

Military Operations in Cities

Dr Alice Hills, holder of a *Thank-Offering to Britain Fellowship 2001-02*, describes some of the findings of her recent research project on the theory and practice of military operations on urban terrain.

For further information on the 'Thank-Offering to Britain Fund' please see page 36.

One of the most notable global transformations of recent years has been the change from a predominantly rural world to an urban one. The shift has been rapid and its military implications are not yet fully understood. Even so a number of conflicting trends are evident. A broad range of military operations in cities is thought increasingly probable even though historical experience suggests that they are costly, destructive and best avoided. Security threats are judged to be more diverse, less predictable, and probably less challenging in terms of conventional warfare. Intervention is predominantly discretionary but its context tends to be that of civil conflict, international terrorism, or state repression. Multi-national operations are subject to restrictive legal and moral rules at the same time as the military remit is expanded. Divisions between the economic North and South, which offset the processes associated with globalisation and internationalisation, further accentuate tensions.

Such developments suggest that it is not enough to see urban operations (the term refers to the range of operations typically occurring in urban areas) as a narrow technical or tactical process. Despite this most defence-related research continues to focus on the practical, or tactical, challenges of operating in cities, and there is remarkably little analytical work relating urban operations to strategy or the wider security debate. While the best way to control a riot

or clear a stairwell is understood, much less is known about the purpose of military force in an era of urbanisation, globalisation, and expeditionary warfare. The Western security community has no coherent picture of what operations in key regional cities might mean for global trade patterns or migrant flows. Similarly the extent to which the inherent destructiveness of urban war can be reconciled to liberal values has yet to be assessed. The controversy surrounding Israeli operations in the Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin in 2002 suggests that standards for judging legitimate levels of force under combat conditions do not yet exist.

It was questions such as these that prompted me to ask whether urban operations have the potential to become a critical security issue in the 21st century. My answer – which is that they warrant a central analytic role – is based on the premise that not only will operations in cities be increasingly difficult to avoid but that their inherent military logic has the potential to undermine the West's faith in technology's transformational potential and thus its preferred way of war. Urban operations also have the potential to challenge liberal values and norms in a way that other operations do not. There is little evidence that Western politicians and publics will find it easy to accommodate their proven characteristics – the short-term advantage that accrues to the side with least regard for civilians, the increasing irrelevance of restraint in the face of heavy losses, and the difficulty of suppressing (rather than fragmenting) chronic violence. Substantive questions of theoretical understanding and policy response are as important as tactical concerns.

I completed my research before the Iraq war of 2003 brought urban issues to public attention, but Operation Iraqi Freedom provides a useful test for the arguments on which my hypothesis is based, and I conclude that they stand. The nightmare scenario of sustained and wide-scale urban warfare in Baghdad did not materialise, but this does not mean that it is no longer necessary to fight urban war on traditional terms. It is essential to consider the unique challenges which future war and violence may pose in the cityscapes of the 21st century.

Soldiers from the U.S. Army's 504 Parachute Infantry Regiment, and UN police conduct a house-to-house search for weapons in Mitrovica, Kosovo, February 2000. Photo: DoD



A strategic logic

Cities represent the most complex and challenging tactical environment in which military actions occur yet the strategic context of urban operations is neglected. It is significant that, although coalition forces got to within 60 miles of Baghdad in 1991, the 1990s did not see systematic research on the strategic implications of cities. Attention focused instead on the tactics used by US forces during their politically unsuccessful operation in Mogadishu in 1993 or those of Russian forces in Grozny in the mid-1990s.

This is not surprising. If anything, the knowledge that urban operations are best avoided effectively sanctions the belief that they should be treated as a primarily tactical challenge. As a result there is no urban paradigm that can be applied to military operations. There is no coherent theory (comparable, for instance, to that for peacekeeping) that can be based on principles independent of specific operations. Nevertheless, a hypothesis or explanation of why the characteristics and constraints of cities consistently affect military operations in the way that they do is now possible.

I have identified a coherent set of variables that provides insight into the function and purpose of military force in an urbanising world. Analysis of operations in cities such as Belfast, Kabul, Grozny, Mogadishu, and Sarajevo suggests that an urban field is identifiable, and that a set of relationships between positions characterised by their own logic and practices can be established. The assumptions behind the logic (or grammar) include the following:

- Cities often require a range of operations to be performed, sequentially or simultaneously, during a single mission. A premium is placed on military skills.
- City terrain magnifies and intensifies every problem and vulnerability.
- Belligerents target civilians. This is either because they are being used as shields by the enemy, or because of ill discipline, the desire for retribution or punishment, deterrence, as a means to a political or tactical end, or because control is a central element in a warfighting strategy.

Warfighting is difficult, destructive and manpower intensive. It usually results in close combat in which a soldier's experience, training, cunning, and motivation are more valuable than advanced technology or innovative doctrine. Indeed, 'the greater the determination of the enemy, the

greater the need for close combat.' (Director of Infantry, *Future Infantry...the route to 2020* (2000), p.3). Such war marks the regression of industrialised societies to pre-industrial styles of war. Suffering and brutality are part of the logic of war. In consequence, urban war and humanitarian war are irreconcilable. It is desirable to lessen suffering but it is not possible to make war and peace at the same time.

Challenging Western preferences

The logic of urban operations challenges the West's preference for technocratic war and its stated liberal objectives.

Most Western visions of urban war are technologically biased. Technological solutions are undeniably desirable, and new technologies in areas such as information, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISR) undoubtedly suggest exciting possibilities. The American faith in technology's leverage potential is widely shared; American technological sophistication is one of the attractions of the USA as an ally. Indeed, recent operations suggest that what makes the USA so powerful is the technology that gives it information: global positioning systems (GPS), laser guidance, and the ability to receive and view data in real time. The changes associated with President Bush's election pledge to 'skip a generation' in military technology could conceivably affect the course of future urban warfighting. Or it could merely pander to the vision of war as the USA would like to fight it – quick, surgical, and successful.

Aerospace power, as an exemplar of technological development, is often thought capable of delivering such war. Its attractions are well documented. It can project force rapidly and flexibly, and its precision capabilities can reduce casualties and collateral damage. Its limitations are, however, equally well known, and of these the most relevant is that only land power can take or hold cities. Recent operations have seen an integration of air and land capabilities that results in impressive synergies, but many questions remain unanswered. Tactical air strikes blended with tanks, infantry, and artillery to great effect in Baghdad, while constant close air support (CAS) helped coalition ground forces maintain the tempo of attack in 2003, but the



US forces patrolling in Mogadishu, 1993. Photo: DoD

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extent to which such superiority can be achieved against cities in other regions is unclear. There is as yet no firm evidence that technological developments will fundamentally reshape urban operations to the West's advantage.

What is known is that cities negate many of the advantages of sophisticated technology. Current GPS technologies are not optimised for the short-range, multidimensional challenges of operations in crowded cities; buildings hinder the situational awareness needed for safe manoeuvring, making communications and navigation difficult. Too many existing problems are unsolved and too many future operational requirements unknown. It is even possible that new technology reduces military effectiveness. Effective technologies (such as mines, flame and novel explosives) already exist but law and policy guidance often prevent their deployment. Technology is consequently an enabler rather than sufficient in itself.

Tension between the technical possibilities, the West's preference for technocratic forms of war, public expectations regarding minimal casualties and low collateral damage, and the realities of operations is the result.

Main findings

Two main findings from the research may be highlighted. First, increasing urbanisation, demographic trends, globalisation, and the emergence of powerful non-state adversaries suggest that cities will become a politically significant area in the future battlespace. Key cities are used by global and political capital as base points in the spatial organisation of production and markets; they are valuable, desirable, and exploitable. Cities attract the disaffected, criminals, and extremists, and there is no reason why this should change. While such trends are unlikely to

Royal and US Marines advance in Basra, Operation Telic, 2003. Photo: MoD



A soldier from 7 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery explains ISAF's mission with the help of an interpreter and a loudspeaker system, Operation Fingal, Kabul, 2002. Photo: MoD

escalate into serious international war, they are likely to result in prolonged low-level conflicts involving subversion, terrorism, and proxy operations, the impact of which is enhanced by cities. In consequence Western expeditionary forces will be forced to engage in cities whether they want to or not. Given the historically proven costs of most urban operations, the critical issue confronting the West is whether operations can be made effective, efficient, and relatively casualty free. The answer is that they cannot.

Secondly, tactics and strategy need to be rebalanced; tactical accomplishments cannot ensure political success. Developing a coherent strategic understanding of urban operations requires the West to engage with the continuities and discontinuities evident in the strategic logic of operations. It requires the reconciliation of contradictory and stressful relations, such as those existing between the imperatives of coercion, warfighting and destruction on the one hand, and technological development, globalisation and humanitarian relief on the other. It also requires negotiation in an age of multinational forces, proxies, peacekeeping and low-level conflict. It needs the imagination to look beyond current scenarios and interests.

This suggests that security analysis need to broaden its focus to facilitate the necessary adjustment. Reductionist analyses that treat operations as a purely military concern are flawed, not least because urban operations could prove to be as characteristic of the 2020s as peacekeeping was of the 1990s. Although analysis must remain based on the methodological logic of military operations, an expanded critical perspective is necessary because urban operations present a unique set of military, political and moral challenges to policy makers and commanders.