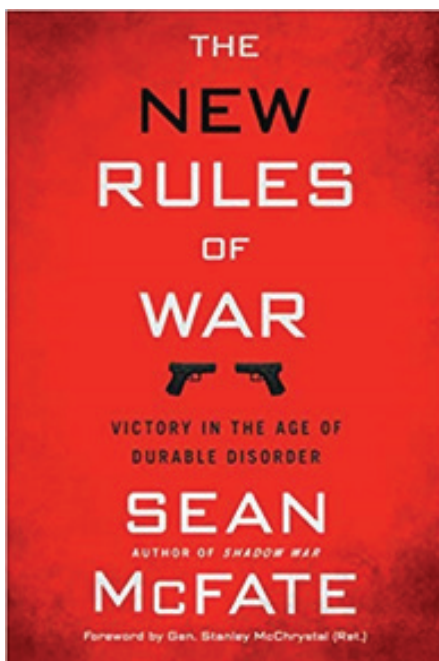


A book review

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Sean McFate. 2019. *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*. New York City, William Morrow. 336 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0062843586



The central notion of the book is that the Western approach to warfare has remained wedged in the past, while the character of warfare has changed since WWII, and particularly since the Cold War. The author offers some original perspectives and solutions to be used in adapting to the “new form” of warfare. The book, therefore, may be seen as a Western contribution to considerations on future warfare, previously described in publications such as the Chinese *Unrestricted Warfare* (written by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui), and concepts such as the Russian *New Generation Warfare*.

Strategically inclined readers should be advised from the beginning that this book does not represent a strictly academic approach to strategy. If someone expects to see the writing style of Colin S. Gray or Beatrice Heuser, be aware that this book is not of that type. It is instead an apotheosis of strategizing

as an art, rather than a science. The author uses in abundance his common sense, experience and observations, including examples and illustrations in the form of dialogues.

The style of writing, however, should not deceive “serious” readers. Sean McFate is Professor of Strategy at the National Defense University and Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Washington D.C. He was a commissioned officer who served in the US Army’s 82nd Airborne Division and as a private military contractor in Africa. His competences and professional experience contribute enormously to his plausibility regarding the topics he elaborates.

McFate primarily criticizes the rigidity of Western strategic thinking and its overreliance on “traditional” military approaches, its conventional military forces and doctrines, including overspending on technologically advanced platforms. These approaches, McFate claims, have proved to be inadequate for winning wars since 1945. He seems to be slightly disappointed, sometimes even ironic, in describing some failed approaches used by Western decision-makers, and their strategic and defence planners. The author primarily criticizes US decision-makers (regarding campaigns in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan) but also those from France (concerning engagements in Indochina and Algeria) and Israel (regarding the 2006 Lebanon war).

In the author’s view, not only are contemporary conflicts approached in the wrong way, but the strategic foresight and thinking about the character of future wars are equally problematic. In the USA, he points out ironically, thinking about the warfare of the future is influenced almost exclusively by Hollywood (e.g. sci-fi movies) rather than by genuine futurists of warfare. However, the incapacity of establishments to recognize, evaluate and empower genuine “futurists” and to recognize their talents is not new. McFate vividly describes the cases of generals William Lendrum Mitchell and John Frederick Charles Fuller, both ahead of their time in understanding the trends of future warfare (the former regarding the role of air power and the latter concerning the role of armour/tanks).

The strength of the book stems from the author’s capacity to “digest” strategic issues, such as the character of contemporary conflict, the meaning

of strategy, the meaning of victory, proper identification of the requirements in defence capabilities, the role of technology and the emergence of new actors in international relations. The considerations regarding strategic incompetence and durable disorder are particularly attractive. The author also provides some precious insights into grand strategy, elaborating its purpose and current (overly bureaucratic) approaches to its development.

McFate is confident and provocative as he challenges the mainstream mindset. His views may challenge the stereotypical Western approaches to the development of warfare as children did in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. For the author, the situation is clear: the Western militaries are "naked", despite all the power and capabilities they retain. The new approach to war, with its disinformation campaigns, propaganda, secret covert operations and attacks on infrastructure, as McFate implies, cannot be undertaken in a "Napoleonic" way. However, while the author is good at identifying issues, the arguments or solutions that he offers sometimes do not stand up to elementary scrutiny (e.g. the thesis that warfare is becoming a mercenary business). Another weakness of the book is its scope. The author examines the US military (its strategies and engagements) primarily but implicitly addresses Western militaries. While some conclusions in the book apply to Western militaries in general, the role of the USA in NATO, and the broader geopolitical perspectives are missing.

The content is organized around the fundamental premise that the present situation in the global security environment can be characterized as "durable disorder". "Durable disorder" apparently encompasses often-used adjectives to describe the contemporary security environment such as "complex", "uncertain", "fluid" and "volatile". McFate argues that the principal feature of that environment is persistent and perpetual conflict. He asks provocatively "Why has America stopped winning wars?" despite the fact that a huge proportion of the US national treasure goes toward the care and feeding of a large war machine. The author finds the answer neither in the military, strictly speaking, nor as part of party politics. He sees the problem as endemically American, one that results from "strategic incompetence". For McFate, the key problem is the inability to understand the character of (contemporary) war and the modern adversary's strategies. Actors such as

Russia, China, Iran, terrorist organizations and drug cartels, all of whom have less money and firepower than the US, are more effective in the new forms of warfare. They use non-conventional methods, such as strategic subversion, information campaigns, a covert proxy or “shadow” wars, which may include private mercenaries, economic warfare, terrorist attacks and strategic manipulation of laws (“lawfare”) to further their agendas. At the same time, the US approach is mainly focused on preparation for conventional warfare, which the author recognizes in decisions that justify investments in costly platforms, such as the US multi-role fighter the F-35, aircraft carriers and new (disruptive) technologies as a part of the *Third Offset*.

The book is organized into 13 main chapters, preceded by a foreword by retired US general, Stanley McChrystal. It starts with the author’s thesis of *Strategic Atrophy*, followed by his view on *Why Do We Get War Wrong?* The chapters that follow are what the author calls “ten rules”, including: “*Conventional War is Dead*”, “*Technology Will Not Save Us*”, “*There Is No Such Thing as War or Peace – Both Coexist. Always*”, “*Hearts and Minds Do Not Matter*”, “*The Best Weapons Do Not Fire Bullets*”, “*Mercenaries Will Return*”, “*New Types of World Powers Will Rule*”, “*There will Be Wars without States*”, “*Shadow Wars Will Dominate*” and “*Victory Is Fungible*”. The last chapter, “*Winning the Future*”, comprises a conclusion and the author’s view on the meaning of winning in “durable disorder”.

“Ten rules” do not seem to be rules for action or direct application but rather assumptions one should hold as authoritative when contemplating actions and decisions (e.g. for strategy development, defence planning etc.). For example, the first “rule” is articulated around the assumption that conventional warfare is dead. This, logically, leads to the conclusion that the West (or rather the USA) does not need that many conventional military capabilities. This is the point where many non-US readers may find themselves hesitant about agreeing with the author. In other words, McFate’s arguments may prove valid for the USA but European countries, especially those in northern and eastern Europe, see things differently, particularly since 2014. McFate does not, however, elaborate on this return of *realpolitik* with assertive actors such as Russia (to include examples of Russian engagement in Georgia and Ukraine).

We may argue that, just because the risk of high-intensity armed conflict on European soil has been low since the Cold War (except for wars in former Yugoslavia), conventional military capabilities have not become obsolete. This turned out to be true particularly in and after 2014, with the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. For Europeans and NATO, their conventional capabilities are an indispensable element of their deterring capabilities. We may also say that these capabilities contribute to non-escalation of strategic competition to an open armed conflict (i.e. keep them “below the threshold”). This kind of “spectral analysis”, in which threats to the security environment should not be seen as isolated, but considered in their complex relations, in the possibility of emerging simultaneously, is something that is missing in the book.

To corroborate his assumption, the author mostly uses US experience from counter-insurgency operations (COIN), along with challenges that emerged from the “new form” of Russian and Chinese strategic behaviour (described often as hybrid warfare or the “grey zone”). McFate implicitly shows that the USA focuses too much on military forces (power) and conventional capabilities while Russian and Chinese strategies use military forces as just one of the instruments for achieving their goals, and as a rule, often as a means of political pressure. Apparently, an attempt to use exclusively conventional military forces and approaches (doctrines and training) to respond to contemporary challenges would prove false and inadequate.

In conclusion, the book should not be considered a set of recipes or a new methodology for defence planning and strategy development as it has not been written that way. Instead, the author provides a set of indicators and principles that should be taken into consideration while thinking about defence and military strategy. It is an excellent source of thoughts for scenario analysis, alternative analysis and approaches to challenge our mindset.

The publication represents a valuable contribution to new approaches to understanding the character of contemporary and future warfare. The author recognizes the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of US (and consequently Western) strategic thinking. The book is certainly not a handbook, and hardly useful for “ordinary thinkers” in strategy development. However,

I highly recommend the book to all professionals in national security and defence, and all others, willing to expand their views in thinking about future warfare. Moreover, it is an attractive piece of work for those ready to enjoy reading views and perspectives that may even be their own but are brilliantly articulated by Sean McFate.