

The wars of the 21st century

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In a passage of his work *On War* to which commentators have not given the attention it deserves¹, the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz described war as “a true chameleon”, forever changing and adapting its appearance to the varying socio-political conditions under which it is waged. Clausewitz elucidated his metaphor by distinguishing three elements of warfare: the intrinsic violence of its components, the creativity of the strategists and the rationality of the political decision-makers. The first of these, the “intrinsic violence of its components, the hatred and enmity which should be regarded as blind instinct”, he ascribes to the populace; he sees the second, the “play of probabilities and chance which makes it [war] a free activity of the soul”, as being a matter for the generals; and lastly, the “subordinate nature of a political tool, whereby it belongs purely to reason”, as making war an instrument for the government.² In each of these domains, social developments, shifting political relationships, technological progress and finally cultural change are continuously bringing about new configurations. In consequence, war, too, is forever assuming new and different forms. From Clausewitz’s perspective, the factor that brings about the most far-reaching and momentous changes in the forms taken by war is the interdependence between elemental violence, strategic creativity and political rationality.

Asymmetry as the salient feature of the new wars

Strategic creativity and the theory of speed

In the light of Clausewitz’s definition of war, the special creativity of Mao-Tse-tung as a theorist of guerrilla warfare lies in his discovery that a slow approach, a deceleration of the course of events, provides an opportunity for successful armed resistance against an enemy who is superior in terms

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both of military technology and of military organization, a discovery which was to raise small-scale war – previously conceived of simply as a concomitant strategy of large-scale war – to the level of a political-military strategy in its own right. A technologically and organizationally superior military apparatus tends to accelerate the course of war because that is the best way for it to bring its superiority to bear. Examples are Murat's cavalry swiftly pursuing and destroying the enemy defeated by Napoleon on the battlefield; Guderian's tanks exploiting small breakthroughs to prise open deep gaps in the enemy front; and Schwartzkopf's fighter bombers and cruise missiles in the Second Gulf War, paralysing Iraq's command and supply structures before the war on the ground had even begun. The consummate strategic skill of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder in waging the wars of German unification of 1866 and 1870-71 reflected not least the fact that he was better than his adversaries in deploying resources to accelerate events. Similarly, the dramatic superiority the US military apparatus has achieved over all potential enemies in the last two decades is largely due to its capacity to exploit the various opportunities for accelerating the pace at the different combat levels.

It might be argued then — and Paul Virilio, the French theorist of speed, and his adherents are of this view³ — that the development of war constantly follows the imperatives of acceleration and that, in any conflict, victory will go to whoever has the greater potential for acceleration and the ability to use it effectively. However, Clausewitz's chameleon metaphor is a reminder that the history of war does not follow such one-way development models, generally based on technological progress, but is subject to the interplay of far more complex factors. There is a price to pay for acceleration; it entails above all an ever-increasing expenditure on logistics, a correspondingly decreasing proportion of fighting forces in the total number of troops, spiralling costs to equip troops with modern weapons and, finally, a more and more vulnerable and problem-prone military apparatus.⁴

1 An exception to this rule is Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Das Rätsel Clausewitz: Politische Theorie im Widerstreit*, Munich, 2001, esp. pp. 98 ff.

2 Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 19th ed., Werner Hahlweg, Bonn, 1980, pp. 212 ff.

3 Of Virilio's extensive works, see especially his essay *La vitesse de libération*, Paris, 1995.

4 The availability of the atom bomb apart, it is above all the inflated logistical structure of modern armies on which Martin van Creveld, in his much discussed book *The Transformation of War*, Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, 1991 (published in German under the title, *Die Zukunft des Krieges*, Munich, 1998), bases his argument that the wars of the future will no longer be waged with conventional armies.

Mao's creativity lay in his refusal to join in the race for a greater acceleration of hostilities, as his peasant army would not have been able to win a war of that kind. Instead, he rejected the principle of acceleration and, turning weakness into strength, made slowness his watchword, defining guerrilla warfare as the "long war of endurance".⁵ Guerrilla strategy also consists in using every possible means to make the enemy really pay the price of acceleration, to such an extent that the war ultimately becomes unaffordable. Raymond Aron encapsulated this situation in the formula that partisans win the war if they don't lose it and those who are fighting against partisans lose the war if they don't win it.⁶ The two sides each have a different time frame. In Vietnam, the Americans learned to their cost how effective this approach can be. Asymmetrical warfare, the salient feature of the new wars in recent decades, is based to a large extent on the different velocities at which the parties wage war on each other: asymmetries of strength are based on a capacity for acceleration which outstrips that of the enemy, whereas asymmetries of weakness are based on a readiness and ability to slow down the pace of the war. This strategy generally involves a considerable increase in the casualties suffered by one's own side. Symmetrical warfare, on the other hand, as exemplified by the wars of the eighteenth, nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries, may be defined as warfare conducted by the parties concerned at the same pace. In symmetrical warfare, it was generally only minimal advantages in terms of acceleration which made the difference between victory and defeat.

High and low-tech weapons

The wars of the twenty-first century — as will be seen from the strategic significance of deceleration in the age of acceleration — will hardly be a linear extension of the trends of the twentieth century. Greater material resources and a more advanced technological development alone will not automatically tip the scales between victory and defeat. The enormous superiority of the United States in military technology is no guarantee that the USA will emerge victorious from all the wars it seems ever more ready to wage. Yet the economically highly advanced societies of the West, based on the rule of law, political participation and a "post-heroic" mentality (i.e. for which "heroic war" and

⁵ For more detail, see Herfried Münkler, *Über den Krieg: Stationen der Kriegsgeschichte im Spiegel ihrer theoretischen Reflexion*, Weilerswist, 2002, pp. 173 ff.

⁶ Raymond Aron, *Der permanente Krieg*, Frankfurt/M., 1953, p. 48.

the sacrifice of life is no longer an ideal) will have no choice but to pursue the technological development of their military apparatus if they wish to remain capable of a military response.

The western democracies are simply unable to wage Mao Tse-tung's "long war of endurance". As they are programmed for interchange rather than sacrifice — and this is what distinguishes "post-heroic" societies from those of the "heroic" age — they will do their utmost to avoid or minimize their own losses in combat, and that is possible only with superior military technology. Examples of this include the Gulf War of 1991, in which the Iraqi forces lost around 100,000 men as compared with about 140 on the side of the US-led Coalition, and, most striking of all, Kosovo, which has gone down in military history as the first war in which the victors did not lose a single man in combat. Accordingly, the arms races of the twenty-first century will no longer be symmetrical like those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Germany and England vied with each other in the construction of warships or the USA and the USSR in nuclear delivery systems. On the contrary, it will be an asymmetrical competition between high-tech and low-tech weapons. Since 11 September we are aware that mere box cutter's knives, if used to hijack airliners so as to crash them into buildings and cities, can serve to shake a superpower to its foundations. In that case, however, it was not deceleration alone which enabled the terrorist operatives to attack the USA but a combination of speed and slowness. The infrastructures of the side attacked were exploited by a clandestine group, which was able to go about preparing the attacks quietly and calmly, and then turned aircraft into rockets and jet fuel into explosive. Mohammed Atta and his accomplices attacked the USA by using its own speed — from the concentration and intensity of air transport to a media system which broadcast the catastrophe of 11 September 2001 to the whole world in real time — as a weapon against it.

Elemental violence

Strategic creativity cannot, of course, unfold independently of the other two elements of Clausewitz's trinity, namely the genuine violence of war and the political rationality of the top decision-makers. Thus the principle of a systematic deceleration of violence — as in a guerrilla war — can be applied successfully only where an overwhelming majority of the population see no other means of resolving social, economic and political problems than to wage a war that will entail heavy losses and large-scale destruction. Only then will the

people provide the guerrilla groups with logistical support, refrain from collaborating with the enemy and continue to allow more and more of their young men (and women) to be recruited for the war. Otherwise the guerrilla fighters cannot move freely within the population like fish in the water, but are out of their native element and fall easy prey to the enemy. For a long time, this precondition limited the applicability of the asymmetric strategy of guerrilla warfare. It has been known in the form described above since the early nineteenth century, for it could in principle be used only on the defensive and only if the population was prepared to make heavy sacrifices.

The really threatening aspect of the latest forms of international terrorism is that they have overcome the constraints on the use of asymmetric warfare which have proved so effective for so long — to use Clausewitz's terminology, the limited extent of hatred and enmity and the resultant limitations to the use of war as a political tool — by discovering that the enemy's civilian infrastructure can serve as the functional equivalent of one's own civilian population and its readiness for sacrifice.⁷

Moreover, current trends also suggest that in the twenty-first century large sections of the population may well see their sole chance for the future in waging wars and emerging successful. Growing environmental risks, such as water shortages, increasing desertification and rising sea levels; a greater global inequality in the distribution of consumer goods, in educational opportunities and in living conditions; the imbalance in demographic rates and the related waves of migration; the instability of the international financial markets and the dwindling ability of States to control their own currency and economy; and, finally, in some parts of the world, the rapid disintegration of States — all these are sufficient grounds for assuming that many people will see violent change rather than peaceful development as a better chance to assure their future. Thus the use of force for a better future will become the key element of their political reasoning and they will be ready not only to fight for vital resources but also to begin asymmetrical wars with superior adversaries.

Vulnerability of the developed world

Precisely because of their advanced socio-economic development, these superior adversaries are themselves highly vulnerable and, however great their military superiority, they cannot eliminate this vulnerability. The aim of the

⁷ See Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2002, p. 175.

US in its various projects to establish a missile defence system is to make itself invulnerable. Such missile defence systems are of course no longer directed against the Soviet Union but against enemies who, though small and relatively weak, pose a serious threat through their possession of nuclear warheads and a few delivery systems. Moreover, the hopes placed in those projects were dispelled by the attacks of 11 September. In principle, war has become not only politically but also economically unattractive for the developed countries. The costs outweigh the returns. In “post-heroic” societies, the highest value is the preservation of human life and with it the multiplication and intensification of individual sensations of well-being.

Since the end of the Second World War at the latest, western societies have therefore justified every type of armament on the grounds of defence, the purpose of such a build-up is not to prepare for war but to prevent it. If the socio-political world consisted only of such societies, Kant’s concept of eternal peace would long have become a reality.⁸ However, that would require all societies to be following a course of development modelled on the western secularization of politics, social individualization and, finally, the pluralization of values. Yet it is precisely against this model that the various fundamentalist movements are fighting. Far from merely defending remnants of backward traditions, they are on the contrary resisting modernization along western lines. The dilemma that has already determined socio-political development in the 1980s and 1990s will also be crucial for the twenty-first century. The fact that a world in which society has developed through interchange and cooperation is based on assumptions which can be taken for granted only if there is an extensive levelling out of the particularities stemming from religion, culture and civilization. Thus apart from a fight to establish new rules for the distribution of economic assets, educational opportunities and the necessities of life, the defence of cultural identity could also become a recurring reason for going to war. Above all, a development theory that looks forward optimistically to peace regularly tends to overlook the fact that, not least through the socio-economic development of recent decades, new opportunities have arisen for profitable economies of developing countries based on war and violence.

⁸ Klaus-Jürgen Gantzel, for example, has defended the view that, once capitalist society has been adopted on a world scale, war will disappear as a means of acquiring goods and services. Klaus-Jürgen Gantzel, “Kriegsursachen: Tendenzen und Perspektiven”, *Ethik und Sozialwissenschaften*, Vol. 3, No. 8, 1997, pp. 257-266.

The privatization and commercialization of war

Historical perspectives of the profits of war

But how has war once again become a distinctly lucrative affair? It must be recalled that waging war has not always been a loss-making business. On the contrary, at various times in European history, when the circumstances were right, the raising of private armies could be perfectly profitable. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain the emergence of mercenary forces such as the Italian *condottieri*, the Swiss *Reisläufer* or the German *Landsknechte*. All of them presumably must have seen war as a means of earning a living. As the axiom has it, *bellum se ipse alet* — war feeds on war. Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was a particularly fertile ground for this development. The substantial financial resources accumulated in the Italian trading cities made them a lucrative target for armed aggression. At the same time, the urban upper classes were disinclined to wage war themselves. As there was plenty of surplus labour in rural areas to do the military work, nothing was easier than to establish a fixed-term employment contract, a so-called *condotta*. The urban upper classes got the rural lower classes to do their fighting for them. The latter were not slow to realize what potential power and opportunities for enrichment had come their way. Fighting wars paid well. Within a few years, many who had started out with little or nothing were living in comfort and a whole string of petty noblemen turned *condottieri* had risen to the rank of dukes and princes.

One of the characteristic features of the commercialized wars fought by the warlords of the late Middle Ages and early modern history was that those waging them sought to avoid major battles and indeed, wherever possible, even decisive ones. Fighting such battles would have undermined their interest in long-term employment and, more importantly, it would have put them at risk of life and limb, an action hardly in keeping with the attitudes of those who live from war but do not really want to die by it. The *condottieri* armies operated by trying to cut each other's lines of supply and so force the adversary to capitulate without a fight. That was a considerably more attractive proposition than mutual slaughter, and the ransoms which could be earned by capturing enemy officers and soldiers represented a highly desirable bonus. If the ransom was paid, the enemy could be released and the war could start all over again.

As a rule, those who suffered from this type of warfare were the cities and nobles who employed the mercenaries. They seldom saw their objectives achieved and were constantly having to raise funds in order to finance their wars.

For this reason they burdened the populace of their lands with special levies and war taxes. This might be described as the *civilized form* of waging war against the population, since so long as it worked, i.e. if the warlords and their soldiers were regularly paid, the population was spared in the areas in which they operated. Things soon changed if the pay was not forthcoming. Then the warlords switched to the *uncivilized form* of warfare against the population, i.e. they pillaged and plundered, setting fire to farmsteads and villages, killing the men and raping the women, in order to get all concerned to see that it was better to pay up regularly than to be subjected to this extreme form of debt collection.

The continuous rise in the cost of the military apparatus during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made war too expensive for the private sector, and those warlords of early modern history gradually disappeared from the scene. Albrecht von Wallenstein, the last great warlord, enjoyed considerable success at first, but was doomed to failure for political reasons.

Inter-State wars and the decrease of privatisation

There were three main reasons for the steadily rising cost of waging war: the development of artillery, the use of which was decisive in battle; the transformation of foot-soldiers into a disciplined and tactically trained infantry, who took up position in long lines to engage the enemy and were increasingly equipped with firearms; and, finally, the growth in size of the army, which had to be able to combine the deployment of infantry, cavalry and artillery in order to achieve victory in the field. Any party failing to join in the technological and organizational developments of the “military revolution” of early modern history⁹ soon fell behind and disappeared from the ranks of those waging war in accordance with symmetrical principles. However, as infantry, artillery and the enlarged army all cost money, it was not long before only the State could raise the necessary funds. A full array of artillery with guns of various calibres was now beyond the resources of private military patrons. The size of the army, the need for exercises to harmonize the deployment of the three different arms and, particularly, the requirement for constant training of the infantry over long periods, all made the provision of troops ever more costly and the waging of war a less and less attractive business proposition for the private sector. War and preparations for war were disconnected from the logic of capital amortization and transferred to the direct authority of the State.

⁹ See Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.

The first consequence of bringing war under State control was that, as a rule, the hostilities became shorter, both sides being interested in a quick and decisive outcome. The means of arriving at such a result was the battle and thus there arose a type of warfare designed with this end in mind, i.e. to bring about battles in order to end the war and conclude a peace. While this led to a dramatic intensification of violence on the battlefields of Europe, it simultaneously set clear limits to the use of violence in terms of time and space. War of this kind was a war of soldiers against soldiers and the civilian population was largely spared from violence and destruction, unless they had the misfortune to live in the path of an advancing army or to find themselves on the battlefield. The sharp distinction drawn between combatant and non-combatant in modern international law is based largely on this development or, at any rate, would otherwise hardly have come to be recognized and applied.

It was therefore due not least to the development of arms technology and military organization that war and peace were each given a distinct legal status, the transition from one to the other itself being marked by a legal act, i.e. a declaration of war and the conclusion of a peace treaty; that war between States and civil war came to be regarded as separate and clearly distinguishable forms of war, the former being hedged about by conventions whereas the latter was not; and that, finally, in wars between States, a distinction was made between combatants and non-combatants under the relevant provisions of the Hague Convention respecting Laws and Customs of War on Land of 1899/1907 and the Geneva Convention of 1864, and belligerents were required to do everything in their power to spare non-combatants from the effects of hostilities.

The return of privatisation in the new wars

In the new wars, the opposite applies in nearly every respect. Most of these wars are not fought by well-equipped armies but by the hastily recruited militias of tribal chiefs or heads of clans, plus the armed followers of warlords and the like. Above all, the weapons used in the new wars are cheap — small arms, automatic rifles, anti-personnel mines and machine guns mounted on pick-up trucks. Heavy weapons are only rarely used and, when they are, consist mostly of remnants from the stockpiles of the Cold War. That wars of this type can be fought — and even fought successfully — is mainly due to the fact that they are not decided on the battlefield between two armies but drag on interminably in violence directed against the civilian population. Whereas in symmetrical conflict conditions the mere preparation for a war — to say nothing of waging one — has

become ever more expensive, the strategists of the new wars have succeeded in making direct warfare so cheap that it is once again a promising business.

Obviously this does not mean that the full social cost of a war is also low. On the contrary, the long-term consequences of an internal war are immense — the destruction of the infrastructure, the devastation of the countryside, the roads and fields infested with mines, the growing up of a generation of children who have no experience of anything but war and violence.¹⁰ However, these costs do not have to be borne by the protagonists of the war. To adapt an old phrase, it could be said that the warlords and militia leaders have managed in an absolutely outrageous way to privatize the profits of the wars they wage and to nationalize the costs. That this is possible has much to do with the failure of nation-building in large swathes of the Third World. In the so-called *failed States*, there are no functioning institutions capable of putting a stop to the nationalization of costs or at least keeping them within bounds. The country's civilian population and natural resources fall prey to those who, with the help of their armed henchmen, exercise control over them. Thus the violence propagated by the warlords gouges ever deeper into society until, in the end, the only possibility of rescue is through the intervention of outside powers. Yet it remains an open question whether these powers can bring peace to the country or whether they themselves will be drawn into the hostilities and the conflict, as a result of their intervention and a possible counter-intervention, will become transnational. Events in Angola, Congo, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Caucasus region are emphatic reminders of this danger.

The growing number of new wars that have been observed over the last two decades or so are mainly characterized by the fact that in them the distinction between gainful activity and the open use of force, a distinction which developed from the nationalization of war and is prerequisite for every stable economy based on peace, has been eroded to vanishing point. In the new wars, for those who have the weapons and are ready to use them, force has become a source of income, whether to procure the means of subsistence or, frequently also, to get rich. Thus in the new wars the old axiom is making a comeback: war feeds on war, and so must be fed by war. Accordingly, these new wars are typified by the emergence of warlords who control a territory by force of arms in order to

¹⁰ See Anne Jung (ed.), *Ungeheuer ist nur das Normale: Zur Ökonomie der „neuen“ Kriege*, medico international, Frankfurt/M., 2002; Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (eds), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder/London, 2000; François Jean and Jean-Christophe Rufin (eds), *Economie des guerres civiles*, Paris, 1996.

exploit its natural resources — from oil and minerals to precious metals and diamonds — or to issue licences for their exploitation. At the same time, there is not only a proliferation of mercenaries, the well-paid hired labour for these wars, but also an increased use of child soldiers, who have proved to be a cheap and effective means of warfare. The indifference of these children to danger, their brutality and cruelty to their adversaries, the problems that having to fight them poses particularly for international peace-keeping forces, the fact that a supply of drugs and food is enough to ensure their obedience, all of these have made the child soldier one of the warlords' favourite tools. And, from a different perspective, the poverty and distress prevailing in large parts of the Third World have assumed such proportions that to obtain regular meals or, where that is not possible, perhaps to plunder what they need, many children are ready to enter the service of a warlord. According to UN estimates, there are some 300,000 child soldiers worldwide, defined as children aged between eight and fourteen who have permanently joined the ranks of a warring party and bear arms and use force on its behalf.

It is not only the disintegration of the State in many parts of the so-called Third World which has made war on a private basis and for one's own account an attractive proposition again, but also and especially the ease with which civil war economies are able to tap into the flows of capital and goods in the world market. Apart from oil and strategic raw materials such as ores and minerals, gold and diamonds, the warlords use above all illegal or fraudulently certified goods to finance their wars and frequently to accumulate enormous fortunes. Trafficking in drugs and increasingly in young women has also proved extremely lucrative because of the high level of demand in the affluent countries. The economic entities of the OECD countries are not entirely blameless for the renewed profitability of war.

Two factors play a crucial part in the emergence of the new wars: the ability to finance them from the flows of goods and capital generated by globalization and, more important still, the fact that they have become cheap to wage. The war that East and West spent over forty years preparing for in order to prevent it taking place was an enormously costly confrontation. To some extent, the very costs of that unremitting arms race can be said to have caused the collapse of one of the sides, the USSR. While peace and conflict research institutions were still busy reconstructing and measuring the symmetries of the East-West arms race, the planners and strategists of the new wars had already succeeded in breaking away not only from the spiralling arms race but also from the compulsion to prepare for and wage symmetrical wars. This process,

which has hitherto received too little attention, is paving the way for the privatization and commercialization of war described above that could, in the long run, prove even more momentous and fateful than the East-West conflict.

These new wars are not likely to remain forever confined to the regions now affected by them, i.e. parts of Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and central and southern Asia, but will spread via various channels to the affluent regions of the northern hemisphere. These are areas which the South cannot attack with traditional military means. And this is where our brief introductory remarks in connection with Clausewitz come in. War is a chameleon which adapts to the current socio-political configuration, its only constant feature being elemental violence. September 11 has given some idea of what new forms of war may take and to what extent there may eventually be a gradual demilitarization of war.

The demilitarization of war

The demilitarization of war means that the wars of the twenty-first century will be fought only partly by soldiers and, for the most part, will no longer be directed against military objectives. A return to the forms of war which the nationalization of warfare brought to an end during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and replaced by a disciplined military organization can already be observed. Civilian targets are now taking the place of military objectives in many areas, starting with towns and villages overrun and despoiled by militia leaders and warlords and extending to the symbols of political and economic might that were targeted by terrorist commandos on 11 September. Even the means used to carry out these attacks are less and less of a genuinely military nature. For instance, in the wars of Africa and central Asia a civilian vehicle, the Toyota pick-up, has come to symbolize the emergence of militia groups and warlords. Likewise, the terrorist attacks of 11 September were made possible only by transforming civilian facilities into assault weapons.

The attacks of 11 September and especially the series of terrorist bombings in Israel have highlighted a specific new threat: operatives who turn their own bodies into weapons and thus link the successful use of force to their own certain death. Attacks of this kind are possible only by renouncing altogether any means of escape. In other words, suicide-bombers compensate for their military inferiority by giving up any chance of survival.¹¹ For a whole series of good

¹¹ An exhaustive account of old and new forms of so-called suicide attacks is to be found in Christoph Reuter, *Mein Leben ist eine Waffe: Selbstmordattentäter – Psychogramm eines Phänomens*, Munich, 2001.

reasons this may be considered morally reprehensible, but it can hardly be disputed that a new form of “heroism” has developed which, for the “post-heroic” societies of the West, is highly dangerous in terms not only of the instruments used but also of the underlying symbolism. Apart from giving bloody proof of the vulnerability of the societies attacked, these new forms of terrorist action convey a further message for them, namely that, because they are oriented towards the preservation of life, they will ultimately be defeated by those who are ready to sacrifice themselves. The act of suicide is an expression of contempt for societies which, out of principles of social self-organization, have repudiated such sacrifice of life or make use of it only metaphorically.¹² The strategists of terror have recognized that “post-heroic” societies, with their lifestyle and self-assurance, are particularly vulnerable to attack by individuals with values of martyrdom. This is a further example of the strategic creativity which for Clausewitz is the essential characteristic of the chameleon of war.

From asymmetrical strategies...

From the strategic use of deceleration against a military apparatus which relies on stepping up hostilities to the rediscovery of suicide as a threat to interchange-based societies, the latest changes in the conduct of war are nearly always characterized by asymmetric strategies. It is therefore predictable that the wars of the twenty-first century will be predominantly asymmetric, contrary to the so-called classic wars of European history since the seventeenth century, which were almost entirely symmetrical in character. For the reciprocal use of force to be symmetrical, numerous conditions must be met, foremost among them the acknowledgement by those concerned that they are *on a par* with each other. However, this acknowledgement, which may come about by the adversaries’ mutual inclusion in a system of values thus considered binding on them both (chivalry) or by their common subjection to legal rules (international law, laws of war), depends on assumptions of equality which need to be largely satisfied: broadly similar weaponry, no strategic disparities in information, and a socially analogous form of recruitment and training of combatants. On this basis, a limitation of the use of force is possible, e.g. force to be used only between such equals who are able to identify each other as combatants.

¹² See also Herfried Münkler and Karsten Fischer, “‘Nothing to kill or die for...’ – Überlegungen zu einer politischen Theorie des Opfers”, in: *Leviathan* 28, 2000, Vol. 3, pp. 343-362, and Herfried Münkler, “Terrorismus als Kommunikationsstrategie: Die Botschaft des 11 September”, *Internationale Politik* 56, 2001, Vol. 12, pp. 11-18.

Those who fall outside this equation will be spared from the deliberate use of force, though only on condition that they, for their part, refrain from the use of force. In this way force can be confined to specific places and areas: the duelling ground, the battlefield, the front. Hence, symmetrical wars are generally characterized by a limited use of force. In asymmetrical wars, on the other hand, there is a tendency for the violence to spread and permeate all domains of social life.¹³ This is because in asymmetrical warfare the weaker side uses the community as a cover and a logistical base to conduct attacks against a superior military apparatus. The starting point of this process is marked by guerrilla warfare and its end, at present, by international terrorism.

...to transnational wars

The main feature of the symmetrical war in modern European history was that it was an international war. Once war became a monopoly of the State and was consequently fought only between States, the equality and mutual recognition needed for symmetrical warfare were institutionally guaranteed. It was only in the course of the Second World War, with the war of annihilation in the East and the strategic bombing of urban residential areas, that the limitations established on that basis to the use of force were finally breached. Until then, the State had drawn the boundaries, distinguishing between internal and external affairs, friend and foe, war and peace, military and police, loyalty and treachery, and so on. For many years, the relevant literature has recognized and used the term *internal* or *civil war* as the antonym of international war or war between States. Even so, the antonym depended on the reference system of statehood, in that it derived its meaning from the boundaries drawn by the State. The term *civil war* is the symmetrical opposite of the term *international war*; the asymmetrical antonym is *transnational war*, i.e. one in which the boundaries drawn by the States no longer play a role. This type of war crosses national borders without being waged as a war between States, such as the wars in and around Angola, Zaire/Congo, Somalia and Afghanistan. It is characterized by a constant switching of friends and foes and by a breakdown of the institutional authorities (such as the military and the police) responsible for

¹³ This distinction is discussed in detail by Mary Kaldor in *Neue und alte Kriege: Organisierte Gewalt im Zeitalter der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt/M., 2000.

ordering and having recourse to the use of force. In this context, acts of war and criminality become indistinguishable and the war drags on with no prospect of a peace accord to end it. Such wars, which had already multiplied in the 1980s and 1990s, look set — along with guerrilla-terrorist wars — to determine the course of violence in the twenty-first century in many parts of the world.

Conclusion

Is there any way to halt or at least to slow down the developments outlined above? Probably a return to the stability of statehood at the world level will be the only effective means of curbing the privatization of war, the growing asymmetry of the strategies of force and the demilitarization of war, i.e. the assertion of autonomy by elements previously incorporated in politico-military strategies. Statehood, after all, is subject to the criteria of political rationality, which are irreconcilable with such developments.¹⁴ However, in view of the trends subsumed under the term *globalization*, any such renewed nationalization of politics at the world level seems doubtful. Above all, it would have the desired success only if elites capable of resisting corruption were to come to power in these States. In view of the developments currently to be observed, this, too, appears a rather unlikely prospect. Thus the wars of the twenty-first century will, in the majority of cases, not be waged with massive firepower and tremendous military capabilities. They will tend to go on smouldering with no clear beginning or end, while the dividing line between the warring parties on the one hand and international organized crime on the other will become more and more blurred. For this reason, some people are already disputing the fact that such situations do indeed constitute war.¹⁵ They forget that before war became a State monopoly in Europe, there was even then a close alliance between mercenaries and bandits. It looks as though, during the twenty-first century, the chameleon of war will increasingly change its appearance to resemble in many respects the wars waged from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

¹⁴ This question is discussed in greater detail in Herfried Münkler, "Die Kriege der Zukunft und die Zukunft der Staaten" in Wolfgang Knöbl/Gunnar Schmidt (eds), *Die Gegenwart des Krieges: Staatliche Gewalt in der Moderne*, Frankfurt/M., 2000, pp. 52-71.

¹⁵ For example, Erhard Eppler, *Vom Gewaltmonopol zum Gewaltmarkt: Die Privatisierung und Kommerzialisierung der Gewalt*, Frankfurt/M., 2002.

Résumé

Les guerres du XXI^e siècle

Herfried Münkler

Cet article identifie et fait ressortir les traits saillants des « nouvelles guerres » du XXI^e siècle et analyse trois phénomènes qui leurs sont propres : l'asymétrie, la « démilitarisation » ainsi que la privatisation et la commercialisation de la guerre.

L'asymétrie entre les parties aux conflits est le premier élément servant à distinguer les guerres actuelles de celles du siècle dernier. L'auteur explique ce point de vue en liant la théorie de la vitesse à la guerre : d'un côté les belligérants bénéficiant d'une technologie plus performante l'utilisent comme moyen pour accélérer la guerre et obtenir ainsi une victoire rapide ; de l'autre côté les guérilleros, en ralentissant la guerre, leur font payer cette accélération au prix fort. C'est entre autres pour cette raison que les sociétés les plus avancées sur le plan technologique n'ont pas nécessairement l'ascendant sur leur ennemi dans les conflits asymétriques.

Deuxièmement, les « nouvelles guerres » vont se « démilitariser » parce qu'elles ne seront plus combattues uniquement par des soldats et qu'elles ne seront plus dirigées principalement contre des cibles militaires. Ces changements reflètent à nouveau les effets d'une stratégie asymétrique. Cette tendance est accentuée et liée à la confusion sur les règles humanitaires applicables dans les conflits déstructurés ou transnationaux.

Le troisième élément est l'augmentation de la privatisation et de la commercialisation des conflits. Les événements du 11 septembre 2001 ont montré que parmi les parties aux conflits peuvent figurer des groupes criminels ou terroristes transnationaux. Cela pourrait aboutir à des conflits privés entre certains États et ces types d'acteurs internationaux. Le phénomène des seigneurs de la guerre tirant profit du conflit et ayant de ce fait un intérêt dans la continuation de celui-ci a déjà ressurgi lors des « nouvelles guerres ». L'article retrace aussi l'aspect historique de cette commercialisation de la guerre.

L'auteur conclut que ces tendances vont probablement continuer à affecter la majorité des guerres dans un avenir proche, à moins qu'un retour à la stabilité des États puisse freiner la privatisation et la démilitarisation de la guerre. La globalisation pourrait également équilibrer la distribution du pouvoir et de la richesse, en diminuant les causes sous-jacentes des conflits asymétriques.