
Book Reviews

War Transformed: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict

Mick Ryan

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The global geopolitical, geo-economical, and geo-strategical landscape is changing at a rapid pace. On the one hand, the Russia-Ukraine war has forced the military pundits to rethink conventional means of warfare, negating the idea that war in the future will be short and precise. On the other hand, the possibility of a nuclear strike is looming large with so much uncertainty. The emergence of China-US rivalry, the tumultuous future of Taiwan and adjoining areas, persistent economic and political instability in and around the Indian subcontinent, and the economic slowdown of the European Union are the events that will shape the future discourse on conflict globally.

War is a constant in human civilisation and will continue to remain so. With this context, the book *War Transformed: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Great Power Competition and Conflict* by Maj Gen Mick Ryan is timely and relevant for future military strategies. As a retired

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Australian army general, Mick Ryan tries to put his experience, with a career spanning more than 30 years, in words. His key focus remains on the disruption caused by the emergence of China, the evolution of technology, and the emphasis on professional military education. Released just before the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, the renowned General is correct when he says that technology alone will not prove decisive in the 21st century and humans will continue to fight with the tools in hand. He was also right when he mentioned that surprise would continue to remain an enduring aspect of international relations which generally does not include sudden and unanticipated events but goes beyond that. Here, he mentioned Sun Tzu's dictum, which says, "Attack where they (the enemy) are unprepared. Go forth where they will not expect it".

In the 'era of acceleration,' the author mentioned that for the fourth industrial revolution, rapid change is happening in demography, information technology, biotechnology, space, communication, and many more. These changes fundamentally change how societies interact and nations compete among themselves. These changes propel militaries worldwide to change, and if they fail to do so, they will be defeated; therefore, they have no choice but to adapt to these military revolutions. The militaries of the aspiring nation must undergo the arduous task of developing strategy, building a new organisation, and educating and developing people to face the emerging challenge in the 21st century.

The theme which resonates throughout the book is that technology alone cannot be a decisive factor, as in current circumstances, it is the level playing field. Technology development remains crucial, but combining technology with new ideas and organisation will prove decisive in future wars. Therefore, how factors play an essential role when technology is at play. Those who know how are the forerunners in the revolution in military affairs. The author describes it more as a cultural phenomenon and emphasizes professional military education, which according to him, will play an essential role in future conflicts.

The six themes that cover the author's argument are; first, war is inevitable and remains a human preoccupation. Second, military power is not only about the military but goes beyond it. Third, it is important to adopt change at every level to face the upcoming future challenges. Fourth, the ethical aspect will be crucial in the future human-machine decision-making process. Fifth, it is crucial to examine how different people perceive war differently. Lastly, professional military education is important to have a wider ecosystem of military education.

While the nature of war is constant and will remain so, the character of the war is continuously changing. The author highlighted technology as a critical element in changing the character of warfare. Also, the book stands out in the vast array of sources and expert opinions that the author has given to justify his argument. The book focuses on China's rise and the disruption it is causing to the current global order.

In four chapters and conclusion, the author tries to review how technology and the new strategic competition drive different ways of thinking about military operations and institutions. In the introduction, the author put forward China's belligerent attitude at the Indian border and how it shapes the future course of action for both militaries. Here, he mentioned that the leaders that will take existing ideas and evolve them into new war-fighting strategies and concepts would have an edge in future conflicts.

The first chapter examines the transformation that occurred during the industrial revolution and how it changed the war, military organisation, and mainly the nation's war-making capacity. The chapter further examines the changes that the current industrial revolution, fourth, is making and how its key aspect can be understood while thinking about the possible war in the future. Further, the second chapter completely examines the war. Here, the author brought about the whole record of warfighting since the evolution of humans and concluded that war remains a constant phenomenon. It also examines the key determinants

for changing the character of the war and how military power can exploit those changes for their benefit; thus, understanding the war becomes critical for policymakers in general and the military in particular.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the effectiveness of military institutions and their idea in shaping the future course of the war. It dwells on the idea of what makes a military organisation effective, and it identifies the character of war as the key element in shaping effective military institutions. Chapter 4 is unique in the sense that it focuses on the people who fight a war and underlines the need for evolution in the recruitment, training, and development of leadership among military people. The man behind the machine remains the crucial element in the face of war, and their capacity and capability to thrive in a more lethal, ambiguous, and challenging environment are crucial.

At last, the conclusion puts forward all the aspects of ideas, organisation and people to build future military power. It takes into consideration that nations must adapt to the enduring change to keep themselves relevant. It lays out a series of propositions that are designed for military leaders to develop a strategy for the 21st century. It is up to the military institution to absorb or adopt the change and take risks to provide their nation with a competitive edge in the decades to come, which will be generally uncertain and challenging.

All in all, the book justifies the title and is a must-read for all military professionals and also for students of international relations and defence and strategic studies. Also, the book must be part of war college curricula as it has the potential to spark debate and discussion among the policymakers for creating military institutions and combining technology and ideas with those institutions for a battle ready for the future.