Book Review: Old & New Battlespaces: Society, Military Power, and War

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Old & New Battlespaces represents more than two decades of thinking, reflection, and analysis by Jahara Matisek and Buddhika Jayamaha, professors affiliated with the US Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. Matisek serves as an associate professor of military and strategic studies and the research director of the Strategy Warfare Center, and Jayamaha serves as an assistant professor of military and strategic studies. Matisek and Jayamaha have military backgrounds with the US Air Force (currently serving) and US Army, respectively, which provide them with the experiential context to integrate theory with real-world operations.

The Air Force Office of Scientific Research supported Matisek and Jayamaha’s research and writing, conveying institutional acceptance of the authors’ approach and methodology. Inspired by interactions with military students, the book focuses on “the battlespace [that] denotes a leader’s concept of the area of operation in order to employ combat power effectively” (viii). The authors link the focus to specific questions: “What is the nature of . . . battlespace, and how can one make sense of it across space, through well-known and emergent domains, and along the various levels of war? Where should one look, how should one look, and for what should one look?” (viii). These questions promote conceptual lenses derived from domain (air, land, and so forth) perceptions found in contemporary US Joint Force doctrine. They ignore dimensionality (space-time warping) constructs while offering their own approach to reformulating traditional tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfighting analysis, which is inherently hierarchical, bureaucratic, and legacy (yet dominant) conventional force reinforcing. As a result, the book’s approach treats war as “a unit of analysis” viewed across a “temporal continuum” and analyzed via a “macro-level interdisciplinary framework drawing on military and strategic studies, political science, sociology, history, and even literature” (10).

The work draws upon the sovereign (later post-Westphalian) state experience with warfighting with modal analysis derived from the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and warfare in the nuclear age during and after the Cold War. The authors undertake this analysis utilizing the well-developed and structured GRINS (geopolitics, regime type,
idea, nature of military organizations, and scientific knowledge) framework (11, see figures 2.1 and 2.2 and accompanying explanations). The essential analysis of “war over space and time,” however, orients itself toward Clausewitzian theory and would be considered a revolution in military affairs application in its level of abstraction (that is, solely existing within the modern paradigm of war) (11). Human organizations such as tribes, clans, city-states, and empires, while briefly acknowledged, exist outside the analytical approach taken.

One could consider this work’s modernist approach to battlespace analysis a strength or a weakness depending on the paradigm of war in which one resides. Military traditionalists who reside in the Westphalian state paradigm and view Clausewitzian teachings as dominant in early- to mid-twenty-first-century warfare will welcome the work’s “in paradigm” analysis of battlespace. The authors treat space and cyberspace as additional domains in which war now takes place, representative of two more interconnected domains of warfighting layered upon the domains of land, sea, and air. Through a modernist narrative, the authors integrate and analyze advanced technologies related to automation, big data, artificial intelligence, and the increasing threat posed by autocracies (such as Russia and China). The US-led response protocols of democratic states against authoritarian state challengers who have a broader “domain” view, including geopolitics and civil society, are initially modeled out via differing views of the operational environment with follow-on discussions (144, see figures 7.1 and 7.2). This articulation provides competing lines of effort, end states, and linkages to DIME (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) as a representation of national power.

The work’s battlespace analysis will dishearten military non-traditionalists who come from a premodern or postmodern “out of paradigm” perspective. I come from this perspective and found the discussion and theory behind the “new” material presented disappointing. The “where, how, and for what” one should look for, according to the authors, is ultimately in legacy warfighting reinforcing with the addition of space and cyberspace bolt-ons—albeit, as a component of contemporary US multi-domain approaches to warfighting. This is why the book’s concluding chapter that recognizes “[t]he United States is facing a crisis of grand strategy and military strategy“ cannot contend with the present political and military policy malaise our nation suffers from (160). The authors’ recognition that “US political leaders will also need to craft a new social contract in support of the grand strategy” indicates a major change the authors foresee needing attention (170). Given its fundamentally “out of paradigm” status, however, and given the constitutional basis of the social contract with our governed, “a new social contract” and battlespace approach would be out of sync with the “in paradigm” framework utilized within the work.

In summation, the work executes well in its modernist approach and writing. Status quo military thinkers—and much of the Department of Defense bureaucracy—will likely receive the work positively. Its legacy reinforcing battlespace dimensionality approach, however, firmly adheres to “in the box” perceptions and does not advance warfighting theory. In this reviewer’s estimation, the authors advocate for the wrong response to “[n]ew adversaries, new domains of warfare and novel weapons [that] are emerging” (171).

Keywords: US Joint Force doctrine, battlespace, Russia, China, Clausewitz

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