



Royal United Services Institute  
for Defence and Security Studies

Conference Report

# Land Warfare Conference

## Securing Competitive Advantage

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RUSI Conference Report, July 2019



**Royal United Services Institute**  
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# Land Warfare Conference: Securing Competitive Advantage

**R**USI CONVENED ITS 19<sup>th</sup> annual Land Warfare Conference from 4–5 June, organised in partnership with the Chief of the General Staff, to explore how land forces can secure advantage in an era of constant competition. Held during the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the conference not only sought to look ahead at emerging concepts and capabilities, but to reflect on historical experience. As adversaries develop increasingly effective strategies to circumvent the strengths of the ‘Western way of war’, the conference attempted to explore how land forces can maximise their advantages and mitigate their vulnerabilities while contesting all domains.

## Competition and Deterrence

The challenge posed by adversaries exploiting the thresholds for escalation imposed by the conventional distinction between peace and war has been widely discussed over the past decade. Another framing of the issue emphasises the capacity for these operations to extend the decision-making cycle supporting a response by presenting policymakers with persistent ambiguities. In his opening remarks General Mark Carleton-Smith emphasised what while the problem was clear, solving it demands innovative thinking as to how armies operate.

The first session saw divergent approaches to confronting this challenge. To explicitly compete in the space between peace and war – embracing ambiguous operations – is to legitimate such activity as the new normal. Conversely, the assertive adaptation of stated thresholds to reduce the space for ambiguity, and thereby enable quicker and more direct responses to hostile activity, risks escalation. Furthermore, deterrence requires some ambiguity as to a state’s red lines, and yet if Western governments wish to uphold an international rules-based system, they must clearly articulate what constitutes an attack, thereby communicating their red lines, and signalling the thresholds that adversaries can then exploit.

It was noted that different states have adopted distinct approaches to this dilemma. Lieutenant General Terry Wolff made the case for calling the bluff of those seeking to conduct undeclared operations, as in the Euphrates Valley, where US forces decisively engaged Russian mercenaries in February 2018. This was consistent with the argument made by Lieutenant General Eric Wesley that adversaries operated covertly because they had concluded that they could not compete in direct force-on-force conflict. David Kilcullen similarly noted that since adversaries operated ambiguously because of their unwillingness to fight conventionally, kinetic retaliation would increase the risk of testing thresholds and thereby deter such operations.

On the other hand, since the UK and other NATO members lack the conventional dominance of the US, competing beneath the threshold of armed conflict may be necessary. In this, Israel likely represents the most effective actor. Ronen Bergman, author of *Rise and Kill First*, outlined how Israel, using targeted killings, and more than 500 air strikes in Syria, has sought to undermine its adversaries' capabilities to avoid escalating to large-scale conflict. Israel's population, however, sees itself as facing an existential threat. The public acceptance of undeclared operations is therefore significantly higher. Ed Williams, CEO of Edelman UK, drew on extensive polling data gathered by his company to show that in the UK, by contrast, the public – while accepting official deception when practised for military necessity – would overwhelmingly prefer that the military maintain sufficient conventional capabilities, rather than rely on deception and covert action.

The means by which effective deterrence can be achieved are not limited to offensive capabilities but include a resilient state and society that does not readily present vulnerabilities that an adversary can target. The Chief of the General Staff highlighted in his opening address how adversaries are becoming adept at turning the tools of globalisation into Western vulnerabilities, threatening supply chains and exploiting information flows to raise the economic and political costs of conventional operations. These vulnerabilities are difficult to eliminate, because they arise from the economic framework that has been the basis for Western prosperity, and therefore conventional military strength. It was in this context that the military's role in national resilience was raised. Unconventional threats to critical national infrastructure could deter military retaliation for operations below the threshold of armed conflict.

## The Utility of Agile Capabilities

The need to contest multiple domains, and the dominance to be gained by superior communications and situational awareness, has consistently increased the price of platforms. Furthermore, the expanding reach and lethality of weapons systems is threatening theatre entry and logistics capabilities. This is shifting prioritisation in force design. The conference heard from the Vice Minister of Defence for Lithuania, and senior military officers from Australia and France, whose armies are all modernising in response to significantly different contexts. However, all three have prioritised mobility first, and lethality over protection, favouring wheeled and modular platforms.

A second trend consistently observed by numerous forces, including the UK and the US, is that protection can be achieved through dispersion, since the range and accuracy of systems is allowing small force packets to attrit more concentrated adversaries. Dispersion, however, leads to a more chaotic, porous battlespace, with force penetration and exposed flanks. Furthermore, with the integration of long-range fires and cyber capabilities, and the wide range of theatres of competition, the distinctions between near, deep and rear battle areas are collapsing. While the force structure has not been entirely flattened, the result is that all echelons are likely to be simultaneously engaged in action; higher echelons will have to defend themselves and use their cyber capabilities for effect against adversaries in conjunction with the kinetic effects of lower echelons, rather than higher echelons.

The implications of fighting dispersed, and the need to converge effects across domains, is not simply – or even primarily – a question of platforms. Officers must be able to understand the battlespace, and soldiers must be prepared to operate with their flanks exposed. This requires a shift in mindset, from sequential and planned periods of contact, to a continuous manoeuvre for advantage. Indeed, a junior NCO, speaking about military culture, highlighted that the issues of mindset and culture can influence or even dictate battlefield performance. Not all domains are equal, however. There are significant limits to what information warfare, for example, can achieve, and initiative will still rest with the army most able to generate violence quickly against relevant targets. This was consistent with the conclusions of the historians' panel on Operation *Overlord*, where deception helped to shape the operation, but the survivability of forces depended upon their available firepower, especially from indirect fires. Information operations were critical, but they were not decisive.

## The Necessity of Multiple Axes

Common to almost all expected future force structures is an integrated, networked army. This vision, however, is unlikely to be reached by laying down a blueprint for a future force and then rigorously implementing it. Several speakers addressed the need for spiral development, testing prototypes in real-world conditions, and A/B testing capabilities. The technological implications of many capabilities are not yet fully understood. Furthermore, as the cost of new systems increases, the strategic cost of investing in the wrong technologies is high. Procurement premised on the complete replacement of platform for platform across a force is not realistic. Indeed, since advantage is unlikely to lie with early adopters, but rather with those best able to integrate, and make use of, new capabilities, bending the force around platforms is likely the wrong approach to modernisation.

Instead it will be necessary to advance along multiple paths. To facilitate this, as Lieutenant General Alain Bouquin argued, new platforms will need to be modular, and software will need to be based on open architectures, allowing new software packages to supersede old, without requiring the replacement of the whole systems. With an open architecture it becomes possible to test different modules and capabilities, or to equip a part of the force, and then adopt technologies once they are sufficiently mature.

There is a persistent belief within armies that counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan has bent the force out of shape. While this may be true in terms of training and readiness, Sharon Weinberger, author of *The Imagineers of War*, reminded the conference that many of the transformative technologies and techniques at the core of AirLand Battle emerged from Vietnam, and that in moving away from counterinsurgency, armies must be careful not to forget hard-won lessons. Samuel Bendett, a Research Analyst at CNA, described in detail Russia's approach to using operations in Syria as a laboratory to develop capabilities for warfighting at scale.

The need for multiple axes of advance was not only true in capability development, but also in theatre entry. It was noted that with the US shifting its attention to China, the endurance of NATO depends on its delivering clear utility to the publics who must fund the forces that

underpin it. NATO must therefore be able to support missions that are politically important – such as operations to Europe’s south – as well as its core strategically vital mission of deterring Russia. Of course, the concerns of a small number of Alliance members may not be concerns of the Alliance. There is therefore a need for a wider base of logistical capabilities, so that Alliance members can conduct politically relevant operations without need for approval from and support by the US. These capabilities do not need to be prohibitively expensive. David Roberts of King’s College London explained how the UAE has shown that with a modest logistical capability, it is possible for small and medium states to project their interests. It was noted that although the UAE is a close counterterrorism partner of the US, converting engagement into leverage is a serious challenge. The lesson appears clear; those who can contribute sovereign force packages to an alliance retain independence, and therefore influence. Those that make their own capabilities dependent upon others lack leverage.

## The Devil is in the Detail

The conference considered a wide range of emerging technologies, from artificial intelligence and autonomous systems to long-range precision fires and battlespace management architectures. Professor Nina Kollars of the Naval War College emphasised that the utility of these systems would be determined by the detail of their integration into and use by the force. Moreover, it is unlikely that a new piece of technology will reshape the individuals that must use it. Instead, technology that makes sense to users and has clear utility will be adopted and experimented with, and new ways of using the technology will emerge. The viability of autonomous systems will likely be determined by their combat service support requirements, and other points of detail all too often overlooked in conceptual discussion. In this sense, the pace of technological development is likely to be faster than envisaged, and its impact on the military more uneven, chaotic and disruptive than accounted for by future fighting concepts.

A non-technological example of the importance of detail raised during the conference is lateral entry, a controversial topic which has raised concerns about outsiders entering the military without understanding its culture or having the basic grounding in military skills that service personnel spend the formative parts of their military careers building. Yet lateral entry is arguably essential, as Western militaries have struggled to internally generate skill sets that are available in the civilian workforce, particularly with regard to cyber capabilities. In practice, the success or failure of the concept will be dictated by the granular detail of implementation.

## Conclusion

Despite technological disruption and emerging capabilities dominating the discussion, it remains the case that technological superiority does not win wars. While technological innovation is critical, it must be matched by the innovative employment of the tools of war, and policymakers must be prepared to make strategic decisions about which innovations are transformative, rather than simply novel. As General Mark Carleton-Smith observed, ‘we probably need to focus more on how to fight rather than what to fight with’.

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