

Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror

Lecture given by Professor Mary Kaldor to the Cold War Studies Centre, London School of Economics

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The Cold War Studies Centre gave me this all-embracing title: ‘Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and War on Terror’ – it more or less covers my life’s work. However, I felt it was a challenge to think about a lecture that could embrace all these topics. But if you feel I have packed too much into one lecture, blame them not me!

My starting point is President Bush standing on the USS Abraham Lincoln in May 2003, wearing fatigues with the back drop of a huge sign saying ‘Mission Accomplished’. Bush talked about the ‘arrival of a new era.’ And he claimed that the US had discovered a new form of warfare that, through exploiting information technology, is more rapid, precise, and low in casualties than ever before. Coalition forces, said Bush, toppled the Iraqi regime ‘with a combination of precision, speed and boldness the enemy did not expect and the world had not seen before.’¹

The war in Iraq is indeed a new kind of war and it does indeed make use of new technologies like satellite systems, the internet or mobile phones. But what I mean by new wars is something different – it has to do not with technology but with the social relations of warfare. I am talking about a new type of warfare associated with globalisation and with the disintegration of states as in the Balkans or Africa. What I want to argue in this lecture is that it is important to identify ‘New Wars’ in these terms if we are to try to address the problems posed by new wars.

I would argue that both the Cold War and the ‘War on Terror’ resemble what I call ‘Old Wars’ using new technology. And I would argue that this insistence on viewing conflicts in ‘Old War’ terms is a huge obstacle to solving many of the world’s deep rooted problems and indeed may exacerbate them. In other words, successive

¹ President George W. Bush *President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended: Remarks by President Bush from the USS Abraham Lincoln May 1 2003*

American administrations continue to behave as though they are fighting World War II but the real conflicts of today in the Balkans, Africa or Iraq are very different and difficult to manage unless we understand them in a different way.

To develop this argument, I start by explaining the distinction between old and new wars, then I want to talk about the Cold War and the War on Terror and why they have to be interpreted as reruns of Old War. And finally I shall talk about what a new war analysis tells us about an alternative approach.

‘Old War’ refers to an idealized version of war that characterised Europe between the late 18th and the middle of the 20th century. ‘Old War’ is war between states fought by armed forces in uniform, where the decisive encounter was battle. ‘Old Wars’, as Charles Tilly has convincingly argued, were linked to the rise of the modern nation-state and were state-building.² ‘[W]ar made states, and vice versa.’ says Tilly³. In wars, states were gradually able to monopolise organized violence and to eliminate private armies, brigands, feudal levies, etc and establish professional forces subservient to the state. Taxation and borrowing were increased, as was administrative efficiency and public services and above all the concept of political community was forged. Imagined communities, based on the development of newspapers and novels in vernacular tongues through which people who spoke the same language came to see themselves as part of one community, were consolidated in war. Carl Schmitt talks about the concept of the political that underlies the modern state. For him, intrinsic to the concept of the political is the friend-enemy distinction, and this, he says, is linked to the ‘real physical possibility of killing.’⁴ The job of the state was to defend territory against others, and it was this job that gave the state its legitimacy. ‘Protectio ergo obligo’ (‘I protect therefore I am obeyed.’) says Schmitt ‘is the Cogito Ergo Sum of the state.’⁵

‘Old Wars’ were fought according to certain rules at least in theory, codified in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Geneva and Hague Conventions – rules about

² Charles Tilly *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990-1900* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990

³ *Ibid.* p.67

⁴ Carl Schmitt *The Concept of the Political* University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1990, p.33; first published in 1932 as *Der Begriff des Politischen*.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.52

minimising civilian casualties, treating prisoners well and so on. Rules were critical to establishing the legitimacy of wars. There is a fine line between heroes and criminals, legitimate killing and murder.

What I call 'New Wars' are just the opposite. These are wars that take place in the context of the disintegration of states (typically authoritarian states under the impact of globalisation). These are wars fought by networks of state and non-state actors, often without uniforms, sometimes they have distinctive signs, like crosses or *Ray-Ban* sunglasses as in the case of the Croatian militia in Bosnia Herzegovina. They are wars where battles are rare and where most violence is directed against civilians as a consequence of counter-insurgency tactics or ethnic cleansing. They are wars where taxation is falling and war finance consists of loot and pillage, illegal trading and other war-generated revenue. They are wars where the distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, legitimate violence and criminality are all breaking down. These are wars which exacerbate the disintegration of the state – declines in GDP, loss of tax revenue, loss of legitimacy, etc. Above all, they construct new sectarian identities (religious, ethnic or tribal) that undermine the sense of a shared political community. Indeed, this could be considered the purpose of these wars. They recreate the sense of political community along new divisive lines through the manufacture of fear and hate. They establish new friend-enemy distinctions. 'This war had to be so bloody because we didn't hate each other' a Bosnian Serb colleague once told me.

Of course, these wars are not entirely 'new'. They have much in common with wars in the pre-modern period in Europe, and with wars outside Europe through out the period. It is even possible to identify some elements of what I have called 'new wars' in within 'Old Wars' –for example, the in the effect of the First World War on the Ottoman Empire. I emphasise the distinction because it helps our understanding of what is happening to-day and what we need to do about it.

'Old Wars' reached their apex in the middle of the 20th Century. The application of science and technology to killing, the increased mobilisation capacities of states led to a destruction on an unimaginable scale. Some 35 million people were killed in World War I and 50 million people in World War II. As many people were killed in a few

weeks in Auschwitz as were killed in the Tsunami or in the entire war in Bosnia Herzegovina. Similar numbers were killed in a single night in the bombing of Tokyo, Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, or Nagasaki. Moreover, half of those killed were civilians. Out of the experience of those wars came the centralized totalitarian state and blocs of states – the high point of statebuilding.. When George Orwell wrote *1984*, his nightmare vision of competing totalitarian blocs, he was thinking not just of the Soviet Union but of post-war Britain. 1984 was 1948 upside down. Above all, these total wars gave rise to a new concept of the political that extended beyond the state to blocs of nations, the idea of democracy against totalitarianism or of socialism against fascism. What I want to argue in the rest of this lecture is that both the ‘Cold War’ and the ‘War on Terror’ are ways of keeping this idea of ‘Old War’ , linked to an extended notion of political community, alive, that ‘Old War’ ways of seeing the world run very deeply in the discourses of politicians. And this prevents them from seeing the reality of ‘New Wars’.

I describe the ‘Cold War’ as an ‘imaginary war’. It used to be said that Europe or even the world, enjoyed ‘peace’ after World War II. Quite apart from the fact that there were real wars in Hungary or Czechoslovakia or in large parts of what was called the Third World, we lived in Europe as though we were at war with millions of men under arms, frequent exercises, spy stories, hostile propaganda and so on. And we lived with much of the anxiety and fear associated with war as well as the organisations – the defence industries, the centralised state – and, of course, the friend-foe distinction that defined the world in two ideological camps and provided a mechanism for discrediting opposition. Throughout the period, the ‘Cold War’ was seen as a mighty ideological clash, a ‘Great Contest’ as Deutscher put it, between democracy and totalitarianism, or between capitalism and socialism.⁶ And I would argue that this idea, this ‘global clash’, was a way of defining political community within each bloc. The ‘Cold War’ suited both sides. World War II had solved the problems of mass unemployment and of destructive economic nationalism of the 1930s in the West and of inefficiency and lack of legitimacy in the East. The ‘Cold War’ reproduced those solutions. In a way, both right and left colluded in this idea.

⁶ Isaac Deutscher *The Great Contest: Russia and the West* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960

The right described the conflict as one between freedom and totalitarianism. The left discredited themselves by seeing the conflict as one between capitalism and socialism.

I don't want to suggest that this was a result of conscious decisions by elites. Rather it was the result of their own experiences in World War II, the state structures that had been established during the period. If you analyse, for example the evolution of the arms race during the 'Cold War', it is much better explained on each side as though they were arming against a phantom German enemy than against each other. Thus the Americans continued to emphasise strategic bombing; with the advent of missiles, nuclear weapons were seen as a continuation of long-distance bombing and placed under Strategic Air Command. The US anticipated a conventional Blitzkrieg across the North German plains and they envisaged themselves rushing to the aid of the Europeans making use of superior know-how. Russians, on the other hand, never did strategic bombing – on the contrary, bombing was considered a fascist tactic. They believed that there was no alternative to conventional ground forces. Aircraft were seen as assisting ground forces, 'hand maidens of artillery' as Stalin called them, so when missiles were developed they were seen as artillery as placed under the command of the artillery academy.

Nor do I want to suggest that there was symmetry. Large numbers of people in the West supported the Cold war and felt they benefited from it. But the imposition of Stalinism was a tragedy for the peoples of Central Europe and, I believe, the Soviet hold over Central Europe, was sustained by the Cold War.

Throughout the period, at least on the Western side, there was always a problem of 'credibility'. If war was purely imaginary, how long would enemies and friends continue to believe in American power? Astonishing numbers of nuclear weapons were accumulated during the 1950s and 1960s enough to destroy the world many times over. Strategy according to von Clausewitz is the use of military force for political ends. But what, pondered strategists like Schelling, did strategy mean if they were too dangerous to be used? What if insurgents in Latin America or South East Asia were not deterred? How could force be used in a limited way? One answer was that strategy came to be about how force might be used in an imaginary war where everyone knew the rules. The arcane Western debates about, for example, mutual

assured destruction versus flexible response, have to be explained in these terms. 'I've always worried less about what would happen in an actual nuclear exchange than the effect the nuclear balance has on our willingness to take risks in local situations' said Richard Perle (remember him?) most recently, Chairman of the Pentagon's defence board. 'It is not that I am worried about the Soviets attacking the United States with nuclear weapons confident that they will win that nuclear war. It is that I worry about an American President feeling he cannot take action in a crisis because Soviet nuclear forces are such that, if escalation took place, they are better poised than we are to move up the escalation ladder.'⁷ Star Wars, the Strategic Defence Initiative, or now National Missile Defence, was supposed to protect America in the imagination so that force could be usable again.

Of course, so-called 'limited' wars did take place, above all, in Vietnam. The failure in Vietnam simultaneously strengthened popular feelings that war is unacceptable, that World War II can never be repeated, and, at the same time, fuelled the preoccupation of military planners with 'credibility' and 'usability'.

This, I think, is the context in which to understand the 'War on Terror'. The Americans believe they have discovered a new form of warfare, making use of IT. War that is rapid, precise and low in casualties. War that is imaginary from the American point of view – Americans do not have to pay extra taxes or to risk their lives. They can watch a kind of replay of World War II on television. They can imagine that they are leading a mission for democracy against terrorists and tyrants. The origins of this type of war go back to the advent of information technologies in the 1970s and 1980s. The post-Vietnam era, generated a debate about the future of strategy. The so-called military reform school argued that precision guided munitions (PGMs) greatly increased the vulnerability of aircraft and tanks and that NATO should shift to a defensive posture. Advocates of traditional military strategy argued that offensive manoeuvres were even more important than in World War II and that area destruction munitions could swamp the defence and that missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) could carry out precise long distance attacks. Of course, the latter school, who reflected the natural presumptions and vested interests of the

⁷ Quoted in Mary Kaldor *The Imaginary War: Understanding the East-West Conflict* Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.202-3

military and the defences industries prevailed in the debate and the consequence was a series of new strategies -Airland Battle in the 1980s; then in the 1990s, came the Revolution in Military Affairs and after the election of President Bush, what Rumsfeld calls Defence Transformation.

Although military spending declined after the end of the Cold War, military R&D fell much less, which allowed the development both of follow-ons to Cold War technologies and new technologies. Yet what actually has happened is that information technologies have been grafted on to traditional assumptions about the ways military forces should be used and traditional institutional structures. Methods have not actually changed much since World War II. They involve a combination of aerial bombardment at long distance and rapid offensive manoeuvres.

One aspect of the new technology is virtual war gaming. The Department of Defense even recruits Hollywood producers to draw up worst-case scenarios, giving rise to what James DerDerian calls Mime-net – the Military-Industrial-Media- Entertainment Network.⁸ The very use of virtual wargaming feeds the assumptions of the war gamers who have been schooled in the Cold War framework. One of the most quoted remarks of the Iraq war was General William Wallace, in charge of US Army units in Iraq, that ‘the enemy we are fighting is a bit different from the one we war gamed against.’⁹

And what about the enemy? Long before 9/11, the war gamers were talking about what they called asymmetric threats, the risks of terrorism and of rogue states who harbour terrorists. It was never quite clear why RMA or Defence Transformation was the answer to these asymmetric threats. Indeed when 9/11 happened my first thought was ‘this is real - they will have to develop a different approach.’ But I was wrong. Especially given the people around President Bush, people like Richard Perle or Dick Cheney who had been educated in the Cold War school, it was perhaps inevitable that the chosen response was a kind of reconstruction of World War II, that 9/11 was compared to Pearl Harbour. The War on Terror, like the Cold War, is viewed as a

⁸ See James Der Derian *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2001

⁹ The remark was quoted in the *New York Times* April 1 2003. ‘A bit’ was left out and it was corrected on April 3 2003.

powerful crusade – freedom against totalitarianism. Indeed, global Islam is dubbed as a new totalitarian ideology even though totalitarianism, at least in my book, is intrinsically linked to state power. And, as during the Cold War, some on the left, do help to collude in the idea by defending the resistance in Iraq for example, or explaining Global Islam in terms of global injustice. For us in Europe, of course, the ‘War on Terror’ is much less convincing than the Cold War. We knew more than the Americans about the reality of communism and we were closer to the memory of World War II then. But I am not sure this is true in America and, indeed that may be the significance of Bush’s re-election. The idea of the war on terror is, for many Americans, no less convincing than the Cold War.

The problem is, of course, that whereas the Cold War was imaginary, the War on terror is very real, especially if you live in Iraq. The invasion conformed to the dreams of Bush and Rumsfeld. It was showy and dramatic. In fact, of course, the Iraqis did not fight. The army and the Republican Guard obeyed the instructions in leaflets dropped by the Americans telling them to go home and take off their uniforms. Apart from a few hard core irregular groups, there was no resistance. It was more like an exercise than a war. But the Americans behaved as though they had won World War II. They tried to recreate the occupation of Germany or Japan in dissolving the army of introducing sweeping de-ba’athification measures, humiliating and infuriating those very people who had allowed them their piece of war theatre.

And the impact of fighting a reconstructed ‘Old War’ was not victory over an enemy state but state disintegration and ‘New War’. What is actually happening in Iraq is that the US is being dragged into a real ‘New War’ Because of shortages of troops, more private contractors are drawn into the war so it is fought by a network of state and non-state actors. Because it is so difficult to distinguish insurgents from combatants, the main victims are civilians. Panorama last Sunday quoted statistics from the Iraqi Ministry of Health of over 3000 civilian casualties in the three months August – November of which the majority were killed by Coalition troops. In Fallujah there were some 300,000 displaced persons. In the attack on Sadr City in August, there were some 3000 casualties. The effect is to consolidate the opposition and strengthen extremist Jihadist tendencies, in a way giving substance to the idea of the ‘War on Terror’.

By analysing 'New War' in terms of social relations of warfare, we come up with a very different approach about how to deal with these type of conflicts and indeed, how to deal with terrorism in general. I don't want to suggest that terrorism is not a serious threat. On the contrary, I think it is too serious to be hijacked by fantasies of old war.. Actually I felt the same way about Communism; nuclear weapons in my view, prevented us from adopting a serious strategy for undermining communism; this was only possible in a détente context. I think World War II really did mark the end of 'Old Wars'. Wars of this type are impossible; they are simply too destructive to be fought and have become unacceptable and, indeed, illegitimate. The eight year war between Iraq and Iran was probably the exception that proved the rule. It was immensely destructive and led to military stalemate and, at least on the Iraqi side, far from consolidating the state, it was the beginning of state disintegration, the slide into new war.

'New Wars' deliberately violate all the conventions of 'Old War' as well as the new body of human rights legislation that has been built up since World War II. Key to dealing with 'New Wars' has to be the reconstruction of political legitimacy. If 'Old Wars' established a notion of political legitimacy in terms of the friend-enemy distinction, in 'New Wars' the friend-enemy distinction destroys political legitimacy. So, political legitimacy can only be reconstructed on the basis of popular consent and within a framework of international law. It means supporting efforts of democratisation in difficult situations or using various international tools and law to support such processes.

Is there a role for military force? Yes, I believe military force has to be used to protect people and uphold the rule of law. I favour humanitarian intervention in cases of threatened humanitarian catastrophe. But that can't be done through classic war fighting. I don't have time to discuss this but I do think that one can envisage new defensive uses of forces aimed at prevention, protection and stabilization rather than victory.

Carl Schmitt would argue that there can be no political community without enemies. And that where force is used in the name of humanity, the adversary is no longer an

enemy but an outlaw, a disturber of the peace. If he is right, the the future is very grim, a pervasive global 'New War' is possible. But if we believe political communities can be held together by reason rather than fear, then there is an alternative possibility, a transformation of state hood, in which states are no longer intrinsically linked to warfare and operate within a multilateral framework. And as for the argument about humanity, we could turn it on its head. If we dub the terrorists as enemies, we give them political status; indeed this may be what they are trying to achieve. I think it is quite a good idea to see them as outlaws, disturbers of the peace, and to use the methods of policing and intelligence rather than 'old war'.

So to conclude: What I have tried to show is that attempts to recreate 'Old War' prevent us from dealing with the realities of to-day's globalised world. Indeed ideas of 'Old War' feed into and exacerbate real 'New Wars' taking place in Iraq and elsewhere. I call them 'new' not because they are altogether 'new' but because we can only develop alternative strategies if we see how different they are from World War II, Cold War or the 'War on Terror'. I think there is a huge security gap in the world to-day. Millions of people live in daily fear of violence. Yet our security conceptions, drawn from the dominant experience of World War II does not reduce that insecurity. Indeed, it makes it worse.