The Urban ‘Battlespace’


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Abstract

Sustaining the military targeting of the everyday sites and spaces of urban life in the contemporary period is a new constellation of military doctrine and theory. In this the spectre of state-vs.-state military conflict is seen to be in radical retreat. Instead, the new doctrine is centred around the idea that a wide spectrum of global insurgencies and ambient threats now operates across the social, technical, political, cultural and financial networks which straddle transnational scales whilst simultaneously penetrating the everyday spaces, sites and circulations of global cities. Such lurking threats are deemed by the latest theorist of ‘assymetric’ or ‘irregular’ warfare to camouflage themselves within the ‘clutter’ of cities at home and abroad for concealment against traditional forms of military targeting. Addressing the Mumbai attacks through the lens of this emerging constellation of military and security doctrine, this paper highlights three important implications of viewing the everyday sites, spaces and circulations of cities as the key strategic ‘battlespaces’ of our era. These involve, firstly, way contemporary doctrine views urban terrorist attacks as part of a broad terrain of transnational organised ‘information operations.’ Second, such paradigms prefigure a radical blurring between local and global scales, the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of nation states, and between policing, military power and state intelligence. And finally, emerging urban security propagates hyper-militarised perspectives in which every aspect of urban life is transposed as an act of limitless and boundless warfare.
Cities as ‘Battlespace’

‘The city [is] not just the site, but the very medium of warfare – a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux’
(Weizman, 2006, 53)

Sustaining the military targeting of the everyday sites and spaces of urban life in the contemporary period is a new constellation of military doctrine and theory. In this the spectre of state-vs.-state military conflict is seen to be in radical retreat. Instead, the new doctrine is centred around the idea that a wide spectrum of global insurgencies and ambient threats now operates across the social, technical, political, cultural and financial networks which straddle transnational scales whilst simultaneously penetrating the everyday spaces, sites and circulations of global cities. Such lurking threats are deemed by the latest theorist of ‘assymetric’ or ‘irregular’ warfare to camouflage themselves within the ‘clutter’ of cities at home and abroad for concealment against traditional forms of military targeting.

The proliferation of such attacks, the argument goes, in exposing the increasing pointlessness of traditional military mobilisations against other states, necessitates instead a radical ratcheting up of techniques of tracking, surveillance and targeting centred on both the transnational architectures of urban circulation and mobility and the spaces of everyday urban life. Through such a focus, the new body of military doctrine radically blurs the traditional separation of military and civil spheres, local and global scales, and the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of nations. In the process, ‘citizens and non-citizens alike are now treated as an always present threat. In this sense, all are imagined as combatants and all-terrain the site of battle’ (Packer, 2006, 378).

Many military theorists thus speak of a new (fourth) generation of warfare (see Hammes, 2006). This is based, they argue, on ‘unconventional’ wars, ‘asymmetric’ struggles, ‘global insurgencies’ and ‘low intensity conflicts’ which pit high-tech state
militaries against informal fighters or mobilized civilians. Military theorist, Thomas Hammes (2006, 32), for example, argues that in the 21st century so-called ‘fourth generation’ warfare will dominate global security politics. Rooted in the concept that ‘superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power’ (2006, 32). Using such doctrine, US commanders in Baghdad have emphasised the need to coordinate the entire ‘battlespace’ of the city based on addressing civilian infrastructure, the shattered economy, and cultural awareness, as well as ‘the controlled application of violence’ in order to try and secure the city (Chiarelli and Patrick Michaelis, 2005).

The key concept driving the current ‘transformation’ in military thinking and practice is ‘battlespace’. This concept is crucial because it basically sustains ‘a conception of military matters that includes absolutely everything’ (Agre, 2001). Nothing lies outside battlespace, temporally or geographically. Battlespace has no front and no back and no start or end. It is ‘deep, high, wide, and simultaneous: there is no longer a front or a rear’ (Blackmore, 2005, 24). The concept of battlespace thus permeates everything from the molecular scales of genetic engineering and nanotechnology through the everyday sites, spaces and experiences of city life, to the planetary spheres of space or the Internet’s globe-straddling ‘cyberspace.’ With wars and battles no longer declared or finished, temporalities of war thus threaten to extend indefinitely. ‘War is back and seemingly forever’ (Deer, 2007, 1). No wonder Pentagon gurus convinced George Bush to replace the idea of the ‘war on terror’ with the new ‘Big Idea’ of the ‘Long War’ in 2004.

A Postcard from Mumbai

Crucially, the lurking threats and malign circulations deemed by contemporary state military theorists to dominate contemporary urban ‘battlespace’ are deemed to provide existential threats to western societies because of the way in which they target, exploit or permeate the very everyday urban sites, circulations and control technologies that sustain contemporary cities. Such threats erupt within and through everyday financial, transport, electric, electronic and public space architectures and
infrastructures that continuously function to bring the global neoliberalised system of global cities into being.

Thus, the 9/11 attackers mobilised Internet, electronic finance, and of course airline infrastructures to project scales of violence against New York and Washington DC that the combined military might of the Axis forces were incapable of during the whole of World War II. Terrorists in London, Spain, Tokyo and elsewhere have widely targeted everyday public transport systems to confine their attacks whilst projecting the sought after media spectacles. Somali pirates simply board the vast assemblage of global shipping that happens to pass their immediate coastline on its way between the world’s major ports and urban logistics hubs.

The recent attacks by the Lashkar-e-Toiba Group in Mumbai, meanwhile, utilized GPS and Google Earth technologies that have been generalised from US military Cold War research programmes before simply boating to the heart of the city to unleash indiscriminate carnage against hotels and cafes frequented by local elites, Western tourists and business visitors. A powerful example of what security analysts are calling ‘swarming’ attacks, the Mumbai assaults are already being discussed as paradigmatic cases of simultaneous, drawn-out and relatively low level urban terrorist events which both spread across symbolic targets of a global city, are clearly orchestrated with extended real time global media coverage in mind, and combine the use of digital control technologies with rudimentary weapons to kill and main large numbers of urban civilians (Arquilla, 2009).

Many US security and military theorists now consider similar attacks to be likely within US and other western metropolitan areas in the near future. ‘The swarm will be heading our way, too,’ John Arquilla (2009), of the US Navy’s Postgraduate School, wrote in the New York Times in February 2009. ‘Right now, most [US] cities would be as hard-pressed as Mumbai was to deal with several simultaneous attacks [.]
Nightmare possibilities include synchronized assaults on several shopping malls, high-rise office buildings or other places that have lots of people and relatively few exits.’ In an article in Foreign Policy, meanwhile Robert Haddick (2009) laments the neglect of the terroristic possibilities of rudimentary weapons within US cities.

‘Forget about suitcase nukes, white powder in envelopes, or airplanes as missiles,’ he
writes. ‘A low-tech gun battle simultaneously played out in several cities would attract the kind of attention many terror groups crave.’

**Global Media Events as ‘Information Operations’**

As Haddick’s remarks demonstrate, and as is usual in debates about ‘assymmetric,’ ‘fourth generation’ or ‘irregular’ warfare, military and security theorists’ discussion about the Mumbai attacks particularly emphasise the role of such attacks as global media events of unparalleled power. Crucially, the acts of terrorist killing are seen to support global media events, rather than the other way round (as in past insurgencies). An official US military blog reflects that the Mumbai attacks, in particular, in ‘sustaining an action for days, the terrorists were able to prolong the life of the story through multiple media cycles. Once again, the enemies of freedom and peace have found devastating ways to manipulate strategic communication to suit hostile agendas’ (USACAC, 2008).

Such reflections demonstrate that the multiple circuits of ‘civilian’ media are fully inscribed into the all the latest variations on military doctrine as perhaps the most important of all elements of contemporary ‘battlespace’. Indeed, military theorists now commonly describe TV and the Internet as ‘virtual weapons’ within the crucial domains of ‘information warfare’ (see, for example, Johnson, 2007). They also bemoan the way ‘asymmetric’ struggles like the second Palestinian Intifada actually gain massive global political credibility because they lead to images of Palestinian children confronting Israeli tanks with stones (Hammes, 2006, chapter 8). Managing and manipulating the politics of fear through ‘information operations’ and propaganda are thus central to these new constellations of military doctrine. The blurring of entertainment, media and war into what James Der Derian calls a media-industrial-media-entertainment network has been centrally important here (Der Derian, 2001). ‘With the advent of the so-called war on terror,’ wrote Andrew Ross (2004), ‘the U.S. government’s legitimacy no longer derives from its capacity or willingness to ensure a decent standard of living for those citizens; it depends, instead, on the degree to which they can be successfully persuaded they are on the verge of being terrorized.’ Even amidst the chaos and devastation of the credit-crunch, desperate Republican campaign managers widely depicted Democrat Presidential candidate,
Barack Obama, as a lurking ally of that ultimate terrorist foe, Osama Bin Laden.

Scalar and Institutional Blurrings

A further feature of the new urban military doctrine is the way it works to erode and collapse legal and geographical binaries separating the inside and outside of nations, local and global scales, and distinctions between policing, military mobilisation and state intelligence services. As distinctions between urban battlespaces at home and abroad collapse, and terrorist mobilisation operates within and through the everyday architectures and infrastructures of global cities, so policing extraterritorialises, military mobilisations intensify within domestic cities, and military power, policing and state intelligence cross-fertilise to target the urban quotidian at home and abroad in increasingly integrated ways.

The case of the United States is instructive here (see Graham, 2009). The US military is now overcoming traditional legal obstacles to deployment in the US itself. US military Powerpoints now routinely address the challenges of ‘urban operations’ in Mogadishu, Fallujah, Kabul or Jenin in the same breath as those addressing the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the 1999 anti-globalisation ‘battles’ in Seattle or Genoa, or the highly militarised response to the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Such a paradigm allows transnational social movements and mobilizations against state oppression or the devastating effects of market fundamentalism, ecological crises and neoliberalisation—such as that by the Zapatistas, or by global justice or environmental campaigners-- to be rendered as forms of ‘netwar’ equivalent to the radical and murderous Islamism of Al Qaeda (Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, 2001). Finally, this blurring means that the militarisation and walling of national borders such as between US-Mexico not only involve the same techniques and technologies and as the walling and portioning off of the neighbourhoods of Baghdad or Gaza, but sometimes actually involve contracts to the same military and technology corporations.

It follows that continual efforts need to be made to connect the effects of the United State’s military aggression abroad with domestic counter-terrorist policies in the ‘homeland’ which target, profile, map and incarcerate Arab and Asian Americans in
particular. In a context where ‘imperial power operates by obscuring the links between homeland projects of racial subordination and minority co-optation and overseas strategies of economic restructuring and political domination,’ Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade (2006, 119) argue that ‘this link between the domestic and overseas fronts of imperial power helps us understand that the shared experiences of Asian and Arab Americans in the U.S., both those that are visible and those not so visible, are due to the workings of empire.’

This process of radical and multiple blurring has other manifestations, too. Civil law enforcement organizations, for example, are themselves become remodeled along much more (para) militarised lines (Sheptycki, 2000). As well as reorganising themselves for highly militarized counter-terrorist operations and the fortification of major conventions, sporting events or political summits, they increasingly ‘adopt the techniques and language of war to launch SWAT teams against a widening array of urban, civil events, and routine call-outs’ (Balko, 2006).

Thus explicitly military models increasingly sustain new ideas in penology, law enforcement doctrine and technology as well as civilian surveillance, training, simulation, and disaster assistance (Kraska, 2001). Doctrine for ‘urban warfare’, ‘military operations on urban terrain,’ ‘irregular operations’ or ‘low intensity conflict,’ developed to try and pacify urban masses on the global periphery, are thus quickly imitated ‘to discipline groups and social movements deemed dangerous within the heartlands of the imperial metropolis’ (Dawson, 2007).

Military-style command and control systems are thus established to support ‘zero tolerance’ or revanchist policing and urban surveillance practices designed to try and exclude failed consumers or those seen not to be long from new enclaves of urban consumption and leisure. What Robert Warren (2004) calls ‘pop-up armies’ are increasingly being organized transnationally to pre-emptively militarise cities hosting political submits, global sporting spectacles, or facing major anti-globalization demonstrations. And the techniques of high-tech urban warfare – from unmanned drones through the verticalised surveillance of satellites to the partitioning of space by walls and biometric checkpoints – increasingly provide models for the reorganisation of domestic urban space. In addition, the almost infinite metaphorisation of ‘war’ – on
crime, drugs, or terror, and so on – solidifies wider shifts from social, welfarist and Keynesian urban paradigms to authoritarian and militarised notions of the state’s role in sustaining ‘order’.

Urban Life as War

‘In 1998, at the same time that urban geographers were writing that cities are places where identities form, social capital is built, and new forms of collective action emerge, the US Marine Corps explained the phenomenon a bit differently: "cities historically are the places where radical ideas ferment, dissenters find allies and discontented groups find media attention" thereby making cities "a likely source of conflict in the future”’ (Golan, 2005, 69)

As the world’s (fading) military hegemon, the US military’s search for new doctrine to deal with cities recognises the similarities when dealing with ‘urbanised terrain’ at home and abroad most explicitly. “Despite the geographic differences,” writes Maryann Lawlor (2007) in the military magazine, Signal, key personnel at the U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) in Norfolk, Virginia have used massive war games and simulations, such as one named Urban Resolve, to ‘identified several key concerns common to both areas.’ These involve the difficulty of separating ‘terrorists’ or ‘insurgents’ from the urban civilian population; the high densities of infrastructure; the way cities interrupt old-style military surveillance and targeting systems; and the complex three-dimensional nature of urban ‘battlespace’.

All too easily, such a discourse slips into a world where ‘life itself is war’ (Agre, 2001): Here, the inability to deal with any notion of the other beyond placing that other in the cross-hairs of the targeting process reaches its zenith. Eventually, as military ways of thinking run rampant, there is nothing left in the world that is not a target for the full spectrum of symbolic or actual violence mobilised through the latest ideologies of permanent, boundless war. ‘The truth of the continual targeting of the world as the fundamental form of knowledge production,’” writes media theorist Rey
Chow (2006, 42), ‘is xenophobia, the inability to handle the otherness of the other beyond the orbit that is the bomber’s own visual path.’ For the xenophobe, she continues, ‘every effort needs to be made to sustain and secure this orbit – that is, by keeping the place of the other-as-target always filled.’

The emerging paradigms emphasising urban everyday sites and circulations as the key 21st century battlespace quickly transpose prosaic the social acts that together forge urban life into existential, societal threats. For example, US military theorist, William Lind, extending the US ‘culture wars’ debates of the 1980s and 1990s, and swallowing whole Samuel Huntingdon’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ binary, has argued that even the prosaic act of urban immigration must now be understood as an act of ‘warfare.’ ‘In Fourth Generation war,’ Lind (2004, 14) writes, ‘invasion by immigration can be at least as dangerous as invasion by a state army.’ Under what he calls the ‘poisonous ideology of multiculturalism,’ Lind argues that immigrants within western nations can now launch ‘a homegrown variety of Fourth Generation war, which is by far the most dangerous kind.’

Here we confront the realities of what the Center for Immigration Studies has called the ‘weaponization’ of immigration (Cato Institute, 2008). Such new imaginations of warfare provide a powerful example of what happens when all aspects of human life are rendered as nothing but war; nations are imagined in narrow ethno-nationalist ways; and diasporic cities emerge as mere cultural pollutants. ‘The road from national genius to a totalized cosmology of the sacred nation,’ writes Arjun Appadurai (2006, 4), ‘and further to ethnic purity and cleansing, is relatively direct.’

Once again, domestic and foreign antiurban imaginaries telescope unerringly here. Returning again to our US example, on the one hand, US military officials have routinely talked on the walling-off of neighbourhoods within Baghdad as constructions analogous to the ‘gated communities’ that encompass more than 50% of new homes in many Southern and western cities in the US. Many right-wing media commentaries or military sales pitches have also blurred homeland and Iraqi cities into a single, demonized space requiring high-tech and heavy-handed militarised assault. In 2007, for example, Nicole Gelinas (2007) argued in
the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal that post-Katrina New Orleans was a ‘Baghdad on the Bayou.’ She argued that the city required a similar militarised response to bring order and investment amid its supposed pathologies of crime and violence.

The US response to the devastation of the largely African-American city of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in November 1995 does indeed provide a pivotal example here (Graham, 2006). Some US officers discussed their highly militarized responses to the Katrina disaster in New Orleans as an attempt to ‘take back’ New Orleans from African-American ‘insurgencies’ (Chiarelli and Patrick Michaelis, 2005). Here, rather than a massive humanitarian response treating the victims as citizens requiring immediate help, a largely military operation was (eventually) organized. Such a response merely added power to the idea that the internal geographies of the US are the sites of state-backed wars against racialised and biopolitically disposable others as much as external ones (Giroux, 2006). This operation treated those abandoned in the central city as a threat and a military target to be contained, targeted and addressed as a means of protecting the property of the normalized and largely white suburban and exurban populations who had escaped in their own cars. In the process, African American citizens of the City were rendered as refugees within their own country. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (2007, 167) argue, ‘Katrina not only ripped the roofs off Gulf Coast houses but also ripped the façade off “the national security state.”

"The Cities are the Problem"

‘The future of warfare lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, industrial parks, and the sprawl of houses, shacks, and shelters that form the broken cities of our world’ (Peters, 1996)

Urban sites, and urban military operations, thus increasingly take centre-stage in all these new imaginations of war. Fed by the anti-urban imaginaries of the military, it is urban sites that are deemed to concentrate, shelter and camouflage the spectrum of
anti-state agitators, insurgents, terrorists and social movements. It is cities where the high-tech advantages of western militaries are deemed to break down because it is no longer possible to use the weapons of the high-tech Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) to annihilate targets conveniently and cheaply on desert plains (as they did in Iraq in 1991). And it is in the burgeoning cities that the vulnerabilities of western state, economic and military power are most exposed. Cities are widely posited by US military commentators as forms of camouflage against the vertical omniscience and omnipotence of US forces. After 1991, many US military theorists hypothesised that ‘insurgent forces around the world, having witnessed the annihilation of Saddam’s troops in the open desert by US “smart bombs” [during the first Gulf War] had realized that their only chance of survival lay infighting future wars in the urban jungles of the underdeveloped world’ (Dawson, 2007, 172).

Such perspectives suggest, as Duane Schattle of the U.S. Joint Forces Command’s Joint Urban Operations Office puts it, that, in a world being urbanised more comprehensively and rapidly than ever before, ‘the cities are the problem’ for US military power (quoted in Turse, 2007). James Lasswell, head of the Office of Science and Technology at the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, thinks that ‘urban is the future’ and that ‘everything worth fighting for is in the urban environment.’ And Wayne Michael Hall, advisor in the Joint Urban Operations Office, argues that US forces ‘will be fighting in urban terrain for the next hundred years’ (quoted in Turse, 2007).

References

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