

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 4
2023

Fascicolo 16. Novembre 2023
Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di
VIRGLIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020
Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597).
Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023)



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare
(www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org)

Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 9788892957930

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Distintivo speciale del Dipartimento della Guerra concesso agli addetti al Progetto Manhattan per la Bomba A(Atomica) che hanno lavorato almeno sei mesi tra il 19 giugno 1942 e il 6 agosto 1945

Foto 1198 DOE Ed Westcott 1945 Oak Ridge Tennessee (Wikimedia Commons)

Place and the Nature of Battle

by JEREMY BLACK

The last half-century has seen great attention, much of it very valuable but some repetitive to the point of predictability, to the “face of battle,” specifically the experience and stress of conflict, and the reasons why men go on fighting. This piece seeks to locate that “face” in context, not those of social arrangements and cultural practice, whether hierarchy or attitudes to death, but rather the contexts of place. For that is a key element of battle and indeed war in military history, as opposed to their use in a rhetorical fashion to discuss other phenomena as in “war on poverty.”

This location of military history, notably battle, in terms of place is important to a range of key factors, some of which helped explain the implementation of strategic and operational planning, and the nature of capability in particular clashes, and, more generally, reasons for success and failure. Place can, and should, be refined and considered across a range of backdrops, each of which had a causative dimension: chronological, geographical and by types of conflict (eg state-to-state or within state; symmetrical or dissymmetrical), and arm. There is also the need to assess the situation at the levels of strategy, operational and tactical, while understanding that these can both be simultaneous and (separately) overlap and indeed are so. Moreover, the situation is complicated further because what primarily may be strategic, operational or tactical may be differently conceived by the other side. In addition, these elements have very different meanings for commanders and troops.

Such points are not some minor conceptual window-dressings before we descend to the main meal/meat. Instead, there is a continual need to consider the particular in terms of these general issues. To give some shape, we can differentiate place and battle in the following terms. First, the choice for and location of battle with reference to the placing of strategy, in terms of its rationale and implementation. Secondly, the same with reference to operational concerns. Thirdly, the tactical dimension in terms of the response to the possibilities of terrain and the shaping of the latter. Fourthly, place in terms of the relationships between and within units, with tactics, formations and events all interacting and overlapping.

The last two are best covered in the literature and the first two least so. In particular, strategy and battle are not invariably brought into line, in part because geopolitics, a subject in which this discussion might occur, is, in general, curiously remote from the nuances and scholarship of military history, and certainly so as far as the tendency for “critical geopolitics” is concerned.

The opening point therefore is that the nature of battle varies greatly in terms of the strategic geography of a conflict. In part, this relates to differences in the wishes for battle. Most obviously, this occurs in asymmetrical warfare, with the conventionally “weaker” power eager to avoid battle. This is especially so with insurgency struggles. In them, the basic resource of the “rebels” is that of being a force in being able to challenge stronger conventional forces, but not to engage them in battle. So also with conflicts between regular forces when there is a clear mismatch in strength. Battle can only be envisaged if it is possible to alter the parameters of strength, and here the parameters of the site may be a key element. This is notably so with the “ambush,” a situation that pertains at a number of scales and in a variety of scenarios, but one that requires a reading of the relationship between terrains and formations in order to access the practicality of the move, which itself has both an operational and a tactical possibility. “Ambush” indeed can entail unexpected moves toward and in battle, as by the Prussians and British at Rossbach (1757) and Salamanca (1812) respectively. That, however, is a move to the tactical when at this point it is the strategic that is the relevant dimension. A surprise attack, as by Germany and Japan on the Soviet Union and the USA respectively in 1941, is a classic instance, with Pearl Harbor a battle of strategic, operational and tactical surprise. So also with more recent battles, such as the Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal in 1973, or the Iraqi and Russian attacks on Iran and Ukraine respectively in 1980 and 2022, or the Hamas attack on Israel in 2023.

Battle here can be a matter of a wide-ranging “battle-space” which underlines the problems and issues involved in definition and its implementation. A surprise attack permits the placing of battle in a way that maximises the potential disadvantages faced by the defender; the latter of course frequently also a potential attacker. In doing so, battle captures the means to create a new form of relative advantage.

Conversely, looked at differently, there is no “true” level of relative advantage but rather the specifics of particular conflict scenarios. These are significant, not least, in providing ways in which the particular capabilities of weapons and forces are countered by anti-weapons, anti-tactics etc.

In terms of the more conventional discussion of battle, the latter can emerge



Torres Vedras Lines in 1810-11. Map from Simão Luz SORIANO, *História da Guerra Civil e do estabelecimento do governo parlamentar em Portugal. 2a época*, Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional, 1874. T. 3

both at the operational level and, most obviously, the tactical one. In some respects, the understanding and use of terrain and other aspects of place take on particular meaning in terms of these anti-characteristics. Indeed, the latter help explain the selection of particular sites, which therefore become places to contest capability, the sites classically serving to equalise as well as express the odds, although both the latter can be understood, at least in part, in “cultural” terms. The salience of the latter is a matter of much of the “face of battle” because it is about morale, however conceived, as much as weaponry. From the perspective of morale factors, place takes on a very different meaning to its location in terms of technology, more specifically weaponry but also the technology of movement. Morale may attach particular importance to holding specific locations, or indeed to the display of force; neither of which may be so consequential in terms of technological factors.

Again, issues of judgment emerge as relative, contextual, contingent and changeable. These points may seem obvious, but the focus in the commonplace literature on victory as an obvious phenomenon unproblematic only in terms of some apparently malign “politics” is unhelpful.

So also with the handling of geography, the other aspect of the consideration of the places of battle. Much of the popular literature, in both America and Britain, represents a sort of reversion to the late-nineteenth century confidence in a determinism borne of environmental control, and at every level. In the early twentieth century, and notably so in France, there was a contrary movement, associated in particular with Lucien Febvre to emphasise a “possibilisme,” in which humans were an active element in the human/environmental partnership.

Again, that may appear obvious to specialists in military history, but there are themes in not only popular methodology that push in an opposite direction, not least with the focus on the impacts of numbers and technology, the two prime axes of the material supposition of war.

There is also an implicit as well as explicit neo-Darwinian progressivism toward ineluctable success as evinced in particular in the languages of military evolution, revolution, modernisation and, simply, change, with those who do not thus progress thus demonstrably reactionary and conservative, and thereby bound to fail. Expressed in these terms, this progressivism is questionable, whether empirically, conceptually, methodologically or historiographically, but such deficiencies do not prevent a framing of the literature accordingly.

To move here toward a more gritty, difficult and questioning approach is therefore to suggest that there is no one means or method for considering, let alone as-

sessing, the nature of battle. Beginning by considering where it was fought helps provide a specific grounding, while yet accepting the multivalence of war. The notion of friction is particularly pertinent in this context, for many battles are encounter ones, on the part of one or both of the participants. The *ad hoc* character of conflict throws particular light on the often accidental nature not only of place but also of placing in the sense of the response to the possibilities of place.

At the same time, air and submarine warfare introduced new geographical spheres, while communication and surveillance capabilities were transformed by radio and radar. Thus, sonar became a key element in submarine warfare. The majority of combatants involved in war, however, continued to fight on land, where mechanisation and, with it, mobile firepower proved a key change in the twentieth century, and, indeed, meant that factors such as height, cover, and 'going' (the firmness of the terrain) acquired new considerations and meanings.

In World War One, observation aircraft effectively provided intelligence of enemy movements and positions and directed artillery fire against enemy gun positions hiding behind ridges and unobservable from the ground. By 1944, in the Normandy campaign, German forces could not safely move during the day due to Allied air superiority. At sea, the height of aircraft provided advantages against both submarines and surface shipping including surveillance and attack.

Despite its vaunted mechanisation, the German army made extensive use of horses in World War Two, although this was for logistics and not combat. At the same time, most infantry and artillery continued to operate in an established fashion, artillery for example plotting lines of fire in the accustomed manner. However, that did not equate with a lack of effectiveness. The British artillery, in particular by 1918 and 1944-5, was able to deliver concentrated fire across a broad frontage, and both in a pre-planned fashion and against targets of opportunity on a variety of axes.

The dimension of human geography was readily seen in the degree to which confrontation was increasingly contextualised in the 1930s by a tension between aggressive, revisionist powers, notably Japan, Italy, Germany and the Soviet Union, and, on the other hand, those which sought to preserve stability and the *status quo*. This contrast provided very different strategic drives and perceptions of territory, and these differences were to be taken forward into World War Two.

The geographical dimension of this war was pushed to the fore by the interaction of campaigning or possible campaigning across much of the world, the latter accentuated by the degree to which there was no fixity in sides until the very close,

with the Soviet Union not attacking Japan until August 1945. This situation helped underline a fluidity that was compounded by the uncertainty of the effectiveness of recent and new weapons systems, and concerning the resilience, adaptability and skill of individual combatants. In particular, the Germans had failed conceptually to confront the space of the Soviet Union, which they invaded in 1941, and this space proved a force-multiplier for the defensive and, as such, an aspect of the reserves. This Soviet advantage was accentuated by the degree to which German war-making, with its emphasis on surprise, speed, and overwhelming and dynamic force at the chosen point of contact, was designed for an offensive strategy that was most effective against linear defences, but not against defences in depth.

Thus, enhanced place, in the shape of fortifications, reframed the battle space, transforming tactical and operational possibilities. In this form, there was a continuum between supposedly permanent fortifications, networks of field fortifications, and units, indeed troops, adopting defensive positions.

Mobility meanwhile carried with it not only specific requirements, notably for fuel, but also an expanded capability that ensured that the defender faced the risk of being obliged to defend areas of interest against attack to a greater depth than in the previous war. This became more significant due to the Allies also fighting Italy from June 1940 and Japan from December 1941. As an aspect of preparations, the British, in 1940, mapped the border areas of Kenya in preparation for campaigning against Italian East Africa (Ethiopia, Italian Somaliland, and Eritrea). In the event, the Italian invasion of Kenya was restricted to the capture of the border post at Moyale. The threat of a Japanese invasion of Australia in 1942 led to the production of large-scale maps for coastal areas, notably of Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria, and near the cities of Adelaide, Darwin and Perth; these maps linked to the location of artillery, for example to protect the naval base of Freemantle near Perth and also the sea approaches to Melbourne.

Such a geography was very different to that of concern about subversion, a concern that tended to focus on areas of alleged political and/or ethnic dissidence, with paranoia often playing a role. In February 1941, when Australia was at war with Germany, and the latter allied to the Soviet Union, the Australian War Cabinet was anxious about Communist subversion, specifically ‘the continued state of industrial unrest in the community.’

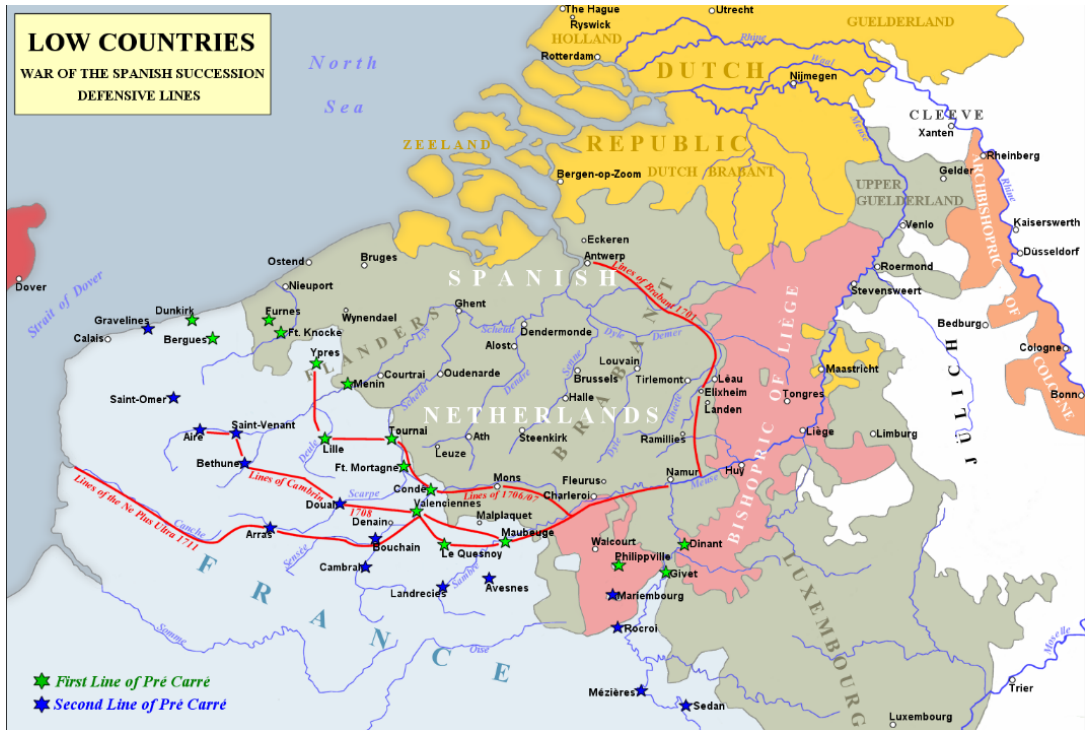
Magnified by the range permitted by technological developments, mobility provided the attacker with a range of opportunity that encouraged defenders, naturally reactive, to prepare defence over a great area. This extent of area created

problems in 1941, both for the British on the island of Crete when, overcoming the advantages of defending an island, it was successfully invaded by the Germans in an airborne assault of unprecedented scale, and for the Americans on the Philippines: the Japanese initially landed with far fewer troops, but kept the Americans guessing where they would land their main forces. In the Philippines, as subsequently in the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese accentuated this situation by successive amphibious assaults leapfrogging the defenders, assaults that were concerted with air support. Sequential cumulative pressure helped overcome the defences of a vast area of operations.

This system of overcoming the friction of defended geographical distance was to be repeated by the Americans in 1943-5. The time taken to defeat the Japanese on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands (August 1942-January 1943), the large number of islands they continued to hold, and the casualties and time-loss that they might impose, meant that the Americans needed to mount at sea the equivalent of the Soviet bypassing on land of German 'hedgehog' positions which were left isolated and irrelevant by cleaving blows. As a result, in each case, the war became one that was far from linear in terms of a clear front line.

An understanding of place simply as a physical phenomenon, while very useful at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, is less helpful in enforcing will, the true goal of conflict. Indeed, in some respects, by creating a deceptive sense that other peoples and lands are readily 'knowable', mapping is to a degree misleading. It is more appropriate, instead, to understand the complexities, ambiguities and nuances of human geography, including the precariousness of results and the degree to which the shared nature of any military situation throws the focus onto political understanding and skill.

The non-linear nature of change is differently indicated by that of force-space ratios. In the twentieth century, there was an emphasis on very large militaries based on the practice of conscription, the idea of the nation under arms, and the need for large numbers, both to man continuous front lines and to occupy territories. Since the end of the Cold War, however, partly as a result of the cost of trained manpower, but, largely due to investment in technology, troop numbers have fallen greatly, and that despite there being, in most states, more military manpower available than ever before as a consequence of a major and continuous rise in the world's population to consistently unprecedented numbers. In the conflicts of 2022-3, however, there was a renewed emphasis on mass in the shape of troop numbers.



Low countries and French defensive lines built at various stages of the War of the Spanish Succession. Also shows the north-eastern section of Vauban's *Pré carré* fortress system. © Rebel Redcoat, 2011. CC SA 3.0 (Wikimedia Commons)

As a result of the fall in troop numbers, not only has the force-space ratio declined in terms of territory but also with reference to the percentage of the population, much of which now lives in an urban environment, with the particular challenges that poses for maintaining order and suppressing disorder. Indeed, the geographies of control and insurgency will be transformed as a result of this issue. By 2012, over half of the world's population lived in cities

Although, due to technological innovation, there is a risk that as we appear to have 'conquered' nature to a large extent, from disease in campaigns and weather forecasting, to mastery of geographical information, so less attention has been paid to the role of geography in warfare. In reality, the significance of geography, both physical and human, rests on the very varied way in which its impact can be experienced, countered and considered; with this variety in perception in part an aspect of human geography, a geography, moreover, that has been affected by change but not been shelved by technology. To underrate the dynamic character

of geography in the history, present, and future, of war is mistaken, but geography has to be understood as more than a series of physical factors.

The current war in Ukraine amply demonstrates these points, not least with differing emphases over control over people as opposed to over territory. The importance of geography was readily demonstrated in terms of the particular significance of specific bridges and other features that helped define the fought landscape. The range of artillery repeatedly was a factor in discussion, not least as it offered a degree of influence. This range however demonstrated the salience of politics because in the contemporaneous sabre-rattling by North Korea there was, alongside the short-range artillery pressure on South Korea, long-range threat-profile and deterrence use of missiles in order to define a battle-space able to intimidate even without the need for action. That factor underlined the open nature of the battlefield, its unfixed character, and the folly of some neo-Platonic approach to an apparently “true” or inherent character to battle and war.

Indeed, weaponry, whether or not defined as anti-weapons, crucially alters tactics by providing variations on range. In turn, these variations alter tactical capability, and that alteration also affects the battle-space.

Yet, as so often with the evaluation of place and the fixing of related spatial features, such discussion offers a somewhat determinist account. Indeed, that, more generally, is a frequent problem with the abstract consideration of spatial characteristics.

The large-scale conflict that began when Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022 led to much talk about a new age of war. In particular, there was a combination of new technology, notably in the form of drones, and the unexpected failure of a major power, Russia, to defeat one that had appeared highly vulnerable, Ukraine. This failure appeared to call out for explanation, and the latter led to much talk of novelty, with technology apparently trumping numbers.

As so often, reality was far more complex, as, indeed, was the assessment of success and failure. In the last, the early months of 2022 saw two failures, first that of deterrence by Western powers. Intelligence material, much of it from satellite photography, had provided plentiful information about Russian preparations, and there had been attempts to deter invasion, but none succeeded and on 24 February, Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, announced a ‘special military operation’. The attack focused on a major drive on the capital Kiev, but airborne forces were rapidly defeated while a land-attack was held in early April. The Russians suffered poor preparations, a failure to gain air superiority, weak Logan’s inade-

quate tactics. At the same time, the Ukrainian resistance was determined and resourceful, and Ukrainian tactics proved superior, not least a mobile defence that inflicted serious damage on less mobile and poorly-deployed Russian formations. These elements were more significant than the weapons employed. There was a parallel with the success by Jordan in repelling Syrian invasion in 1970 and of Chad in defeating Libyan invasion in 1987 in the so-called Toyota War. In each case, the defending force benefited from the assistance of Western air power, but ground-fighting was also significant and notably so at the expense of the rigid Soviet doctrine employed by Syria and Libya, both of whom also used Soviet weaponry, notably tanks. So also with the Egyptian and Syrian failure to prevail over Israel in 1973 and, with another surprise attack, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980. Instead, what was envisaged as a rapidly-successful overthrow of the Iranian regime became an intractable conflict that lasted until 1988, with early gains the target for Iranian counteroffensives, some of which were successful. There was a parallel with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Indeed, the conflict soon saw many 'traditional' elements, notably, particularly in eastern Ukraine, a heavy emphasis on artillery and, linked to that, a reliance on trench cover. The range of artillery greatly increased, but the issues of target-acquisition, accuracy, and, in particular, supplies remained acute. Indeed, the cost of the munitions encouraged cost-benefit analyses by commentators. This cost also underlined the significance both of the substantial pre-war Russian arsenal and of the willingness and ability of Ukraine's Western allies to provide the munitions. The latter underlined the problem for Ukraine created by its legacy Soviet weaponry for which it lacked the necessary ammunition.

As a further instance of this continuity came the stress in early 2023 on the provision of Western tanks for Ukraine, although this issue was about political commitment as much as military help. This was not the novelty that had been discerned in 2022 during the counter-attack on Russian units advancing on Kiev when the role of drones had led to discussion of the prospects for 'killer drones.'

So also with the key emphasis on the human dimension. Russia had had far more success when it seized Crimea and consolidated its position in part of the Donbass in 2014, because the bulk of the population in those parts of Ukraine were not actively opposed; but the situation was very different in the areas attacked in 2022, the bulk of Ukraine. This helped resistance, while a lack of consent also became apparent in places that were overrun, such as the city of Kherson, and this eased the process of recapture when it occurred.

As with other conflicts, the international context proved an important element. Putin saw the war both as a way to prevent an independent Ukraine from joining NATO and also as a means to reverse the geopolitical aspects of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He enjoyed a measure of support from foreign powers, notably China and Iran, but could not match the international arms and financial support won by Ukraine, particularly in terms of backing from Eastern European states that identified with its struggle against Russia, as well as from the more general 'West' in which the conflict was regarded as a repetition of the Cold War. This international dimension enabled Ukraine to sustain the attritional struggle that developed as a second stage after the more ponderous offensive of the Russians, their pseudo-blitzkrieg, had failed against Kiev.

At the same time, this latter struggle raised the question of strategic capability for both of the combatants, and indeed for their allies. How best to define feasible goals in this second stage, and to envisage and secure a desirable outcome, became more serious due to frequent Russian public threats to go nuclear. The leadership of each combatant had put themselves in a difficult situation by outlining goals that were not plausible unless in terms of a complete victory. Ukraine seeks not just driving Russia from its recent conquests, including the territory to the north of the Sea of Azov that is apparently under clear Russian control, but also that taken by Russia in 2014. Yet, in the latter case, it is difficult to envisage Putin accepting the loss of Crimea and/or the Donbass. To do so would be an admission of a total failure that would lead to the overthrow of his regime as with the end of the military rule of Greece and Argentina after international defeats in 1973 and 1982 respectively. It is more plausible that Putin would escalate the struggle rather than accepting such losses. Similarly, it is hard to see how his forces can conquer Ukraine or impose a settlement in which it accepts major losses.

These elements help make the conflict appear not new but in many senses a fresh iteration of longstanding features of warfare. To focus on the weaponry risks ignoring such continuities.

The war potentially has lessons for other possible strands, notably that which might emerge from a Chinese attempt to gain control of Taiwan. How far the Ukraine war offers lessons for such a struggle, however, was a matter of debate, with suggestions that it might offer a viable model for opposition by a weaker force, and a guide to successful asymmetrical warfare.

This may be the case, but it is equally possible that Ukraine represents, as do all wars, factors that are specific to its particular case and of only possible relevance

elsewhere. In this case, the extent to which Russia has not been able to gain air superiority and shut Ukraine off from foreign supplies is a key point, one that underlines the significance of the efforts by the very outnumbered Ukrainian air force to continue to challenge Russian air power. So also with missile attacks on Russian air bases. As with the Afghan war in 1979-89, the Russians found it difficult to concentrate and apply their strength. In contrast, in the case of Taiwan, which is an island and therefore a distinctive military environment, China would seek to use air and sea power in order to isolate the battle-space. How then does Ukraine prepare us to consider conflict over Taiwan?

The Ukraine war may be more indicative of the already long-term pattern of conflict on land, one that has been to the fore since World War Two, namely of the difficulty of staging a war of attack and occupation when facing a determined opposition. Unlike in (far more vulnerable) Hungary and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, Russia in 2022 did not get to first base in turning invasion into occupation, whereas in 2014, in areas of a different ethnic composition (Crimea and the Donbass), the military and political contexts and consequences had been far more benign for the Russians. That suggests the problems of 'learning' from example, as that can be a matter of confirmation bias rather than anything else. However, even if there had been a Russian conquest in 2022, the occupation would have still been a very difficult military task because of the size of the area involved, and of its population, and of the attitudes of the latter. A rapid overrunning of Ukraine comparable to that in Iraq in 2003 would have been implausible, not least given the absence of domestic support for the invaders comparable to the Kurds. However, even had there been such an overrunning, it is difficult to see how a rising similar to that in Iraq after its conquest could have been avoided. Moreover, much of the terrain is well-suited to resistance activities.

There is also the question of how far the Ukraine war can or could have been contained. The possibility that it might lead to hostilities involving Belarus and Poland is more apparent than that of nuclear warfare, but 'only' in this context is a difficult concept. Poland is a NATO member and the possibility that NATO will or would have responded in such a way that large-scale conflict arises is high.

This then entails questions of prioritisation which are always issues as far as strategy is concerned. In particular, America has to assess how far a commitment to Ukraine is compatible with one to Taiwan, and whether the former will help deter China from pressurising Taiwan or, conversely, will encourage it to do so.

There is also the domestic political dimension. Given Donald Trump's past at-

titudes to American allies, especially NATO, a victory for his allies in the 2022 American midterms might have been seen as a triumph for Putin, and the same point can be made about the 2024 presidential elections. As always, war is about politics as well as fighting, and the ‘shape’ of battle has to cover both. Issues such as military morale, popular resolve, and strategic prioritisation all have a political dimension and cannot be seen as separate to the course of conflict or indeed the measure of capability. It is easier to define, discuss and illustrate the latter in terms of the capabilities of weapons, whether drones, guns or tanks, but these take on meaning in terms of these other factors.

Given these elements in conflict, it is readily apparent that the recently and currently fashionable literature about being prisoners of geography is highly misleading. Success in war at every level is about decision-makers having a holistic view of the theatre of conflict broadly understood, and no single decision, act or factor is likely to lead to success. This situation reflects the degree to which fighting and succeeding in war is a complex business.

This absence of an environmental-borne determinism could be readily seen in early 2023 with debate over likely moves in both Ukraine and over Taiwan. The range of operational and strategic options open to both sides in the Ukraine crisis was widely discussed, and so also with possible crisis, or at least confrontation, involving North Korea or a Sino-Indian limited conflict. So later in the year with war between Hamas and Israel. The handling of the present stands as a very clear warning about the dangers posed by any clearcut account suggesting inevitability or any degree of determinism. Such accounts imply that the future is readily explicable, but fall down when they move beyond the banal.

This is scarcely surprising at present given the conflation of geopolitical uncertainty with the use of unfamiliar weaponry. The range of weaponry was a major element, notably in defining geographies of menace. Thus, the range of Russian and Chinese missiles became centrally linked to ideas of area-denial for other forces. Control over particular parts of territory, on land (as with the Russians in the Kaliningrad enclave, and with the Russians and NATO for the Suwalki Gap between the enclave and Belarus through which NATO would reinforce the Baltic Republics) and sea (as with the Chinese man-made or enhanced islands in the South China Sea), became more significant as a result of their serving as the bases of these missiles. This significance underlined the importance of strategically-located tiny places to the world powers, including, for the United States, Diego Garcia, Guam, and Incirlik airbase in Turkey, and, for Britain, Akrotiri in Cyprus. Bas-

es for aircraft, rockets and listening stations were all involved. In some respects, these places were the equivalent to the naval bases and coaling stations of former years, although Intelligence facilities can be more significant. In November 2020, however, Diego Garcia was mentioned as a possible base if the Americans recreated the First Fleet, established in 1947, that had been disestablished in 1973.

The allocation of naval tasks is a reminder of the fluidity of geopolitical construction. For example, in place of the earlier focus on the Asia-Pacific, the term Indo-Pacific became more significant from 2007 when the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, gave a speech to the Indian Parliament entitled ‘The Confluence of Two Seas,’ in which he argued that:

‘The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A “broader Asia” that broke away from geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form... By Japan and India coming together in this way, this “broader Asia” will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia.’

The American government recognised this in 2018 by changing the name of United State Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command, Jim Mattis, the Defense Secretary, referring to a ‘recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific oceans.’ The idea of a new First Fleet was a reflection of this, one designed to reduce the pressure on the Seventh Fleet which operates out of Japan, covering from the International Dateline to the Indo-Pakistan border.

The technological situation was also changing rapidly. In 2018, Russia deployed its nuclear-capable, 500 kilometre (300 miles) range, Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad enclave. The lethality of such missiles was a factor alongside their range, as with the Chinese test firing of a nuclear-capable DF-21D ‘carrier-killer’ anti-ship ballistic missile into the South China Sea in August 2020. The other missile then tested, the Chinese DF-26B, can carry nuclear or conventional warheads and has a range of 4000 kilometres, thus making it capable of hitting American forces on the Pacific base of Guam. Access-denial weaponry was the key theme, with Russia trying to deny the Baltic to NATO and Swedish forces, and to threaten, as well as harass, NATO activity in the Black Sea. China did the same to the Americans in the western Pacific, and, more specifically, the waters round Taiwan. Access-denial at the least increases the risk inherent in deployment, which is another, but different, form of denial.



Spratly islands map showing occupied features marked with the flags of countries occupying them. Central Intelligence Agency, 1995 (Original Picture), February 3, 2008 (Modified Picture) Public domain, Wikimedia Commons

In addition, hypersonic weapons, in which Russia led the way, offered an ability to get inside opponents’ command- and control system times, thus providing another type of range capability. In December 2109, Russia claimed to have deployed Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles able to travel twenty times the speed of sound at a continental range and to deliver both nuclear and conventional payloads. In October 2020, the Tsirkon missile, which had been revealed by Russia the previous year, was successfully tested: a ship- or submarine-launched, hypersonic cruise missile, able to travel at up to eight times the speed of sound, with a range of 600 miles, that could be armed with a conventional or nuclear warhead, covered over 280 miles in 4.5 minutes in order to destroy a target in the Barents Sea. For this and other weapons, nevertheless, the uncertainty of performance in

wartime conditions, notably exposure to defense mechanisms that themselves improve, was part of the unpredictability of weapons' capabilities, usage and impact. Moreover, although hypersonic weapons may be fast and not hindered by physical geographic features, the potential targets are geographic, and these smart weapons depend on spatial information. So also with local geographical features affecting the blast, blast wave and radioactivity of atomic bombs.

Confrontation with China created a greater test for the United States than Russia. The notion of space as an index of political determination was underlined in August 2020 when Mark Esper, the American Defence Secretary, announced, of the South China Sea, 'We're not going to cede this region, an inch of ground if you will, to another country.' The idea of the Pacific as an American lake was part of the psychological equation, as was the legacy and validation of America's role in World War Two in the Pacific. Such ideas, however, and the strategic culture bound up in them, were challenged by the increased range of land-based strategic and intermediate weapon systems. This led to American naval interest, expressed by Rear Admiral Robert Gaucher in 2020, in unmanned systems in order to get inside the Chinese 'denied areas,' and to reduce the cost of doing so.

The particular environments, and therefore geographies, of land, sea, submarine, air, and space, are all ones that are subject to technological change, as are the interactions between them and the possibility of using these interactions in order to gain or lose advantage. In 2020, the US military signed contracts to assess technical and cost challenges for building a 7,500 mph rocket able to blast 80 tonnes of cargo into space and land it anywhere in the world within about a hour. Whereas, to reinforce Bagram airbase in Afghanistan took a C-17 Globemaster, with its maximum speed of 590 mph, up to 15 hours, 7,000 miles from Cape Canaveral for a rocket was designed to take an hour. Moreover, under the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, over-flight via orbit did not require arrangements with foreign governments. Cost, precision, and the safe arrival of cargo were all factors. However, while the existing system was not cost-free, C-17s costing \$218 million each and C-5 Galaxies over \$100 million, this was far more feasible than the proposed new system, even though the Falcon 9, a partly reusable rocket that can carry 22 tonnes of cargo and can land in a powered controlled descent, has been developed.

As during the Cold War, notably, but not only, with rocketry and atomic weaponry, the need for a first-strike to destroy the opposing threat, will encourage an active defence that may well be proactive, in the sense of attacking potentially hostile platforms. This brings together questions of nomenclature, law (interna-

tional and domestic), ethics, technology and doctrine, and the issue can be seen in the American response to a North Korea that deploys access-denial as well as strategic strike weaponry. The range of geographies at play is seen with both powers and types of weaponry.

Thus, test-fired by North Korea in 2017, the 74-foot long Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile has a range of over 8,000 miles and can possibly reach New York and Washington, and, if the range may probably be less with a nuclear warhead, calculations of range, a key element now of strategic geography, have to include the element of uncertainty over new systems. This uncertainty should be considered in terms of the stated intentions of those devising and deploying such systems. In the case of North Korea, as of Russia, there is a clear intention to reach Western targets, and to do so without interception. As such, these systems are not part of a mutual deterrence, but, instead, a means to overcome deterrence.

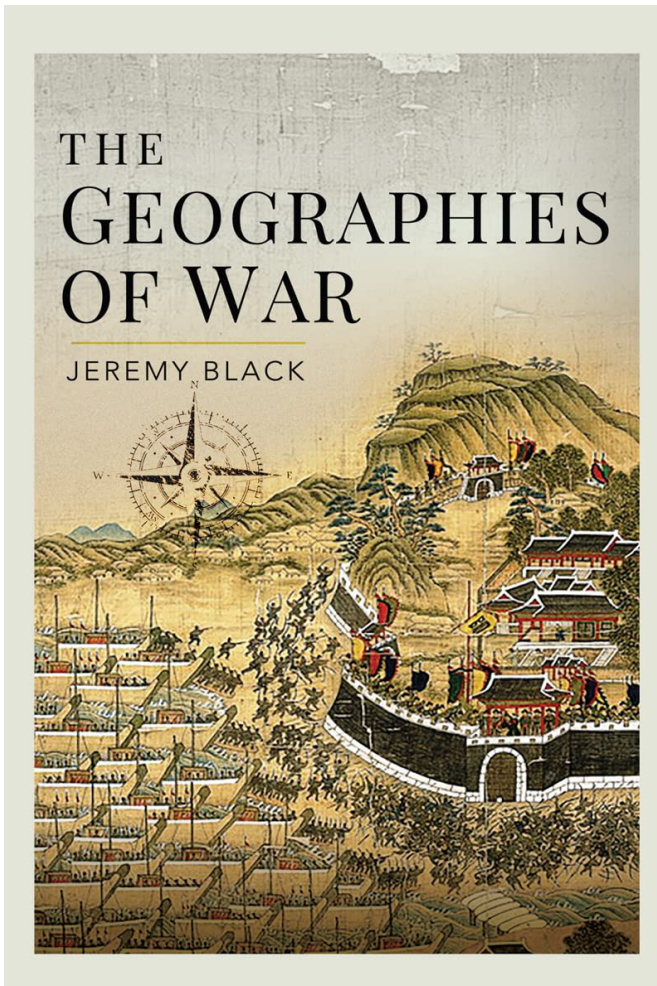
At the tactical level, the Hwasong-15's mobile transporter-erector-launcher, a massive flatbed truck, makes it harder to detect and destroy. Yet, a target is provided by the need for a storage and assembly area for the missiles, one constructed close to Pyongyang's main airport and including underground storage areas and rail links to nearby factories producing missile components. In 2020, reinforcement work was carried out on the Okryu Bridge in Pyongyang, presumably so that it was able to carry the transporters. In January 2021, North Korea issued renewed public threats by its leader Kim Il-Jung about its determination to be able to attack the United States, including by submarine-launched missiles.

At the same time, technology is deployed, and doctrine and training focused by powers, in response to a range of tasks, and with variations in the related planned distance of effectiveness. Thus, anti-missile preparedness takes a variety of forms, both symmetrical and asymmetrical. For example, in 2020, in Exercise Noble Fury, the US Marines tested the concept of 'expeditionary advanced base operations,' covert arrivals, by means of tilt-rotor aircraft, at Pacific islands, the rapid firing from them of long-range missiles at Chinese warships and missile sites, and then departure. This was an aspect of a 2018 refocus by the Pentagon on China and Russia as military rivals, and, on the part of the Marines, a subsequent move to lighter weapon systems and the abandonment of heavier artillery and tanks.

Amidst all these possibilities, notably of lethality at great range, and the active research, development and implementation being employed to profit from them, it may appear foolish to insist on long-established crucial geographical military factors. These include the continuing significance of the dichotomy of nearness and

distance, the tensions of accuracy, the constraints of logistics, and the issues involved in reconciling movement and firepower.

Leaving aside these overall points, however, come the continued specific requirements of operating in particular physical and human environments, and the pronounced ‘frictions’ these environments and requirements continue to impose. Human society does not bend easily to the requirements of systems and machines, and the geography of conflict will continue to have to respond to the resulting issues and tensions of this society.



Jeremy Black's books include histories of air power, naval power, tank warfare, artillery, World Wars One and Two, the Cold War and strategy.



Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj in uniforme di capitano d'artiglieria

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