
RESEARCH BRIEF 12/2021

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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Influencing military futures

Background

One common vulnerability facing armed forces is their cautiousness to adapt to uncertain futures. Such cautiousness holds risks as failure to adjust and rash decisions about change can both place armed forces at risk. Both strands hold implications for heightening the defence dilemma outlined by [Barry Buzan](#) manifesting as the threat of military defeat by competitors who are better prepared for future conflict.

Historically and in the realm of Futures Studies, future warfare conjured up images and narratives of ways and means how enemies harness innovations to conduct warfare in new ways and this, in turn, created fear and tension in societies that must face new military futures but are ill prepared. This holds the fear of military defeat by not keeping up with changes in the military field and this oversight creates vulnerabilities that military threats prey upon. Both then and now the question “[Are we ready](#)” plague political and military decision-makers.

The following section touches upon some suggestions on the importance of as well as the logic of dealing with defence and military futures.

Discussion

It suffices to say that armed forces often find themselves ill prepared to meet upcoming wars their political masters expect their militaries to fight. While the popular view maintains that armed forces are always ready to fight the last war, the politico-military nexus must position armed forces to be more prepared when they must face future threats in support national objectives.

Several pathways offer opportunities to military and political decision-makers to lower the uncertainty stemming from future threats, [to not get it terribly wrong](#) as opposed to undue expectations of getting the future perfectly right, and how they might be expected to fight in future. To this end think tanks like [RAND](#), research institutions such as [SIPRI](#) and academics in [Russia](#) and [China](#) deal with military futures in a rather consistent way. One major break that forced decision-makers the world over to

review their defence foundations came after the Cold War. The second decade of the 21st century and the dual waves of military threats below the conventional threshold alongside the rise of possible peer on peer warfare between the USA, Europe, Russia and China with their respective allies, again place politicians in a precarious position. In this vein Clausewitz noted: First and foremost, you must know what kind of war you are going to fight, and this is a **political** and **military** imperative.¹ This dictum of Clausewitz remains relevant and both entities are thus co-responsible and accountable to steer armed forces politically and militarily towards plausible futures to lower the risk of planning for the wrong war.

Combat ready armed forces make the difference between military defeat and victory; however, the latter is defined with difficulty in the 21st century. Military defeat is more visible to all and allows less room for interpretation. Military defeat is not only a scourge on the national psyche of society, but also gives rise to [negative repercussions](#) such as a damaged public image, disinterest in supporting or joining a discredited military institution, a negative self-image held by soldiers and their commanders often leading to disciplinary difficulties and even mutiny. Positioning armed forces for the future is thus important for reasons beyond the glamour of victory and serves to stave off undesirable ripples in society when getting it wrong and fostering dangerous military opportunism amongst regular and irregular opponents.

Lowering the uncertainty of defence, military, and battlefield futures requires a dedicated involvement to either design or keep pace with changes. This implies dramatic or incremental adjustments over time. Irrespective of what the practice is, both require some form of politico-military engagement with the future while the [political imperative](#) remains the guiding domain and the military arm preferably keeping to implementation. Irrespective of war, or interwar periods, political leadership and guidance trump military hubris and promote better transparency in this process. Several catalysts are at play of which some are outlined below.

Military futures are bound to be affected by [change and continuity](#) and armed forces too often opt to hedge for the impact of both. However, it remains a political responsibility to plant the signposts for the armed forces to follow. This implies a defence policy or political directives framing or flagging what futures politicians want their armed forces to prepare for.

While it is possible to gather from mere literature the range of alternatives that armed forces might face in future, the way the process takes place remains important. The process includes the choice of evolutionary or revolutionary change depending on how far armed forces have regressed. History offers much insight when time makes provision for evolutionary changes to move armed forces towards the future. If this opportunity becomes negated by having left one's armed forces to regress too far, then the curve of change becomes steeper and more so in the information age where strategic landscapes change consistently and rapidly.²

Several opportunities suggest to decision-makers how to engage with military futures. The work of futurists with methodological experience are of great value in guiding the process. This brings into play the notion of trusted partners. [Kenkel](#) points out in his study on South Africa how the change over to the SANDF and its future trajectory came to be strongly influenced by academic resonance, trust and skills. Inherently a close partnership between partners (advisors, specialists, politicians, and military role players) forms the glue and shapes the robustness of such an endeavour. Ultimately, the

¹ Howard, M. & P. Paret. (eds). Carl von Clausewitz: On war. Princeton University Press: Princeton. 1989. 88

² Guha, M. Future war in Galbreath, D.J. & J.R. Deni (eds). Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies. Routledge: London. 2018. 376-377.

guiding and final decisions remain in the ambit of defence politics, as does the accountability for success or failure.

An unavoidable catalyst in setting up and directing armed forces for their future roles is the technology sector and the defence industry in particular. The defence industry must play its role to support, adapt, or criticise the future alternatives designed and opted for in the political realm. Different from armed forces, the defence industry is probably more aligned with changes relevant to future battlefields, but domestic arms industries in particular must support shifts in the national defence environment with decision support, fit-for-purpose systems and how to bridge new and legacy systems dynamics over time. The risk remains that when [defence becomes marginalised within the national debate](#) on priorities, budgets and interests, the domestic defence industry declines along with its core essentials such as knowledge, projects, research, and development.

Concluding remarks

Shifting or changing defence and military futures are difficult and complex. No easy pathway exists to get back into step and even more so if neglected for long periods by ignoring shifts in the defence landscape. History plays a role alongside attempts for understanding how institutions change. Together with keeping the technology imperative aligned, the former represents three informative domains when contemplating alternative military futures. However, it remains up to the national politico-military leadership to be proactive in helping their militaries to face less uncertain futures or remain placid and end up with incompetent, ill-prepared and embarrassing defence institutions.

Recommended reading.

Galbreath, D.J. & R.D. John (eds). The Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies. Routledge: London. (2018).

Singh, H. Thinking change in the armed forces. Journal of Defence Studies. 3 /4October 2009. [Thinking Change in the Armed Forces \(idsa.in\)](#)

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