



IDSS COMMENTARIES (53/2006)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

The Obstacles to Military Transformation

Alvin Chew*

June 2006

Militaries and commercial corporations share many similarities. Business corporations have adopted war strategies for their strategic planning and decision making processes while militaries have adopted the corporate strategy of innovation in their transformational process. As the global society evolves from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, several modern militaries are following the footsteps of the commercial sector by adopting a paradigm shift in the conduct of warfare. With the US spearheading the process of military transformation, the trend is also being observed in other nations such as Australia, Sweden and Singapore.

While both businesses and the military share a common strategic vision of staying relevant, transformation in the military may not provide the clear benefits it has offered the business world. Instead, the current transformation of the military faces a multitude of impediments to its success. These impediments may be grouped into the organisational, the operational and the asymmetric.

Organisation Structure

The term creative destruction, coined by Austrian Economist Joseph Schumpeter, is used to illustrate the transformation of industry from a monopolistic market to a competitive one with the entry of radical entrepreneurs. Leading management consultant, McKinsey & Company, have found that corporations are built on the basis of continuity while capital markets function on the assumption of discontinuity. Hence, corporate managers need to break away from the assumption of continuity to tackle cultural barriers of corporations.

In a similar context, military organisations exist as sole protectors of their respective states. The argument goes that in order to face the threats of discontinuity posed by the dynamic global strategic environment, military commanders need to ditch the notion of a 'built to last' armed forces and instead adopt an attitude amenable to constant transformation.

The imperative for military transformation is evident but is it viable in the strict hierarchical structure of a military organisation? The top-down chain-of-command in the military owes itself to the nature of its operations. Any attempt to disrupt or flatten out the structure could prove futile because the military needs to thrive in an ordered system so as to preserve its vision of maintaining an ordered environment.

Nature of Operations

The impediment to create an adaptable fighting force to deal with indeterminate threats does not solely lie in the rigidity of the military's organisational structure but also in the nature of its operations as well. For example, while the well-known blitzkrieg doctrine adopted by the Germans during World War Two had a decentralised command structure, this highly organised manoeuvre could only be perfectly executed with an extremely disciplined force. However, the required intense coordination of infantry troops, artillery and close-air support would render the operation inadaptable when confronted with an opposition that does not perform to script. In a sense, the more coordinated the operation, the less ability it has to accommodate unexpected changes.

Similarly, although the implementation of the Network Centric Warfare (NCW) aims to provide more autonomy for tactical fighters on the battleground, the methodology of military training at the rudimentary level does not permit a subordinate soldier to act on his own discretion during a training session and certainly not in a war. Simulation of an enemy's response during training exercises are only possibilities, they are certainly not actual representations of how an adversary would fight in a real war. The advent of technology aims to speed up decision making processes as well as the ability to orchestrate a manoeuvre perfectly but it does little to train a tactical soldier the skill of adaptability. In fact, the nature of training to perfect an execution already indisposes the characteristic of adaptability during battle.

Furthermore, transformation, through its empowerment of soldiers at the tactical level, creates uncertainty in military culture which then paradoxically hinders the endeavour of eliminating the fog of war. Consequently, as transformation leads to unfamiliar turf, the imperatives for organisational change fail to convince the old military saying of "Knowing Oneself and Knowing One's Enemies".

Asymmetric Warfare

Besides these impediments to the current process of transformation, the current transformation also falls short of meeting the present global challenges posed by trans-national terrorism. While it is understandable that the strategic goal of military transformation inevitably stretches beyond solving the current threats of asymmetric warfare, societies nevertheless benchmark military competency against current rather than future adversaries. Therefore, it remains crucial for militaries to deal with the current indeterminacies of insurgencies and guerrilla warfare.

The inability of the military to deal with the present threat scenario serves little to aid its transformational effort. Critics of military transformation have argued that the current rise of conflicts perpetuated by non-state actors, notably the events of 9/11 and London Underground bombings, may result in the obsolescence of high-tech weapons.

On the other hand, asymmetric warfare has always been present and cannot be eradicated completely. Sun Tzu's definition of "avoiding the enemies' strength and attacking its weaknesses" reiterates the use of asymmetry even though the potential adversary has the ability to wage a conventional warfare. The sole reliance on technology in the transformational process serves as a double-edged sword as it not only enhances fighting capabilities but also functions as a critical vulnerability for enemies to exploit. Thus, the resulting disparity in

military technology through transformation will exacerbate the situation of asymmetry. Adversaries will close the military gap by avoiding the technological superiority and converting it into vulnerability. Therefore, the transformational effort towards a more advanced combat will only bear fruit if potential adversaries fight in a conventional manner. It is ironic that while militaries attempt to leverage on technology as a force multiplier to gain military primacy, they are at the same time opening up avenues for exploitation by potential adversaries.

Stability via Transformation

Regardless of whether militaries decide to exploit leading-edge technologies for the conduct of future warfare, potential adversaries will likewise turn to these new inventions as they become more accessible to the average man on the street. An obvious example of this is of course the manner in which the internet – a communication system designed for the US military – has been exploited now by terrorist groups for their own activities.

The traits of asymmetry will prevail regardless of whether militaries exploit the force multiplier potential of technology. However, the transformation of the military has to be done moderately so as to conceal and eventually protect vulnerabilities. The current transformation process hinged on a single variable of technology may be effective but it is certainly not robust enough to cover the wide spectrum of asymmetric threats. As effectiveness and robustness are inversely proportional factors, the transformation of the military ultimately bodes on the intricate balance of these two parameters.

* Dr Alvin Chew is an Associate Research Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.