other times, more targeted and selective modernization, together with vigorous research, development, and experimentation, makes more sense. In the 1920's, for example, major military systems such as the tank and airplane existed, but were not yet ready for large-scale purchase. Absent advanced operational concepts such as *blitzkrieg* and carrier aviation, there was nothing in place to guide hardware acquisition or the reshaping of military organizations. As such, research, prototyping, and experimentation were the proper elements of a wise innovation and acquisition strategy. In the 1930s, however, new operational concepts were better understood, technologies better developed, and geostrategic circumstances more foreboding. Under these circumstances, large-scale modernization made sense, and those countries that did not conduct it tended to perform badly in the early phases of World War II.

Today, several technological innovations are on the cusp of providing great advances in capability. High resolution real time intelligence, precision munitions, and unmanned aerial vehicles are a few of the technologies one would expect to dominate the military of the future. However, the incorporation of these new technologies into the U.S. military (or allied militaries) does not demand a radical transformation of military affairs. A more prudent approach should be taken, as it was in the 1920's, until doctrines and organizational concepts are developed that apply to the new technologies. The future vision of the military advanced by the current revolution minded administration does not demonstrate the doctrinal and organizational innovations that accompany a revolution in military affairs, as illustrated by maintenance of status quo force structures. Because most RMA proponents cannot clearly specify what a near-term transformation should consist of, we are inclined to liken today's situation to the 1920s rather than the 1930s.

Rapid evolution vs. radical revolution

Consider the last half century of technical and doctrinal innovation and improvement. No DoD-wide transformation strategies were necessary to bring satellites, stealth, precision-guided munitions, advanced jet engines, night-vision equipment, or other remarkable new capabilities into the force in past decades. So skepticism about the RMA and defense transformation is not tantamount to remaining fixated on the status quo. Our skepticism means only that we favor continued rapid evolution rather than radical measures.

Moreover, if the wrong ideas are adopted in an attempt to transform military forces, harm can actually be done. In the world wars, militaries overestimated the likely effects of artillery as well as aerial and battleship bombardment against prepared defensive positions; their infantry soldiers paid the price for these errors. Britain's radically new all-tank units were inflexible, making them less successful than Germany's integrated mechanized divisions in World War II. Strategic aerial bombardment did not achieve nearly the expected results in World War II either.

Some individuals feel that the above arguments notwithstanding, the United States has no choice but to rebuild its equipment inventories and combat units or face defeat at the hands of opponents using sea mines, cruise and ballistic missiles, and other means to attempt to deny the U.S. military the ability to build up forces and operate from large, fixed infrastructures.

However, many of the solutions to these problems may not be in the realm of advanced weaponry. True, long-range strike platforms, missile defenses, and other such advanced technologies may be part of the appropriate response. But so might more minesweepers, concrete bunkers for deployed aircraft, and other relatively low-tech systems. The military services already are biased in favor of procuring advanced weaponry at the expense of equally important but less advanced hardware. By emphasizing modernistic and futuristic technology, the most ambitious RMA concepts could reinforce this existing tendency, quite possibly to the nation's detriment. ■

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