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### MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds. *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050*

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**MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray, eds. *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050*.  
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.**

Reviewed by Stephen T. Satkiewicz

Carl von Clausewitz famously declared “War is but the continuation of politics by other means.” It could just as easily be declared that war is the continuation of civilization by other means, concerning how different societies and cultures fight can be reflective of their distinct characters as much as any other factor. The study of war from the civilizational perspective is not new; for example, former ISCSC presidents Pitirim Sorokin and Matthew Melko did their own studies related to the matter. Into this mix come MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray in their edited volume *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* published by Cambridge University Press. The specific context of the book was to address the debates concerning the nature of “Revolutions in Military Affairs” (RMA) that were widespread during the 1990s.

The origins of the “Revolution in Military Affairs” concept date back to the 1970s when Soviet Marshal Nikolai V. Ogarkov proposed that a “military-technical revolution” was underway where advanced weaponry would utterly transform the very nature of warfare. This kind of proposition was very well suited to the governing Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet regime (pp. 2-3). It was not until the 1990s, after the rapid defeat of Iraq in the First Persian Gulf War (1991), with the conflict being broadcasted as more like a video game as opposed to the traditional image of war, that the concept became more widespread within American military thinking. The main task at the time was contemplating ways to maintain American military dominance in wake of the collapse of its Soviet rival of the Cold War era. The predominant focus on technology was the principal feature of the literature at the time, both within the military itself as well as popular culture.

It is this main point that Knox and Williamson sought to challenge within this volume. To achieve this goal, several chapters deal with various historical case studies that demonstrate that while technology certainly is effective in war, it is not necessarily the most predominant factor when compared to more socio-cultural factors. The eight case studies highlighted within the edited volume are as follows:

- Clifford J. Rogers’s study of Medieval England during the Hundred Years’ War (chapter 2).
- John A. Lynn on the rise of modern European warfare in seventeenth century France (chapter 3).
- Macgregor Knox on the military effects of the French Revolution (chapter 4).
- Mark Grimsley on the American Civil War (chapter 5).

- The late Dennis E. Showalter on the nineteenth century rise of Prussia (later Germany) as a military power dominating Europe (chapter 6).
- Holger H. Herwig on the development of modern battleship fleets (chapter 7).
- Jonathan B. A. Bailey on World War I (chapter 8).
- Williamson Murray on the German *blitzkrieg* victory in the 1940 campaign (chapter 9).

Within the conclusion, Williamson Murray and Macgregor Knox offer some summarizing thoughts on the general nature of revolutions in military affairs. Based on the eight case studies provided they listed four key components:

1. Technology is not the primary factor.
2. Evolutionary preparation for realistic scenarios.
3. Doctrinal coherence.
4. Working within the limitations of a strategic context and the inherent nature of war built on uncertainty and chaos (pp. 192-193).

Building upon the last point of “strategic context”, this could very much be expanded into a wider discussion concerning *civilizational* contexts of warfare as well as revolutions in military affairs. There is some recent scholarship seeking to do such regarding Asian forms of warfare, as opposed to the traditional Eurocentric focus of the field.<sup>1</sup> Within this particular volume, John A. Lynn does briefly address this issue when discussing the clashes of European and Asian military powers in the early modern period. Lynn counters the arguments put forth by Victor Davis Hanson and the late John Keegan of there being an underlying “Western way of war” that dates all the way back to Ancient Greece and continuing to present times. Lynn by contrast stresses “Classical texts influenced early modern European military practice, but no unbroken Western pattern linked ancients to moderns” (p. 55).

So while civilizational contexts do matter, proper attention to their complex nature must be properly addressed in the study of military traditions and practices. Lynn in particular argues that early modern Western drill proved the critical advantage, which “ran wholly counter to native Mongol notions of horse-archer warfare, which stressed individual prowess and minimal casualties” (p. 54). Both European and Asian powers had gunpowder weaponry, so technology was not necessarily the critical factor in this case.

On the very last page of the book, Murray and Knox give a stern prophetic warning about the twenty-first century:

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<sup>1</sup> Peter A. Lorge’s *The Asian Military Revolution: From Gunpowder to the Bomb (New Approaches to Asian History)*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

The present strategic pause — like the blessed European armed peace from 1871 to 1914 — is unlikely to last. While it endures, the U.S. armed forces have an opportunity to address fundamental weaknesses. They must beware above all of substituting technology for strategy and of fielding superior weapons *platforms* rather than effective military *forces*. They must also bear in mind the danger that one of America’s many proclaimed or covert enemies — rather than America itself — may launch the next revolution in military affairs (p. 194, emphasis in original).

It is quite remarkable that such a book would have been published literally just a month prior to the attacks in September 2001 that would propel the American military into a war in Afghanistan. The common presumption at the time was that American military hardware would carry the day, and thus avoid the prolonged quagmire that befell the Soviet military in the 1980s. In the first few months of the war, it seemed this was very much the case, when the Taliban were driven out of power and Kabul was captured in November. The reality was this was merely the beginning of a prolonged guerrilla campaign. Twenty years later American leaders have conducted a military withdrawal from Afghanistan, and it appears that the presumption of American firepower automatically bringing victory has been severely challenged. There is also the resurgence of great-power competition on the world stage and with it the potential threat posed by “hybrid warfare” techniques as a means of overcoming American military domination which has also created further relevance of this book, even decades after its original publication.