



**WHITHER  
WHITHER**

**WAR?**



**Francis J. Gavin**



In the introductory essay to Volume 3 Issue 3, chair of the TNSR editorial board Francis J. Gavin explores whether the nature of war and interstate competition may have changed and how the articles in this issue illuminate the changes.

As the world sunk deeper into a deadly global conflagration in 1941, Princeton University professor Edward Meade Earle gathered a group of eminent scholars to discuss the history and practice of military strategy. The seminar eventually produced a landmark collection of essays, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*.<sup>1</sup> The book, which was updated in 1986 by Peter Paret, quickly became a classic.

Three things in particular are notable about the 1943 volume, which included some of the best military and political historians working in the middle part of the 20th century. First is the focus on individuals: leaders such as Frederick the Great and thinkers like naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan. The second is an understanding that conflict had become all-encompassing, dominating every aspect of society. Given the total mobilization of World War II, when every element of the economy, political system, and even information was tightly controlled and exploited by the state, this frightening perspective was understandable: “When war comes it dominates our lives.”<sup>2</sup> Third, the essays focus on the physical elements of war: the movement, clash, and material and human destruction between massed groups of men and machines fighting to destroy each other. Certain themes appear over and over again, across the centuries as well as across national and ideological lines:

Among these are the concept of lightning war and the battle of annihilation; the war of maneuver vs. the war of position; the relationship between war and social institutions and between economic strength and military power; psychology and morale as weapons of war; the role of discipline in the army; the question of the professional army vs. the militia.<sup>3</sup>

The outstanding articles in this issue have caused me to reflect upon what such a volume might look like today (an important task my esteemed Kissinger Center colleague Hal Brands is actually pursuing). Would these three themes — the role of individuals and leaders, the complete socio-economic mobilization by the nation-state to prosecute war, and the place of kinetic, physical conflict — serve as the organizing principles for a third edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy*? Or do we need to focus on different factors and forces that better reflect the nature of contemporary and future conflict?

In some ways, the issues today are quite similar — as a commentator on the original volume pointed out, the goal of the book was to reflect upon the “art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation or a coalition of nations, to promote and secure their interests against enemies, actual, potential, or presumed.”<sup>4</sup> This is as good a definition of grand strategy as any, and is as applicable today as it was in 1943. The interests of key states, however, and the means of securing those interests, appear quite different in 2020 than in 1943. Instead of reflections on the best ways to deploy battleships or tanks, the latest analyses of grand strategy focus on new tools which are often non-kinetic, such as cyber weapons and economic warfare.

The first big shift in the realities of war occurred only a few years after *Makers of Modern Strategy* appeared, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The ability to deliver unimaginable destruction in such a short period and from long distances transformed the use of force. As Bernard Brodie pointed out, “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them.”<sup>5</sup> For the next eight decades, the strategy of deterrence — using

1 Edward Meade Earle, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert. *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

2 Earle et al., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, vii.

3 Earle et al., *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ix.

4 Patrick Garrity, “Makers of Modern Strategy by Edward Mead Earle (1943),” *Classics of Strategy and Diplomacy*, August 4, 2008, <https://www.classicsofstrategy.com/2008/08/makers-of-modern-strategy.html>.

5 Bernard Brodie, ed, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale Institute of International Studies, February 15, 1946), 62, <https://www.osti.gov/opennet/servlets/purl/16380564%20p.%2062>. This pre-published version appears to have been a copy read and marked up by Dwight D. Eisenhower.



weapons to *prevent* events like invasion, conquest, or coercion — became the key focus. While counter-intuitive and often terrifying, a renaissance in strategy emerged, centered upon sophisticated analyses of what kinds of weapons, arrayed in what strategies and deployments, would best ensure they were never used. This strategic revolution also generated the intellectual architecture and policy elements for another novel form of strategy: negotiated bilateral and multilateral arms control. Such agreements sought to decrease the chance for the kind of miscalculation and misperception that some believed could lead to an unwanted war. These strategies appeared to play a key role in the peaceful end of the Cold War and the absence of great-power war ever since.

There are reasons to wonder whether our period of new technological transformation and great-power rivalry is challenging the underpinnings of the decades-long legacy of deterrence and arms control. Luis Simón and Alexander Lanoszka, for example, highlight the consequences that new precision-guided missiles have had on the strategic environment, particularly in northeastern Europe. These precision-strike weapons, deployed as part of an anti-access/area denial strategy, often blur the line between conventional and nuclear environments. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty revealed how our legacy arms control concepts and institutions are poorly adapted to this new world. Given how exposed Baltic members in NATO are to Russian power, this confused environment could be dangerous.

It is important to recall that much of the post-1945 revolution in military strategy was based upon the clear distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear forces. A considerable amount of intellectual energy was expended trying to figure out whether and in what ways conflict could still take place under the nuclear shadow, and under what circumstances — either planned or inadvertent — a conventional war might escalate into a nuclear conflict. Rebecca Hersman convincingly demonstrates that the linear model of escalation that shaped strategy throughout most of the nuclear age no longer captures the complex and non-linear dynamics of an international system marked by profound technological change, increased security competition, and a fraying global order. Hersman creatively deploys a metaphor from physics to highlight what she labels “wormhole escalation.” Her analysis captures a terrifying and underappreciated irony — that the ability of states (and non-state actors) to use novel, non-kinetic, and *sub-strategic* tools such as information warfare, cyber attacks, and economic coercion to target an adversary’s *strategic* interests actually increases the

dangers of a nuclear crisis through strange, uncharted paths. Asymmetric capabilities may encourage higher risk, or simply blur risk and increase the fog of war, potentially producing disastrous outcomes. Hersman’s truly original analysis is precisely the kind of chapter one would hope to find in a new *Makers of Modern Strategy*.

Similar challenges for strategists exist in the world of cyber conflict. Michael N. Schmitt argues that the portrayal of cyberspace as the new “Wild West,” a completely unregulated, anything-goes domain, is untrue. The reality is more mixed, though promising. Cyberspace presents a dilemma: States and societies are relying on it more for critical economic, political, and security functions, yet cyber attacks and malfeasance are on the rise. International law, according to Schmitt, increasingly provides an important if imperfect tool to help states establish and solidify norms, express their interests and preferences, and regulate the most harmful activities.

In the past, economics was largely seen as a means to support a successful military strategy. The state with the largest industrial economy, that could produce the most steel, coal, and electricity, and that could convert those assets into weapons that supported military forces, was the one that could best prevail in war. For David H. McCormick, Charles E. Luftig, and James M. Cunningham, economics is no longer simply about the means to support war. Economic dominance is the *goal* of great-power competition, and economic tools the best means to achieve that end. In other words, future great-power competition is as likely to occur over the development of new technologies, the crafting of international economic institutions and norms, and reserve currency status. This is different from the recent past, when global economic exchange was seen purely through the lens of the laws of comparative advantage and mutual gain. The idea that when China sold cheap goods to the United States, citizens in both countries benefited, is seen as increasingly suspect. McCormick et al. believe that at least some portions of economic activity need to be understood through the zero-sum approach of traditional security and geopolitical competition. In their view, China and Russia, with their strategic investments in key technologies and industries, are well ahead of the United States in the field of state-driven economic strategy. The article lays out a series of concrete measures the United States could take, ones that fall short of the kind of national economic planning that America eschews but do coordinate and encourage targeted private sector activity in strategic industries.

Needless to say, we need rigorous scholarly and

analytical tools to identify, measure, and evaluate these changes. Jessica D. Blankshain and Andrew L. Stigler provide a very useful primer on the tools available to social scientists, from game theory to statistical analysis to historical case studies. We will need these and other tools to make sense of the complex, ever changing world of national and international security.

Has war changed since Earle, Gordon Craig, Hajo Halborn, Robert Roswell Palmer, and others offered their reflections on the nature of military strategy, and if so, in what ways? The first question would involve who — or what — constitutes the “makers” of modern strategy. While there are

**Instead of reflections on the best ways to deploy battleships or tanks, the latest analyses of grand strategy focus on new tools which are often non-kinetic, such as cyber weapons and economic warfare.**

— certainly great strategic thinkers — and leaders ranging from several American presidents to China’s President Xi Jinping have mattered enormously — one is struck by the importance of other variables shaping the security environment. Technology, the role of ideology, demographics, the move to a post-industrial, globalized economy — the tectonic, intensifying structural forces shaping world order in recent decades seem to have outpaced both our ability to conceptualize international security and to translate these ideas into policies.

This leads to the second theme of the 1943 volume — the total mobilization by the nation-state of society for war. As dangerous as the world has been since

1945, the place that war plays in most modern countries has decreased substantially. In 1960, 6 percent of global GDP went to military expenses. By 2017, it was down to 2 percent.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the economic side, the number of people involved in state-driven military enterprises has fallen as armies and navies have shrunk. Even the United States, which possesses far and away the world’s most powerful military, in 2019 only spent 3.4 percent of its GDP.<sup>7</sup> Only 0.4 percent of the total population is active duty military.<sup>8</sup> The historians Paul Kennedy and William McNeill both argued that the so-called rise of the modern West was driven by fierce security competition and the constant prevalence of war in Europe.<sup>9</sup> War and geopolitical competition drove any number of other profound changes, such as the rise of the modern bureaucratic state, mass education, literacy, public health, international finance, and technology. The connection between war and new technological developments, or war and socio-economic change, seems far more tenuous today than in the past. In 2020, Charles Tilly’s observation that “war made the state and the state made war” tells us less than it once did.<sup>10</sup>

Does this mean the kind of great-power wars that plagued the world in earlier centuries has abated for good? Scholars such as Bear F. Braumoeller have cautioned against believing that either human nature or fierce international competition have fundamentally changed.<sup>11</sup> As the growing rivalry between the United States and China reveals, great-power competition has not disappeared. Will these rivalries, however, take different forms? Will the age of kinetic, force-on-force, army-on-army battles, highlighted by battleships and tanks, be replaced by economic statecraft, battles in space and in the cyber world, autonomous weapons, and robots? The digital revolution, combined with the decreasing value of land, shifting demographics, and changing socio-economics, all under the nuclear shadow, does make the idea of great-power war somewhat unthinkable. And yet...

Scanning the globe, one sees any number of places where traditional, physical military force retains its threat, as the recent deadly clash between China and India over the Line of Actual Control reveals.

6 Max Roser and Mohamed Nagdy, “Military Spending,” *Our World in Data*, 2013, <https://ourworldindata.org/military-spending>.

7 “The 15 Countries With the Highest Military Spending Worldwide in 2019,” *Statista*, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262742/countries-with-the-highest-military-spending/>.

8 Mona Chalabi, “What Percentage of Americans Have Served in the Military,” *FiveThirtyEight*, March 19, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-percentage-of-americans-have-served-in-the-military/>.

9 Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

10 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

11 Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).



Can we really rule out a Russian invasion of Estonia, or a move by China to take Taiwan by force? And could we rule out a fierce military response by the United States and others? Such a scenario might make the three themes — leaders, total mobilization, and physical, material force — dangerously relevant again. Obviously, these are scenarios we should work hard to prevent from occurring, and their dire potential consequences highlight the continuing importance that deterrence and statecraft play in the world. To that end, let us hope the third edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* is written in conditions similar to what we find today, and not the terrifying world faced by Earle and his colleagues in 1943. 🏰

**Francis J. Gavin** is the chair of the editorial board of the Texas National Security Review. He is the Giovanni Agnelli Distinguished Professor and the inaugural director of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University. His writings include *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2012). His latest book is *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020).