

EDITORIAL

The history of war has been marked by the efforts of strategists to devise new weapons and new methods to secure rapid victory. However, technical ingenuity and arms superiority are not necessarily decisive on the battlefield. Methods of warfare have played, and often still play, a more critical role than means of warfare. This is particularly true in the present theatres of conflict, which are often characterized by asymmetry between the opponents in terms of means, power, organization and time. The greatest atrocities in recent years have been committed using technically primitive means. Machetes, machine guns and starvation have killed or maimed many more than sophisticated weaponry. The Cambodian mallet and the Rwandan machete have become well-recognized symbols of how internal wars can be fought. The most spectacular acts of terror have been perpetrated using mere box cutters. Technology influences warfare, but it does not determine moral or morality in warfare.

Weapons are nevertheless an integral feature of every armed conflict and the use of weapons is as old as war itself. The earliest warriors were armed with clubs, spears and daggers. The iron revolution three thousand years ago led to the spread of improved weaponry, giving military power to the peasantry and townspeople of the world's fertile regions. Since the invention of gunpowder in China around 1,100 years ago, chemistry and physics have presided over muscle power. The technological equilibrium was modified some centuries later with the appearance of new firearms, rifled to enhance accuracy at unprecedented ranges and furnished with magazines to multiply firepower. Soldiers paid a terrible price in the First World War for using old-fashioned close-order tactics in the face of machine-gun technology.

The next world war was characterized by the use of tanks, aircraft, artillery and motorized infantry, and Axis victory seemed assured until the pendulum of technical superiority swung the other way and the Allies built up even more devastating firepower. Meanwhile, civilian victims substantially outnumbered military victims and soldiers were often more worried about their families in the bomb-ravaged towns of Britain, Germany or Japan than they were about themselves. Technological advances aimed at increasing firepower and the development of nuclear weapons were the logical culmination and ultimate refutation of the adage that war is, or might be, a continuation of politics by other means. What Winston Churchill had called "Judgement Day" was now capable of destroying humanity itself.

But modern technology and the changing nature of warfare led to a decrease in explosive power: mass was becoming less important than precision. Aerial warfare with smart bombs and laser-guided missiles became the dominant feature of international wars. Military operations in low-intensity conflicts, counter-terrorism measures and crowd-control, hostage-rescue and peace-support activities led to the development of new conventional and unconventional weapons, including those designed to incapacitate personnel and limit physical damage.

Conventional weapons will always remain the arms most used. Meanwhile, governments and the general public will continue to focus on weapons of mass destruction — which are sometimes less destructive than conventional weapons. In the darkest days of the Cold War, there was a firm belief that nuclear war could not break out between the West and the East. Even China's rise to the exclusive club of nuclear States did not change this situation. Despite the temptations, the capacity of Moscow and Washington to destroy each other (MAD or Mutual Assured Destruction) arguably saved mankind from a third world war in the twentieth century.

It is much less certain that atom bombs play the same role in guaranteeing peace today. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, decreasing fear and growing public talk of using nuclear warheads against other States and non-State entities, even for preventive purposes, have lowered the threshold for use of these weapons. Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington highlighted the possibility that terrorist organizations would resort to nuclear bombs or other weapons of mass destruction.

The potential misuse of advances in life sciences is also working its way up the security agenda. Biotechnology and pharmacology may be put to hostile purposes and could make biological or chemical weapons more effective, easier to make, safer to use and more difficult to detect.

A broad-based survey on proliferation threats and responses, carried out by US Senator Richard Lugar in June 2005, estimated the combined risk of an attack with weapons of mass destruction over the next five years to be as high as 50%, increasing to as much as 70% over 10 years. The risk of a biological or chemical attack was judged to be higher than that of a nuclear attack and the risk of a radiological attack was thought to be significantly higher still. There was strong, but not unanimous, agreement that even nuclear attacks were less likely to be carried out by governments than by terrorist groups, who would either acquire working nuclear weapons or manufacture them themselves after obtaining fissile material.

The suspected possession of biological and chemical weapons led to what may be the first counter-proliferation war of the twenty-first century. The spread of ever more destructive power to State, non-State and even individual actors may cause governments and their military establishments to maintain

almost constant pressure on potential users, especially in non- or under-governed territories. Questions of use ad bellum — including the pre-emptive use of force to contain weapons of mass destruction — will dominate the international agenda.

The aim of arms-control measures is to maintain peace and security and reduce the destructive potential of war. These measures involve complex technical, political and psychological questions, and mastering them opens the road to greater stability. If steps are not taken to repair and strengthen the current disarmament and non-proliferation regime, it may well unravel altogether.

In many ways, arms control measures overlap with international humanitarian law. Rules of international humanitarian law are designed to moderate the hardships of war by attempting to confine hostilities to armed forces. Cynics have called such rules the disarmament not of materials but of methods. However, rules of war have been of little practical use where they have failed to pay sufficient heed to “military necessity.”

The authors of the preamble to the St Petersburg Declaration of 1868, the first formal agreement prohibiting the use of certain weapons in war, agreed that the use of weapons to disable or kill members of enemy armed forces was legitimate. The Declaration, however, placed some limits on the selection of weapons permissible. Nowadays, the use of weapons is restricted by a network of conventions, protocols and declarations, and by the customary rules of the law of war. In the absence of a particular rule of international law dealing with a specific weapon, its use is governed by the general principles of the law of armed conflict.

Weapons are vital to national security interests and the economic stakes are high, which is why new weapons programmes are shrouded in secrecy. States hold ultimate responsibility for weapons and determine their development and use. They are influenced by many non-military factors such as national tradition, economic capacity, constitutional limitations, public opinion, political climate and personal idiosyncrasies, as well as by international law and their view of the nature of international relations. States have (or should have) the monopoly on military power and set the example for non-State actors and individuals when dealing with arms issues. Above all, governments must conduct a thorough and critical evaluation of the legality of new weapons before deployment, taking into account the wide range of technical, military and humanitarian issues involved.

Countries with strong democratic regimes and active civil societies obviously face greater levels of public debate on their national weapons policies, but they still need to strike a balance between secrecy and openness. Weighing transparency against the legitimate need for secrecy requires an internal debate and a difficult trade-off between operational military effectiveness on the one hand and public accountability on the other.

Military necessity may also clash with humanitarian requirements. The St Petersburg Declaration of 1868 called on the parties to “conciliate the necessities of war with the laws of humanity.” Conciliation will probably not be possible, but a balance between military necessity and humanitarian considerations is essential for the sake of humanity. Under modern law, weapons used should not be of a nature to cause greater injury or suffering than is necessary for military purposes; military objectives and civilians or civilian property should not be struck without distinction; and no widespread, long-term and severe damage should be caused to the natural environment.

Applying these principles to individual weapons entails balancing a myriad of political, military, economic, psychological and humanitarian considerations. Many actors, including humanitarian organizations, try to influence this balance. Ultimately, it is up to each individual State to determine whether new weapons comply with international humanitarian law or not.

The ICRC meanwhile seeks to ensure that, in carrying out this balancing act, States take due account of humanitarian aspects. It is like a dance through a minefield, in which the danger increases according to the military significance of each weapon. The ICRC may be, and has been, accused of acting like a peace or disarmament organization and exceeding its primary mandate to protect and assist victims. However, the preventive work carried out by the ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in this sphere can make a real difference by saving lives on the ground.

Few cases demonstrate this as clearly as the campaign against anti-personnel mines, when concerted efforts helped curb what had become a global epidemic and significantly reduced civilian casualties in many countries. When intervening in the highly politicized environment of arms, the ICRC must prove its impartiality, taking care not to be instrumentalized and staying solely committed to helping the victims of armed conflict and violence.

More people probably fear AIDS and avian flu than weapons of mass destruction. Their potential use is consciously or unconsciously underestimated and the threat countered with the hope that nothing may happen, and that if it does, then it will be somewhere else. Like Cassandra’s prophecy to the Trojans against accepting the ill-fated wooden horse from their Greek enemy, the warnings fall on deaf ears.

The use of weapons of mass destruction does not necessarily lead to a day of reckoning or even to large-scale destruction. Limited use and geographically circumscribed consequences are more likely, and the effects of each weapon need to be analysed separately. Preventive action is difficult, however, given the many possible threats related to these weapons. Attacks will often be a surprise, the protective measures are not foolproof and can be circumvented, and there are few chokepoints, even though physical protection, chemical and biological countermeasures and medical treatment can reduce some of the effects of

biological and chemical weapons. A radiological attack coupled with rumours and insecurity could lead to panic of unprecedented proportions, further propagated by media coverage. The security, economic and political implications could be enormous and weapons of mass destruction may lead to vast disruption but not to destruction of apocalyptic proportions.

States bear the prime responsibility for mitigating the losses, damage and suffering inflicted on civilians as a result of the dramatic developments in the means and methods of warfare. Civil defence and, especially, military units are in charge of relief operations in the event of natural or technological catastrophes or armed conflict, and obviously also in the case of the potential use of weapons of mass destruction. They should coordinate their work with non-governmental organizations. In the worst-case scenario, the ICRC and Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies would be expected to assist the victims. Some National Societies have already invested considerable resources in preparing themselves for this possibility. Even if events turn the world upside down, they are at least trying to contradict Lowell J. Carr when he wrote in 1932 that catastrophes are nothing other than the damage that occurs after an event, and the greater the potential damage, the less human beings are able to confront them.

The use of weapons of mass destruction will not be a “disaster” in the etymological sense of something occurring under an “unlucky star.” Sixty years after Hiroshima and four years after New York, it will be neither an accident nor bad luck, but what some call the “logic of failure,” when obstacles and obstructions, flaws and uncalculated adversity lead inexorably to the expected result. These are “catastrophes” in the manner of Greek drama, when tragic transformation suddenly occurs. And maybe catastrophic happenings are indeed divine threats and punishment and a call for repentance, remorse and piety, as was believed in mediaeval thinking. If nothing else, it shows the vulnerability of our modern civilization.

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