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DUELING NATURES

by

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Election cycles make for interesting times. For one thing, they prompt debates among defense analysts and other experts over current programs, the balance (or lack thereof) among ends, ways, and means, as well as examinations of some of the basic assumptions underpinning our theories and concepts of war. One debate in particular – that regarding the nature of war – is worth reviewing because its implications are far-reaching.

For most of its history, the nature of war was not a contested concept. Military professionals believed that war's nature was unchanging: war was violent, chaotic, and tended to escalate beyond control. For that reason, it seemed a good idea to strike "firstest with the mostest." The basic idea was to knock the other guy off balance and to keep hammering him until he succumbed. It was supremely frustrating to all but a few military commanders that their political masters could not understand this most simple of rules, dictated – so it seemed – by the nature of war itself.

That general understanding changed with the various waves of thinking that struck in the 1990s with the so-called "Revolution in Military Affairs." One school of thought in particular became popular when it claimed that information technologies could change the very nature of war by reducing or eliminating uncertainty, at least for one party. With the "fog of war" essentially lifted – and the enemy's forces and movements revealed and thus rendered vulnerable – war would become a one-sided affair, a genuinely reliable and low-risk political tool. These claims immediately brought a series of counterclaims, which argued that the nature of war could not be changed by the introduction of a mere piece or two of technology, however revolutionary.

The resultant controversy revealed two things: (1) the U.S. military did not have a clear understanding of the nature of war, let alone a uniform one; and (2) the disagreement had implications for the services. Airpower enthusiasts held firmly to the former view, that information technologies were radically changing not only the conduct of war but its very essence; while landpower and seapower advocates argued for the permanence or "unchangeability" of war's nature, and the need for reliable reserves as a hedge against uncertainty. If war did indeed become a one-sided affair,

large reserves would not be necessary, and force structures could be cut back accordingly.

Uncharacteristic of debates of this sort, this one reached a conceptual middle-ground relatively quickly. The idea of the nature of war was examined more closely, and in near-Clausewitzian fashion, it was divided in two: one part consisted of war's "nature," or essence, which was considered to remain unchanging, while the other part was made up of war's "character," or how it is fought, which was seen to change frequently based on the weapons and techniques employed. Information technologies might change the character of war, so the argument went, but they could not change its nature. How could war's nature change? If it did, it would not be war anymore.

This middle ground seemed acceptable for a time. Proponents of the new school of thought could still claim that a military revolution was underway, even if it involved war's character rather than its nature. At the same time, the other side could continue to argue that war's nature had not changed, and therefore it was still wise to hedge one's bets in war.

The problem is that the conceptual middle ground was illusory: English dictionaries do not allow for a meaningful distinction between the terms "nature" and "character." Each term could well be substituted for the other without a significant loss in meaning.

However, there is a second problem which has to do with the logic underpinning the argument that war's nature is unchanging. If war's nature is unchanging, then we should be able to draw the following conclusions:

- All wars must follow the same pattern, whatever that may be; they may be different in minor details but nothing more.
- What holds true for one will hold true for all: if one war escalates, they all must escalate, without exception.
- We should be able to predict outcomes: the same key factors should appear again and again as responsible for victory (or defeat).
- It should be possible to discern a set of rules or principles that would pertain to all wars.

Few scholars or military professionals today would want to accept these conclusions, regardless of which side of the debate they are on. Even those who believe the nature of war is unchanging would readily agree that war is fundamentally a clash of opposing wills. That alone means it must be dynamic. That, in turn, means it must fluctuate and change in intensity, that is, be changeable, rather than static. Ergo, the logic for arguing that war's nature is unchanging is broken at a critical point.

But there is a way to resolve this problem. What those who argue that war's nature is unchanging appear to want to say is that there are certain elements or tendencies common to every war, be they the Clausewitzian tendencies of hostility, chance, and purpose, or some other elements. Because they are found in every war, they are described as "permanent," and, by extension, war's nature is described as "unchanging," even though the tendencies themselves do fluctuate, sometimes wildly. No single technology or technological innovation can eliminate that. In this sense, their argument

is laudably Clausewitzian. Its obvious sin is that it is unhappily awkward: war has an unchanging nature that is itself changeable.

Clausewitz did indeed say that all wars are things of the same nature, but we need to remember that nature is essentially Janus-faced, with all-out wars on one side and very limited ones on the other. It is a nature comprised of three principal tendencies – hostility, chance, and purpose – which operate along a sliding scale of intensity. We also need to remember that he said war is *more* than a chameleon: a chameleon can only change its external colors, but not its internal composition (its organs remain fixed). War, in contrast, can change the proportional relationships among any or all of its three tendencies and still remain war. Clausewitz underscores war’s changeable nature to make the point that military “grammar” might need to be revised, depending upon which face of Janus is leering at us.

As for those who argue that the fog of war can be lifted, thereby permanently altering the nature of war – what they are actually saying is that war’s nature does not matter: whatever it is, we can change it and make war what we want it to be, preferably short and essentially risk-free. They are putting all their faith in a certain type of technology and taking an enormous leap. They are asking us to leave our reason behind and join them. We have seen this before, and the landings are always messy and painful. I, for one, will take my chances with the sin of unhappy awkwardness.

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