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The human domain: Towards the completion of a paradigm in military theory?

Introduction

Thomas Kuhn noticed in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) that the history of scientific theory is not merely a product of a linear accumulation of knowledge, but also of changing intellectual frameworks (paradigms). This brief argues, through the phases of the Kuhn cycle (Figure 1), that Western postmodern societies and Western defence departments have indeed started embracing a postmodern paradigm, which is replacing the [industrial warfare paradigm](#); the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) being its exponent. However, the RMA is biased towards state-on-state warfare in line with the militaries' [dominant institutional preferences](#); consequently, Western defence departments remain highly ineffective in ['wars amongst the people'](#) and the paradigm shift is incomplete without the addition of a human domain of warfare.

Figure 1. Structure of Scientific Revolutions

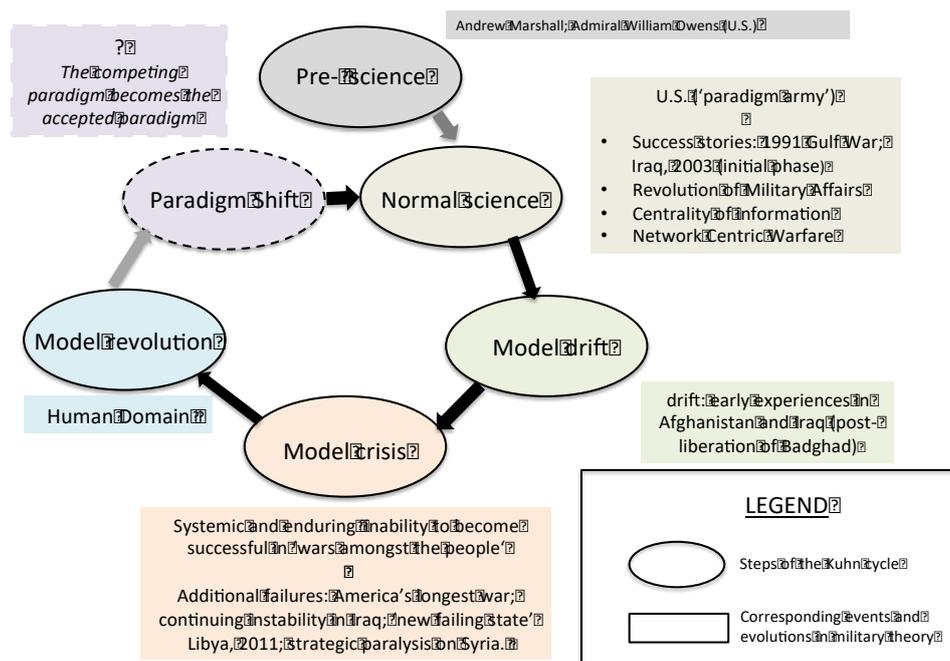


Figure 1

Kuhn cycle adjusted by the author to developments in postmodern military theory.
Source: O'Brien, B. J. (2018). Paradigm shifts about dust on the Moon: From Apollo 11 to Chang'e-4. *Planetary and Space Science*, 156, pp. 1-9.

Discussion

RMA: towards postmodern military theory

Figure 1 cannot be detached from larger societal evolutions in Western societies. Indeed, constructivism argues that norms and context shape actors and actors shape norms and context, in an inescapable interaction. Globalization and instantaneous interconnectedness empower individuals and interest groups (e.g. Greenpeace, Islamic State). Norms (e.g. Responsibility to Protect, humanitarian interventions) reflect a societal sensitivity towards the individual, translated into an aversion to violence and to casualties. These Western societal evolutions are most outspoken in Western Europe, as these postmodern, ['emocratic'](#) societies entered a [post-heroic](#) era where humanitarian goals replaced industrial era meta-narratives.

Marshall [defined](#) RMA as a major change in the nature of warfare through the innovative application of new technologies which, combined with dramatic changes in military doctrine and concepts, fundamentally alters the character and conduct of military operations. Owens advocated that Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets could [lift 'the fog of war'](#). Formulated at the end of the 20th century, these remain paradigmatic assertions.

RMA¹ relies on the primacy of information, interconnectedness, rapid processing of mass intelligence, stand-off weapons, drones, nanotechnology, and robotics and is often overseen by lawyers sitting in on targeting boards. RMA proved highly effective in 'conventional' state-on-state war. The Allied ground offensive to liberate Kuwait (1991) took only days. This success of the world's [paradigm military](#) resulted in a subsequent rapid spread of the emerging 'RMA paradigm' as Kuhn's 'normal science' RMA proved equally successful in 2003, when US-led forces conquered Iraq in less than six weeks.

Questioning the paradigm: RMA and 'wars amongst the people'

Yet, when facing 'non-conventional' threats in Afghanistan and in Iraq (post-conventional phase), empirical evidence on the limits of what RMA capabilities could achieve, accumulated. RMA required to be supplemented with *ad-hoc* measures such as the establishment of 'human terrain teams' - which ultimately failed to make a strategic difference in both Iraq and Afghanistan. This signalled that RMA-based military forces are not the panacea it claimed to be.

The continuing problems in Iraq and Afghanistan (America's longest war), supplemented with the 2011 Libya campaign (resulting in another 'failing state') and Western strategic paralysis in Syria, point to a systemic inability of RMA in providing viable policy options in 'wars amongst the people'. The West risks ending-up with tools that are both [dominant and irrelevant](#). Similar argument holds for other African conflicts and interventions that seem to assume an undesirable permanency.

Why do RMA-based strategies fail in 'wars amongst the people'? At a meta-level, RMA lacks modernizing foundational philosophies: it over-relies on technology based on the deeply-engrained assumption that military victory leads to strategic success and the foundational framework remains state-on-state war. RMA-proponents cherry-pick postmodern notions such as the primacy of information and interconnectedness to suit their preferred way-of-war. The technophiles behind RMA clad war as an exact science. Yet, ['small wars' can no longer be fought as 'miniature big wars'](#). Western armies, with their massive home bases, computer networks, and stand-off weaponry, are, at a historical unprecedented scale, [distanced from the societies](#) among which they operate against irregular opponents. The contradictory effect is that RMA [dehumanises](#) the population and the enemy to the benefit of the opposing forces. RMA's materialist orientation cannot cope with qualitative

¹ Description applies largely to AirLand Battle and Network Centric Warfare as well.

factors of culture and will remain so for as long as its mechanistic nature ignores adversary and context. Technical ISR continues to fail lifting the 'fog of war' in 'wars amongst the people'.

Towards the completion of a paradigm?

Since Cleveland first proposed the notion of a Human Domain (HD) in 2010, academics and military practitioners produced a variety of definitions, characteristics and concept maps of the emerging domain. The vast majority of the literature on the HD proposes to add [culture and language](#) in curricula; to include complexity theory - [competition for networks](#) becomes the focus, for a central place for [social sciences](#) in theory development, and for a better [fusion of all civil-military actors](#) involved in the resolution of conflict.

The addition of an overarching/transversal HD, to the existing Land, Air and Sea and the *postmodern-technical* Cyber domains, is indeed a paradigmatic endeavour, as humanity becomes *de facto* a domain as well. Yet, at least two new realities underpin its importance. First, the character of war has changed: Smith observed that 'war is [now] the reality in which all the people, *anywhere*, are the battlefield - civilians are the targets, objectives to be won, as much as an opposing force'. Smith's observations warrant the establishment of a corresponding conceptual location in military theory. Second, existing military theory currently equally lacks a conceptual location for 'victory' in 'wars amongst the people': these wars are ultimately decided by the resulting civil order, not primarily by the application of force against a threat. The HD fills a conceptual void by providing a space in military theory that caters for these two realities.

Conclusion

The development of postmodern military theory is an inevitable product of postmodern societies. Is the HD the 'missing conceptual link', which could complete postmodern military theory and expand its utility to 'wars amongst the people'? Two important questions remain: first, how would the HD theoretically affect *inter alia* Colin Gray's classic definition of Strategy ([ends, ways, means and assumptions](#))? Second, are these theoretical findings supported by empirical evidence at all? Both represent questions worthy of further research. An upcoming second brief sheds more light on the HD contributions to deal with 'wars amongst the people'.

Recommended reading:

1. Cleveland, C., Jensen, B., Bryant, S. & David, A. (2018). *Military Strategy in the 21st Century. People, Connectivity, and Competition*. Amherst, New York: Cambria Press.
2. Simpson, E. (2015). *War From the Ground Up. Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics*. London, United Kingdom: C. Hurst & Co (originally published in 2012).
3. Coker, C. (2001). *Humane Warfare*. London: Routledge.
4. Smith, R. (2008). *The Utility of Force. The Art of War in the Modern World*. New York, USA: Vintage Books (originally published in 2005).

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