

Urban Warfare and Military Strategy: Examining the Relationship between Ends-Ways-Means-Risk and Urban Operations

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ABSTRACT

Urban Warfare presents a unique set of challenges to policymakers, military professionals, and scholars. A significant and important amount of literature has been produced in the past decade highlighting the importance of urban warfare. Much of this literature focuses on the mechanics of urban warfare – how to fight and stay alive in those environments. Little has been written, however, on the interplay of strategy and urban warfare. This article explores urban warfare through the lens of strategy and in doing so comes to a few important findings. First, the defender in urban warfare gains an initial protection advantage, but that advantage is not constant, but evaporates in proportion to its adversary gaining situational understanding. Next, leads to urban warfare proliferation of wars of attrition, regardless of how a state wants to prosecute the war. Lastly, smaller, lighter forces are incompatible with the challenges of urban warfare. Therefore, states should invest in larger, heavier forces. Otherwise, they risk becoming trapped in an urban death trap.

Key words: Urban Warfare, military strategy, ends-ways-means-risk, sieges, Russo-Ukrainian War.

Introduction

As the litany of conflicts in the post-9/11 period illustrate, urban warfare is a critical element of contemporary armed conflict. Each potential operating environment presents its participants unique challenges to overcome, and urban operating environments are no different. Military activities in urban operating environments, or urban warfare, present a unique blend of challenges. Urban environments inhibit swift vehicle movement, and often causes warfare to make on a slow, methodical plod, as battles like the 2016-2017 battle of Mosul illustrate. In that battle, the Iraq security forces would not move against ensconced Islamic State fighters unless they were covered with artillery and air support. The Iraqi's methodical slog through the city created a spidering wave of death and destruction as it moved forward.¹

Moreover, urban environments provide protection against ground and air-based fires, as well as hide personnel, equipment, and other sinew of warfare. In the Russo-Ukrainian

¹ Amos Fox, "The Mosul Study Group and the Lessons of the Battle of Mosul," *Association of the United States Army*, Land Warfare Paper 130 (2020): 5-9.

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War, both Russia and Ukraine have used civilian infrastructure to conceal troops and military equipment.² And in Gaza, Hamas uses hospitals and other civilian infrastructures to protect itself from its adversaries.³

Next to the methodical, frontal clearance of an urban area, sieges are the most known operation in urban warfare. Further, sieges are an inseparable part of urban warfare. In the post-9/11 period, sieges have occurred in the US-Iraq War, the US-Afghan War, the Syrian Civil War, the Counter-Islamic State wars in Iraq and The Philippines, and the Russo-Ukrainian War. Sieges are not inconsequential, nor the result of bad tactics. Sieges are often reflective of a specific situation, coupled with the deterministic impact of urban terrain on military operations. Similar to the situation in Mosul, sieges tend to develop out of one belligerent seeking protection in the urban area, while the other belligerent attempts to manage the situation by encircling their ensconced and bludgeoning and starving them into submission. Russia's siege of Mariupol in 2022 provides a near perfect case example of this point. Russian military forces concentrically defeated Ukrainian forces defended outside, then inside the city. As a last-ditch effort to hold the city, Ukrainian forces consolidated in the Azovstal iron and steel plant in late February 2022. Ukraine's 3,000 soldiers were able to fend off Russia's 12,000-man army for 80 days. Nevertheless, Russia's overwhelming strength caused the defenders to surrender on 20 May 2022.⁴

Despite all the great work done on urban warfare to date, there is very little analysis on the relationship between strategy and urban warfare. This paper examines urban warfare not through the lens of operations or characteristics, but by examining the phenomena through the lens of strategy. Many methods for defining strategy exist, but for the purpose of analysis the *Ends-Ways-Means-Risk* heuristic is a simple, yet helpful tool that helps illustrate urban warfare considerations that might otherwise be overlooked or ignored.

This article's analysis suggests that contrary to popular opinion, the defender in urban warfare gains an initial protection advantage, but if its adversary gains its situational bearing, urban operating environments turn into a death trap. Moreover, urban warfare tends to contribute to the proliferation of wars of attrition, regardless of how a state wants to prosecute the battle. Lastly, support for smaller, lighter forces, considering the relevance of urban warfare in nearly every modern conflict, might be incorrect.

This article proceeds as follows. First, the article engages with 'ends', or a state, military force, or non-state actor's goal within a specific conflict. At the end of this section, a small sub-section elaborates on the findings associated with strategic 'ends'. Next, the article examines 'ways', or the methods of warfare. Similar to the previous chapter, the 'ways' chapter concludes with a synthesis of the sections overall findings. Third, the article addresses 'means' or the resources required to give life to a strategy's 'ways'. Lastly, the article explores risk's role in strategy and how that consideration shapes how states and non-state actors negotiate their way through urban warfare. The paper

² "Russian, Ukrainian Bases Endangering Civilian," *Human Rights Watch*, 21 July 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/21/russian-ukrainian-bases-endangering-civilians>.

³ John Kirby, *Press Conference on Israel-Gaza War*, 14 November 2023, accessed 15 November 2023, available at: <https://youtu.be/nZ8JwsW-nwM?si=IG0Jm2DbbP3VgUAb>.

⁴ Michael Schwartz, "Last Stand at Azovstal: Inside the Siege That Shaped the Ukraine War," *New York Times*, 24 July 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/24/world/europe/ukraine-war-mariupol-azovstal.html>.



concludes with some thoughts on how strategy can better support the policymakers, military professionals, and scholars who have to toil on the challenges of urban warfare.

Urban Operations and Strategy

Ends

An 'end' in strategy is a policy or strategic military goal or outcome. Ends evolve as a conflict evolves. Nevertheless, the ultimate end for any combatant – whether a state or non-state actor – is three-fold.

First, a combatant engages in war to win. Further, winning is not universally defined. The definition of victory (or winning) is tied to each belligerent and their geopolitical situation, coupled with the status and disposition of their military forces. A belligerent's initial conditions are an important factor, but they do not generate a deterministic pathway that preordains a conflict's outcome.

A correlation of forces and means comparison between Russia and Ukraine in early February 2022 pointed to Russia possessing a significant materiel advantage in almost every measurable category.⁵ Journalist Angela Dewan characterized the disparity as a David and Goliath situation, in which Ukraine was the smaller and feeble David, and Russia was the imposing Goliath. The disparity in starting, or initial conditions caused many commenters, policymakers, and military professionals to assume that, if attacked, Kyiv would fall to Russia's military forces within a week, and that most, if not all of Ukraine would revert to the Kremlin's control.⁶ However, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian armed forces, and the Ukrainian people's stalwart defense against Russia's initial assault in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and other cities demonstrated that initial conditions are not deterministic. Ukraine's collective success in the first desperate days of Russia's invasion, coupled with impressive information operations, and the international community's general displeasure with Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign policy toward Ukraine, resulted in a massive wave of financial, materiel, and intelligence support.⁷ This dynamic changed the balance between Russia and Ukraine's initial conditions and each belligerent's strategic ends.⁸

Further, a state's unique definition of victory must be viewed as a set of defined conditions, or a win set. Win sets are a combatant's codified conditions for victory. Some

⁵ Angela Dewan, "Ukraine and Russia's Militaries are David and Goliath. Here's How They Compare," *CNN*, 25 February 2022, accessed 4 November 2022, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/25/europe/russia-ukraine-military-comparison-intl/index.html>.

⁶ "General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Resolution Demanding Russian Federation Immediately End Illegal Use of Force in Ukraine, Withdraw All Troops," *United Nations*, 2 March 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12407.doc.htm>; "NATO's Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *NATO*, 6 November 2023, accessed 10 November 2023, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm.

⁷ "Fact Sheet: One Year of Supporting Ukraine," *White House*, 21 February 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/21/fact-sheet-one-year-of-supporting-ukraine/>.

⁸ Gerry Doyle, Anurag Rao, and Vijdan Mohammad Kawoosa, "Shaping the Battlefield: How Weapons from Western Allies are Strengthening Ukraine's Defense," *Reuters*, 10 March 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/ARMS/lgvdkoygnpo/>.

conditions are transparent and readily available to the international community, whereas other conditions are private information and reserved for a small group of trusted agents. Private information pertinent to a combatant's win sets help explain that subject's actions in situations that might not make sense to the outside observer. This also helps explain Putin's seemingly illogical invasion of Ukraine. Putin has private information and win sets that are not privy to the international community, which makes his actions and that of Russia's appear irrational.

Hamas' incursion into southern Israel on 7 October 2023 is another example of both the ideas of unique definitions of victory and private information. Hamas entered Israel and killed more than 260 people.⁹ Hamas' geopolitical and religious interests are well established. Yet, for the curious onlooker, and most of the international community, Hamas' attack seems irrational and lacking clear logic.¹⁰ Applying the principle of private information one can apply several assumptions to Hamas' known interests. Doing so, thereby allows one to deduce that Hamas possesses external international support, thus increasing their odds for obtaining the conditions outlined within their own unique win set.

Russia's war in Ukraine is another example of this reality. Russia and Ukraine each have a unique definition of victory. Russia's interest resides in fracturing Kyiv's sovereignty by taking large swaths of Ukrainian territory and incorporating that land and its people into the Russian Federation. Kyiv, meanwhile, is interested in retaining its sovereignty over its territory and people. Further, considering the external support provided by the US and other Western states, Ukraine is also interested in reclaiming its lost element Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, as well as Crimea. Private information keeps each belligerent guessing about what their adversary's true goals are within the conflict. This causes the conflict to continue moving forward with no apparent end in sight. This dynamic, in which Russia and Ukraine cycle through seemingly illogical combat operations, is reflective of why wars drift to long wars of attrition.

Second, modern militaries operate as part of a complex, open and adaptive system. Systems, like any institution, organization, or individual, operate according to the law of 'do no harm', and combatants engaged in conflict operate to survive. This is not a new idea. Historian Peter Paret notes that, "For most people the problems posed by war have always been a matter, first of survival, and second of victory."¹¹ Moreover, theorist J.F.C. Fuller's thinking operates along a similar line of logic. Fuller writes that "Self-preservation is the keystone in the arch of war."¹² Further, strategist Alexander Svechin also advocates for the importance of survival in military matters. Svechin states that the first rule of war is to guard oneself against any decisive blows.¹³

Considering survivability's fundamental position within both war and warfare it must be regarded as an unshakable law of war. Strategic actors, whether state or non-state,

⁹ Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman, "The Secrets Hamas Knew about Israel's Military," *New York Times*, 13 October 2023, accessed 31 October 2023, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-attack-gaza.html>.

¹⁰ Haroro Ingram and Omar Mohammed, "The Logic of Insanity: Why Groups Like ISIS and Hamas Strategically Court with Self Destruction," *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 1 November 2023, accessed 5 November 2023, available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/logic-insanity>.

¹¹ Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenges of War, Prussia 1806* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 129.

¹² J.F.C. Fuller, *Generalship, Its Diseases and Their Cure: A Study of the Personal Factor in Command* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Services Publishing Company, 1936), 26.

¹³ Alexander Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Information Services, 2004), 248.



engaged in armed conflict will not intentionally chose to operate in ways or along pathways that lead them to their respective destruction.

Appreciating that armed conflict is an adversarial endeavor, in which combatants jockey for dominance, then 'destroy' must be understood as 'survives' inverse equivalent. If Actor A applies the principle of 'survive' to himself, and he understands that Actor B is also applying that principle to itself, and to win the former must deny the latter its win sets, then it must pursue Actor B's destruction.

Third, war is wasteful. Nevertheless, combatants will not operate in ways or along pathways that accelerate them towards resource exhaustion. Because war is wasteful, and armed conflict occurs in a resource-constrained environment, the manipulation of resources –available and potentially available – is a salient pathway to victory or defeat in war and warfare. At the tactical level, depriving a military force of resupply after they have expended their on-hand stocks is a proven way to defeat that force. Extrapolating that to the operational and strategic levels is more challenging, but it is still one of the most effective paths to victory.

Ends – Analysis

Synthesizing these three concepts – winning, military goals, and survival –the allure of urban operations becomes apparent. Modern military forces often lack the size to operate along vast fronts that contain multiple points of combat. A few exceptions to this rule include the US, Russia, Ukraine, and China. Nonetheless, an aggressor's ability to force their adversary into an urban area centralizes, compresses, and reduces the number of the military problems that the aggressor must address. Although the challenges of urban operations are significant, from an operational and strategic level, centralized operations and campaigns simplifies the logistics challenges associated with operating multiple battles along a dispersed front. As a result, urban operations remain an attractive option for states and non-state actors seeking to fight and survive on the battlefield.

Further, operating from an urban area increases the military force's chance of survival. Yet, this comes with a caveat. A dataset on post-Cold War sieges – one of urban warfare's defining characteristics today – finds that the defender is successful in only 30 percent of observed cases.¹⁴ On the other hand, the aggressor won 60 percent of the time. The remaining percentage is split amongst ongoing sieges, stalemates, and multiple victors (see Table 1).

¹⁴ *Post-Cold War Siege Dataset 28 October 2023*. Dataset is currently unpublished and retained and maintained by the author. The dataset will be published as part of the author's forthcoming book which is due to be published in 2024.

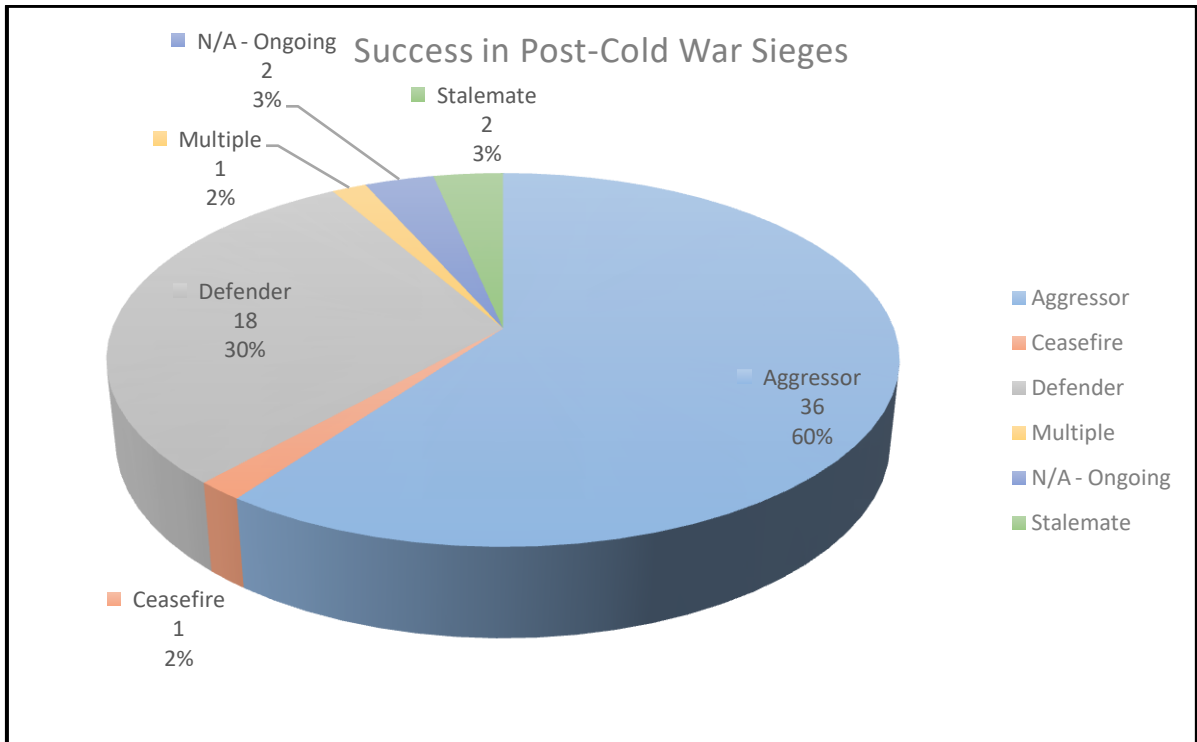


Table 1: Post-Cold War Siege Win Sets

Refining the post-Cold War sieges into four categories yields useful findings. In the ten sieges lasting one month or less, the aggressor won 90 percent of the time, while the defender won the remaining ten percent. In the twenty-one sieges lasting between one and six months in duration, the aggressor came out on top 57 percent of the time, while the defender won 33 percent of those sieges. The remaining sieges during that window are split between ongoing sieges and ceasefires.¹⁵

Further, the data indicates that the aggressor’s monopoly on winning sieges begins to change as the duration of the conflict elongates. This trend continues in the eleven sieges lasting between six to twelve months. During that period, the aggressor only won 36 percent of the time, whereas the defender prevailed 55 percent of the time. The remaining nine percent goes to a single stalemate.¹⁶

The final category accounts for sieges lasting longer than twelve months. Eighteen sieges were identified in this window. Victory returns to the aggressor in this category. The aggressor won 61 percent of the sieges and the defender won only 36 percent of the time. The remaining three percent splits between a stalemate, an ongoing siege, and a stalemate.¹⁷

A final review of the data finds a so-called sweet spot for the defender. The defender’s sweet spot is sieges lasting longer than one month, but less than a year (see Table 2). Although the dataset does not elaborate on causality, the sweet spot presumably emerges because of the synergistic effect of surprise and resources on the operation. Based on the data a simple theory emerges. Aggressor’s win short sieges because they surprise and their opponent and bring overwhelming strength to bear simultaneously. The

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.



aggressor encircles and defeats the defender before they can regain their bearing. Defeat originates from one of two situations. The defender acquiesces because they realize that they are not in position to resist the aggressor. Or, the aggressor might physically destroy the defender's ability to resist before it has the opportunity to establish a suitable urban defense.

Nonetheless, the defender's position stabilizes in sieges occurring between one and twelve months. This results from one of three situations. First, a degree of parity exists between the aggressor and the defender, and by missing the opportunity to defeat the defender, that parity lends victory to the combatant who uses the most prudent and timely operations. Second, the defender activates its bases of power – existing, latent, and potential – to support their operations. Therefore, instead of depleting their personnel, food, and equipment, the defender can parry the aggressor's offensive action. Third, the international community joins the conflict. In sieges lasting longer than a month, for instance, the international community pressures the aggressor to end the siege, or open humanitarian corridors for the besieged population.¹⁸ A besieged actor's best chance of winning results from extending a siege to a month, at a minimum, but no longer than a year.¹⁹

The balance tips back to the aggressor for sieges lasting longer than a year.²⁰ This is likely because of resources. The basic assumption is an aggressor wins in sieges longer than twelve months because they have the logistical base to outlast the defender. The data also suggests that states are victorious 39 percent of the time when sieges exceed twelve months. Principal-proxy dyads account for a further 17 percent of the wins in this category. Taken collective, states prevail in 56 percent of the sieges that fall within the one-month-to-twelve-month category.²¹

The data indicates that sieges are an inseparable element of urban warfare. Moreover, the analysis shows a trend that contrasts with contemporary assertions regarding urban warfare. Scholars, military professionals, and others suggest that urban environments provide a defender or weaker combatant with a place of refuge from an aggressor or stronger combatant. This might be true, but siege data suggests that unless a defender can elongate the siege into, but not exceed, the one-to-six-month window, their chance of winning a siege is quite low. This finding is specific to a siege, but given the siege's central position in urban warfare, and the absence of any comparable quantifiable information on urban operations, then it is reasonable to assume that urban operations follow a similar pattern. This similarity likely follows both the findings for the relationship between duration and outcomes, as well as the relationship between duration, status (that is, aggressor or defender), and outcomes.

¹⁸ Bill Hutchinson, "How Humanitarian Corridors Work to Offer Lifeline to Besieged Ukrainians," *ABC News*, 12 April 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/humanitarian-corridors-work-offer-lifeline-besieged-ukrainians/story?id=84011869>.

¹⁹ Amos Fox, "Urban Warfare, Sieges, and Israel's Looming Invasion of Gaza," *War on the Rocks*, 27 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2023/10/urban-warfare-sieges-and-israels-looming-invasion-of-gaza/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Post-Cold War Siege Dataset_28 October 2023*.

Strategy pertaining to urban operations therefore indicates that they benefit the aggressor most often. As a result, an aggressor should not fear urban warfare. They must either strike with sufficient force and speed to surprise and annihilate the defender before they can respond, or they intentionally extend the duration of the campaign to such a point that the defender can no longer muster the resources required to maintain operations.

To improve one’s potential for winning in urban warfare; one must not dither around the margins of force design. Western militaries must increase – not decrease – the size of their forces. This will help Western military forces compensate for the destruction and casualties that accompany operating in an urban environment.

Western militaries must also expand their understanding of urban warfare by broadening the concepts and doctrine. To that end, Western militaries must not rely on institutional concept developers and doctrine writers to address the challenges of developing the concepts and doctrine. Extant concept developers and doctrine writers tend to be process-oriented bureaucrats who are not paid to think and generate novel approaches to new problems; but rather, they focus on process and protecting their institutional interests and prerogatives.

The research indicates that Western militaries would be better served identifying the small number of urban warfare experts that exist across friendly states and give them the lead to develop those concepts and ideas. Doing so will help Western militaries develop innovative DOTMLPF (Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities, Policies, and Finance) solutions to enable Western militaries to more effectively and efficiently accomplish their military ends.

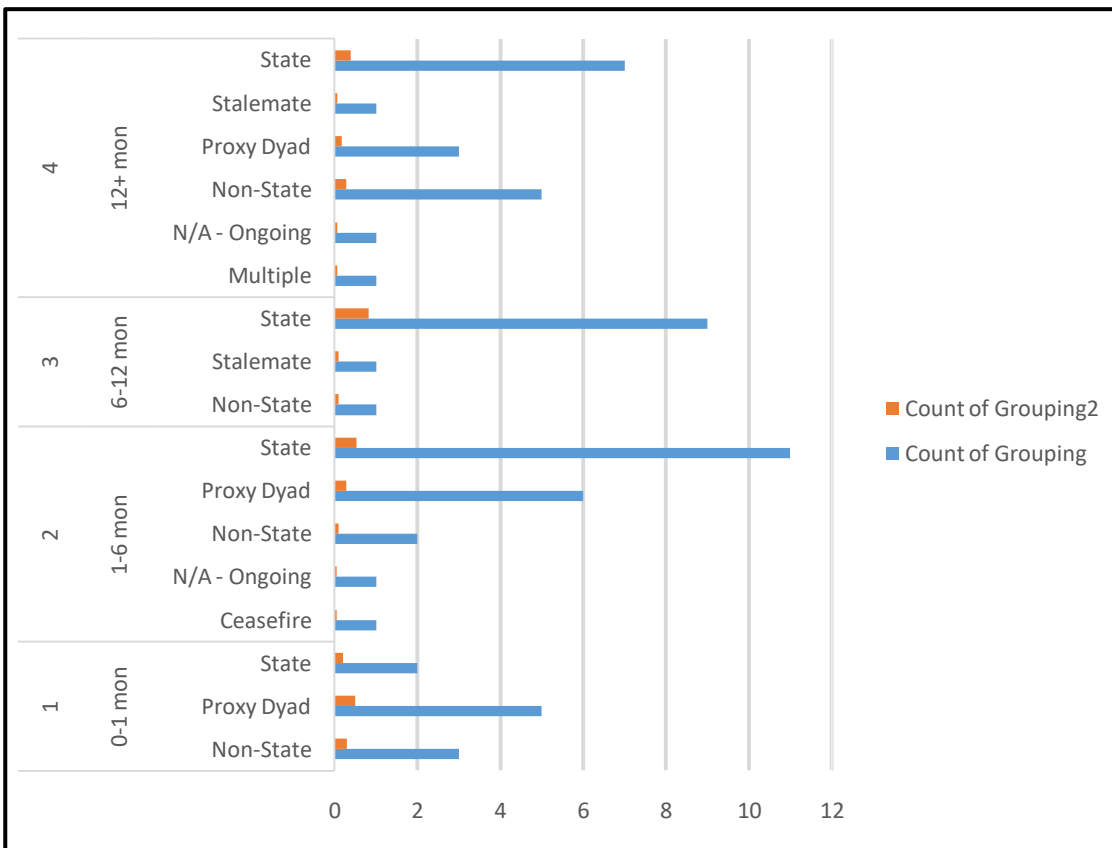


Table 2: Post-Cold War Siege Win Sets, By Month, by Combatant



Ways

'Ways' refers to the method(s) that a state or non-state actor employs to achieve their ends. Ways are 'means' informed; meaning that if a solution to a problem requires more resources than that belligerent can generate, then that approach or plan is not feasible and is discarded.

'Ways' are not the product of a state's recalcitrant determination to make one type of warfare fit the situation. Instead, ways reflect a handful of deterministic factors, to include the operating environment, time, chance, and lastly, oneself. General George S. Patton makes this point, writing that:

One does not plan and then try to make circumstances fit those plans. One tries to make plans fit the circumstances. I think the difference between success and failure in high command depends upon the ability, or lack of it, to do just that.²²

Considering the goal of ways in military strategy and how they must fit the situation, scholars, military professionals, and policymakers must understand a set of key considerations. First, ways must be informed by the strategic, operational, and tactical operating environment. Each of these environments bring their own unique set of considerations. The strategic operating environment is a derivative of the governing effect of the international community, International Humanitarian Law, and the strategic adversary. Each of those variables both directly and indirectly shape a combatant's intentions, ends, and ways. Israel's conflict in Gaza helps illustrate this point.

The international community has offered both support and condemnation, depending on the strategic actor.²³ States, international government organizations, and nongovernmental organizations have all urged Israel and the Israeli Defense Forces to adhere to International Humanitarian Law.²⁴ Israel delayed its invasion of Gaza at the request of the US so that the US could situation air defense systems in the region and to provide more time for accommodations to be made to protect civilians in Gaza.²⁵

²² George Patton, *War as I Knew It* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 92.

²³ "Joint Statement on Israel," *The White House*, 9 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-bombards-gaza-prepares-invasion-biden-urges-path-two-states-2023-10-25/#:~:text=With%20no%20sign%20of%20a,and%20violations%20of%20international%20law;Nidal al-Mughrabi and Emily Rose, "Israeli Troops Raid Gaza as Arab Nations Condemn Bombardment," *Reuters*, 26 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-bombards-gaza-prepares-invasion-biden-urges-path-two-states-2023-10-25/#:~:text=With%20no%20sign%20of%20a,and%20violations%20of%20international%20law..](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-bombards-gaza-prepares-invasion-biden-urges-path-two-states-2023-10-25/#:~:text=With%20no%20sign%20of%20a,and%20violations%20of%20international%20law;Nidal%20al-Mughrabi%20and%20Emily%20Rose,%20%20Israeli%20Troops%20Raid%20Gaza%20as%20Arab%20Nations%20Condemn%20Bombardment,%20%20Reuters,%2026%20October%202023,%20accessed%204%20November%202023,%20available%20at:%20https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-bombards-gaza-prepares-invasion-biden-urges-path-two-states-2023-10-25/#:~:text=With%20no%20sign%20of%20a,and%20violations%20of%20international%20law..)

²⁴ Andrea Shalal and Kanishka Singh, "Biden, Key Western Leaders Urge Israel to Protect Civilians," *Reuters*, 22 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: [https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-holds-call-with-key-western-allies-pope-discuss-israel-hamas-war-2023-10-22/#:~:text=REHOBOTH%20BEACH%2C%20Delaware%2C%20Oct%202022,humanitarian%20law%20and%20protect%20civilians;General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling for Immediate, Sustained Humanitarian Truce Leading to Cessation of Hostilities Between Israel, Hamas," *United Nations Tenth Emergency Special Session*, 40th and 41st Meetings, 27 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12548.doc.htm.](https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-holds-call-with-key-western-allies-pope-discuss-israel-hamas-war-2023-10-22/#:~:text=REHOBOTH%20BEACH%2C%20Delaware%2C%20Oct%202022,humanitarian%20law%20and%20protect%20civilians;General%20Assembly%20Adopts%20Resolution%20Calling%20for%20Immediate,%20Sustained%20Humanitarian%20Truce%20Leading%20to%20Cessation%20of%20Hostilities%20Between%20Israel,%20 Hamas,%20United%20Nations%20Tenth%20Emergency%20Special%20Session,%2040th%20and%2041st%20Meetings,%2027%20October%202023,%20accessed%204%20November%202023,%20available%20at:%20https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12548.doc.htm.)

²⁵ Dion Nissenbaum, Gordon Lubold, Don Lieber, and Omar Abdel-Baqi, "Israel Agrees to US Request to Delay Invasion of Gaza," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 October 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-battles-on-multiple-fronts-as-conflict-risks-spreading-a5e537ec>.



The operational-level operating environment is the general theater of conflict, or the entire area in which the war is taking place. Considering this variable requires assessing the geographic terrain, to include identifying seaports, airports, and other strategic embarkation and debarkation nodes. This helps a belligerent develop a comprehensive understanding of the theater operating environment's potential impact on military operations. Further, the purpose of this analysis is to generate warfighting approaches that integrate considerations from the strategic operating environment with the constraints and opportunities afforded by both a theater's physical terrain and its accessibility by air, sea, and land. Factors such as cyber, information, and other lesser, but important, variables are also considered here. Moreover, further operational level considerations include examining a theater for the relationship between road networks to (and from) urban areas, large bridging, the density of urban areas, and the ratio of urban areas to less restrictive terrain within a specific theater's context. Patton is helpful here too. He writes, "Surely the greatest study of war is the road net."²⁶

Continuing along this line of causality, Patton asserts that high-level military commanders are not concerned with how to defeat an adversary. That concern, according to Patton, is the prerogative of tactical commanders. Operational and strategic military commanders are concerned with where to defeat their adversary. Patton continues, stating that, "The where is learned from a careful study of road, rail, and river maps."²⁷

Considerations at this level also require assessing the theater's geography in relation to potential types of military activities to determine time, resource, and consumption rate factors needed to support operations. Theater level operating environment considerations allow policymakers and military leaders to craft military activities that align military forces with theater-specific considerations pursuant to political and strategic military objectives. The US's invasion of Iraq helps make this point tangible. The US invaded Iraq on the flawed belief that once Saddam Hussein's regime fell that the Iraqi people would welcome their forces as a liberating force for good.²⁸ Poor policy decisions involving Paul Bremer and the Coalition Provisional Authority's decision to de-Ba'athify Iraq and to disband the Iraqi Army, coupled with insufficient troops on the ground (the product of an egregious misread of the strategic and theater operating environment), institutional proclivity (ahead of military necessity) and an inefficacious military doctrine worked in unison to derail the US's policy and strategic military objectives.²⁹ The derailment caused the US to develop a subsequent policy and military strategy (i.e., counterinsurgency, or COIN) to address the problems generated by its initial strategy.³⁰ In turn, the US's initial bad strategy – in which its ways, means, and risk evaluations proved incorrect from the start—resulted in Washington's inability to substantially attain its policy goals. In a somewhat fitting end to

²⁶ Patton, *War as I Knew It*, 92.

²⁷ Ibid, 354.

²⁸ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008), 15.

²⁹ US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's advocacy of 'transformation' and making US forces small, faster, and sleeker ran in direct contrast to the military necessities for fighting a war in a country dominated by large cities in which most of state's population resided. See Paul Light, "Rumsfeld's Revolution at Defense," *Brookings Institute*, Policy Brief #142 (2005): 1-8.

³⁰ Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1: Invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), 281-303.



the war in Iraq, the US Army's own official history, published after several delays, asserts that Iran was the real winner of the Iraq War.³¹

The tactical operating environment is less important when developing strategy because if a decent operational level operating environment assessment is conducted, most of the significant tactical level considerations will have been identified. Nonetheless, tactical considerations help add necessary detail to how a theater's terrain impacts potential operations.

Second, time is a vital element of ways. Speaking of the importance of time in war and warfare, generalissimo Napoleon Bonaparte stated "I may lose ground, but I shall never lose a minute. Ground, we may recover; time, never."³² Fuller writes that, "Time is an all-embracing condition...it must be reckoned in minutes, and not only from a military point of view, but from an economic one as well."³³ Modern scholar Olivier Schmitt also notes, in armed conflict, "The perception of 'time' changes according to the social-political context." Professor Andrew Carr makes a similar point, stating "Time is an ordering process," and that, "Political and military leaders thus must recognize that their assumptions about the order of events shapes how they interpret the available information."³⁴

Time's deterministic impact on every aspect of war and warfare is what makes it germane to the strategy of military activities. If time is short, meaning that the strategic, domestic, or military situation requires a quick military operation, then that limits what a state can do. For instance, if a state's interests are one of unprovoked territorial acquisition, like Russia's 2014 desire to annex Ukraine's Crimean and Donbas territories, the state must move to avoid the condemnation of the international community and the rebuke of a disinterested domestic audience. As scholar Dan Altman notes, this type of situation is often where *fait accomplis* emerge.³⁵ Unlimited time resides on the other end of the spectrum. The US's unbounded timeframe for its punitive campaign in Afghanistan illustrates how strategy evolves to its time considerations.

The same holds time dynamic true for urban operations. Some urban operations, like the US's siege of Fallujah in the winter of 2004, were influenced by an international community that was sensitive to the plight of the citizens of Fallujah, and therefore applied pressure on US policymakers and strategists to make the operation quick and careful to adhere to International Humanitarian Law.³⁶

At the operational and tactical levels, time is often dictated, not directed. By that it must be understood that geography, adversary's military activities, and that adversary's ability to activate bases of power influence a conflict's duration. For example, if the operating environment is dominated by terrain that inhibits movement, then the time needed to accomplish military objectives increases. If road networks and water crossings

³¹ Jeane Godfroy, James Powell, Matthew Morton, and Matthew Zais, *US Army in the Iraq War – Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal, 2007-2011* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, 2019), 569-86.

³² David Chandler, *Napoleon* (London: Pen and Sword Publishers, 2000), 168.

³³ J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1926), 180.

³⁴ Andrew Carr, "It's About Time: Strategy and Temporal Phenomena," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 44, no. 3 (2021): 311. DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2018.1529569

³⁵ Dan Altman, "By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61 (2017): 882-884.

³⁶ Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War – Volume 1*, 344-351.

are limited, the same holds true. As Russia advanced towards Kyiv in February 2022, the Ukrainian military blew the Kakhovka Dam, flooding the main arteries leading from southern Belarus to Kyiv.³⁷ Doing so cause the Russian advance toward Kyiv to stall.³⁸ In fact, eliminating access to these roads slowed Russia's operations to the point that Vladimir Putin called off the advance of Kyiv, and ordered a redirect of Russian military forces towards the Donbas sector.³⁹

Chance is the third factor that impacts ways. Chance is the impact of randomness and suboptimization on military operations. Randomness is the effect of any unforeseen or unplanned event on a specific situation. Suboptimization is the impact of inherent inefficiencies on military operations. Moreover, suboptimization is the gradual and perpetual towards disorder. Militaries constantly work to combat suboptimization. Training is one way in which policymakers and military leaders attempt to overcome chance and suboptimization. Training provides military forces and the individual soldiers that comprise any military the opportunity to experience a military event or activity in a safe, learning environment before having to deal with that situation in an unsafe, unforgiving environment in which every bullet and artillery round is real.

Institutional or personal preference is the last consideration. This is because the other elements provide situational variance regarding their respective deterministic impact on operations. For example, a group of policymakers might want to hasten a conflict's end. Yet, the problem that they are attempting to address through the use of force is the eradication of a hostile military force in a theater of conflict dominated by urban areas and thick forests. The impact of the physical terrain, coupled with the military objective's own proclivity to avoid existential crisis, means that the conflict will take much longer than what the policymakers would like.

Looking at this argument from another level of examination, what if, in the short scenario provided above, the policymakers still direct a 'short' conflict and that they want to limit civilian casualties and collateral damage during the process. That actor's military commanders then state that they want to conduct a lightning quick campaign of maneuver that seeks to avoid urban warfare and defeat the adversary without having much impact on the civilian population. The physical environment and the threat's interest in survival, however, will cause the conflict to be flipped on its head. An adversary would likely benefit from seeking refuge in the urban area, while using the thick wooded area outside its cities to slow its adversary and cause it to move along predictable routes and force it to fight its way into the urban area.

At the tactical level, given the same scenario, what if a small tactical unit finds itself on the cusp of attacking into an urban? This situation was one that neither the policymakers nor the senior military commanders wanted, but the adversary's actions, coupled with the potential benefit that dense urban terrain provides for a defending force,

³⁷ "Ukraine Blew Up a dam to Stop the Russian Advance on Kyiv, Some Homes Remain Flooded," *Reuters*, 28 May 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/months-after-dam-destroyed-stop-russian-advance-parts-village-still-flooded-2022-05-29/>.

³⁸ Dmytro Dzhulay, "Revealed: How Ukraine Blew Up a Dam to Save Kyiv," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 February 2023, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-moshchun-irpin-kyiv-war-battle/32286263.html>

³⁹ Robert Burns, "Russia's Failure to Take Down Kyiv was a Defeat for the Ages," *Associated Press*, 7 April 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-battle-for-kyiv-dc559574ce9f6683668fa221af2d5340>.



resulted in this outcome. The tactical military commander – steeped in the language and mental models of their respective military institution – also states that they want to conduct a battle of maneuver (in the urban area) and that they want to limit the impact of their military activities on the immediate population and infrastructure. Yet, once hostilities commence, the adversary contracts into the city’s recesses and operates amongst the people in questionable ways, to include using them as human shields and relocating local civilians against their will to the areas in which combat is occurring.

The scenario laid out above is not too far from reality. The scenario mirrors what occurred during the US-Iraqi Mosul campaign to eliminate the Islamic State in 2016-2017. Iraq’s open deserts did not provide the Islamic State any military advantage, so they operated within urban areas. Despite the US-Iraqi dyad’s best efforts, they were unable to separate the Islamic State from the civilian population sufficient to limit civilian casualties and collateral damage. As a result, cities like Ramadi and Mosul were razed during the process of annihilating the Islamic State. Tracing the footsteps back to the policymakers in this example finds that a leader’s preferential method of warfare had almost no impact on how their forces were forced to fight. Therefore, it is important for policymakers, scholars, and military professionals to understand that dynamic. As a result, policymakers and military professionals must integrate non-preferential forms of operating and non-preferential operating environments into how they physically and mentally prepare their forces for armed conflict.

Ways – Analysis

The operating environment, time, chance, and an opponent’s interest in self-preservation and survival all work together to undercut the best laid plans. What does this mean as we examine strategy and urban warfare? It means that all things being equal, a weaker military force will not intentionally meet a strong military force in terrain that provides advantage to the stronger force. In fact, the opposite rings true. If provided time and the means to do so, a weaker combatant will move from open terrain and into urban areas because of the benefit provide by urban infrastructure. Given the fact that military forces are in a period of shrinking size, and armed reconnaissance-strike drones and long-range fires are now offsetting the gaps created by the use of larger land forces, it then makes sense that once a stronger force-weaker force dyad appears, that weaker forces will operate from a city to try and achieve some degree of parity and increase its odds of survival and military success. Consequently, urban warfare will likely play an important role in armed conflict because it provides a combatant with game-changing potential.

Means

‘Means’ are perhaps the simplest element of strategy to examine within the context of urban warfare. Means are the resources required to animate any military activity. Most often, means are considered as the forces, to include their personnel and equipment, required to engage in armed conflict. At the policy and strategic military levels, means include many broader topics such as economic considerations, strategic lift to move forces across the globe, or within (and between) military theaters.



Protection of means, like survival and self-preservation, is a first order principle for any belligerent engaged in armed conflict. Urban areas, more so than any other type of operating environment, provide a military force with the best protection for their means. Military forces that possess sophisticated reconnaissance, strike, long-range fires, and professional land forces want to engage adversaries in terrain that favors those advantages. Conversely, it is suicidal for a military force to engage with a military of equal or greater strength without attempting to do so from an area that protects its means and offset the belligerent's advantages.

Means also carries a telescopic aspect with it. By that, means represent different things at different levels of analysis. At the tactical level, means are thought of as accessible warfighting resources. At the operational level, however, means are one of the primary factors upon which exhaustion balances. Exhaustion is the state in which a belligerent can no longer sustain their rate of resource consumption in relation to the tempo or physical extent of military operations. Nazi Germany's operations in Stalingrad are instructive here.

By December 1942, Soviet military forces had surrounded General Friedrich Paulus' 6th Army (some 270,000 soldiers) in the city of Stalingrad.⁴⁰ In doing so, Soviet forces cut Paulus and the 6th Army's ability to attend to their means by the replenishment of supplies.⁴¹ Historian Antony Beevor notes that by January 1943, Nazi Germany's political leadership came to the realization that 6th Army was exhausted and that they were able to do little more than feeble localized defensive operations.⁴² The once powerful German war machine, short on military and economic means, was unable to provide Paulus with the resources he needed to keep his quarter-million man army afloat.⁴³ Paulus and his exhausted army fought on through early February 1943. When culmination set in, Paulus surrendered himself and the 6th Army.⁴⁴

Means – Analysis

Considering the preceding ideas in the context of urban warfare is important because it provides a handful of important findings. First, because means are a combatant's lifeblood, protection of one's means is a first order principle of warfare, regardless of the operating environment's physical characterization. Moreover, weighing scholar Anthony King's research on the relationship between the diminishing size of state military forces and the reciprocal increase in urban warfare, finds that small land forces operating in open, unobstructed terrain are more prone to identification and destruction. Considering the requirement to protect means, and the inadequacies of modern forces structures in unobstructed terrain, it is simple to deduce that urban warfare will remain a significant consideration for Western military forces. It is not a stretch to actually see the phenomenon accelerate as states look to further reduce the size of their forces and replace that loss of physical mass with long range precision strike.

⁴⁰ David Glantz and Jonathon House, *To the Gates of Stalingrad: Soviet-German Combat Operations, April-August 1942* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 486.

⁴¹ Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad, The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 308-311.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Robert Citino, *The Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2022), 157.



Long range precision strike, however, requires excellent reconnaissance to work. Left unchecked, the proliferation of sensors – an evolved form of reconnaissance – will make battlefields prone to precision strike and long range precision fires. Moreover, the relationship between transparency and strike will require active measures to protect tactical and operational means. Further, the protection of tactical and operational means helps prevent a combatant from expending more resources than its strategic base can support. As a result, the assumption must be made that urban environments will become even more important than they are today because of their ability to both hide and protect people, equipment, and other means of warfare.

This situation should cause the onlooker to take pause and question some key ideas in military discourse today. First, is the evolution to smaller land forces (and militaries, in general) a deterministic pathway that cannot be escaped? Second, are small, lighter land forces the answer to the problems of contemporary, and increasingly, future armed conflict?

The data is clear on these questions – small land forces are easier to annihilate, easier to identify through their pattern of sustainment support, and due to their small size, they are far less capable of addressing the challenges of land warfare, and urban warfare in particular. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that small, lighter land forces might provide some advantages in deployability and the ability to hide within urban operating environments, but neither of those advantages seem to outweigh the advantages of larger, heavier land forces.

Further, small, lighter land forces have yet to prove themselves in large-scale combat operations. The US military's initial 'light footprint' approach in Afghanistan and Iraq provided some small victories early in each of those conflicts. These small victories were presumably due more resultant of surprise and the localized overmatch the US was able to achieve, and less on the effectiveness of 'light footprint' strategy. In due time, the 'light footprint' strategy caused more problems than victories delivered.⁴⁵ Moreover, those problems proved much more strategically disruptive and long-lasting than did the impact of the early victories.⁴⁶ Once military leaders acknowledged the 'light footprint's' failure, they pleaded with policymakers to loosen the restraints on troop deployments in both conflicts. Both Afghanistan and Iraq required troop surges to account for the 'light footprints' failures.⁴⁷ The failures of strategy associated with the light foot print has caused many other commenters to suggest that the approach is a paradoxical fool's errand.⁴⁸ Though these conflicts are not a direct facsimile for conflicts in which large-scale combat operations between industrialized states occur, it is reasonable to assume that 'light

⁴⁵ Bad Stapleton, "The Problem with the Light Footprint: Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy," *CATO Institute*, 7 June 2016, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/problem-light-footprint-shifting-tactics-lieu-strategy>.

⁴⁶ Stapleton, "The Problem with the Light Footprint."

⁴⁷ George Bush, "The Surge of Troops in Iraq," *PBS*, 4 May 2020, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.pbs.org/video/george-w-bush-troops-surge-iraq/>; Barack Obama, "The Way Forward in Afghanistan," *Obama White House Archives*, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/defense/afghanistan#:~:text=The%20President%20announced%20that%20the,by%20the%20summer%20of%202012.>

⁴⁸ Stapleton, "The Problem with the Light Footprint."



footprint' strategies will be disastrous in the future, and should therefore be avoided, despite the financial cost.

Risk

Risk is a diverse idea. Regarding strategy, and specifically to strategy pertaining to urban warfare, should be understood as the trade-off what is possible with what it costs to generate that outcome. Costs are more than financial considerations. Costs also include things such as civilian casualties, collateral damage, the impact on personnel (i.e., will losses be worth the cost of expenditure), the impact on weapon systems and munitions stockpiles, and a host of other considerations. Scholar Thomas Schelling provides a useful way to think about risk. Schelling writes, "The questions that do arise involve degrees of risk – what risk is worth taking, and how to evaluate risk involved in a course of action...it adds an entire dimension to military relations: the manipulation of risk."⁴⁹ Scholar Olivier Schmitt builds upon Schelling's idea, as well as many other scholars, by writing that in the post-Cold War era war is the art of "risk management."⁵⁰

The urban operating environment is a slippery slope. A state or non-state actor choosing to operate in an urban area theoretically decreases the risk associated with using their own forces. In an applied situation, however, the decreased cost to one's own troops also comes at the cost of the inherent civilian casualties and collateral damage that accompanies urban warfare. Moreover, the use of precision guided munitions is often cited as a way in which Western militaries limit civilian casualties, collateral damage, and adhere to International Humanitarian Law. Unfortunately, historical analysis of post-Cold War precision strike-laden warfare tells another story.⁵¹ Warfighting strategies underpinned by precision strike, contrary to the laudatory narratives, prove just as destructive, if not more destructive, than conflicts without precision strike.⁵²

Proxy force employ is another byproduct of risk management in armed conflict. As states look to offset and ameliorate the costs associated with armed conflict that have increasingly sought to use proxies to bring that vision to reality. Proxy wars – in which multiple proxy strategies are being utilized by states to supporting their self-interested policy objectives – are on the rise since the end of the Cold War.⁵³

Moreover, the impact of proxy utilization on an operating environment is often overlooked in proxy war and urban warfare scholarship. Proxies are often third parties who are not concerned with International Humanitarian Law or the negative consequences of their actions on their principal's policy objectives or strategic military objectives. A state's use of proxies often exacerbates collateral damage and the loss of civilian life in urban operating environments. Moreover, because proxies are not a state's own military forces, states haphazardly throw their proxies into situations in which annihilation is omnipresent. Analysts Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds highlight this point by articulating Russia's use of

⁴⁹ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 94.

⁵⁰ Olivier Schmitt, "Wartime Paradigms and the Future of Western Military Powers," *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, no. 2 (2020): 5.

⁵¹ Amos Fox, "Precision Gone Wild," *RUSI Journal* (Forthcoming).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *RUSI Journal*/Vol. 158, no. 2 (2013): 42-43.



Wagner Group proxy forces in Bakhmut as 'meatgrinder' tactics.⁵⁴ The same pattern is present in Russia's employment of Wagner during the battle for Mariupol.⁵⁵

This pattern was also seen during the US's use of Iraqi Security Forces as proxy land forces during Operation Inherent Resolve. The term 'meatgrinder' might well do justice in characterizing how the US encouraged the Iraqi Security Forces to operate during the battle of Mosul. Watling and Reynolds are again helpful here. They point to the fact that the Iraqi's Counter Terrorism Service, or CTS, was often the spearhead of operations in Mosul, which resulted in a casualty rate greater than 100% for battalion commanders during the siege of Mosul.⁵⁶

Although challenging to prove, another hypothesis regarding proxy force employment is that the strategy extends, or elongates, a conflict. Similar to a state's willingness to accept 'meatgrinder' tactics when proxy forces are their predominant land force, states appear less interested in accelerating a conflict to a decisive political outcome in conflicts dominated by proxy strategies. The same logic carries over from the 'meatgrinder' scenario. States' domestic and strategic risk tolerance is greater when proxy forces are used because the negative consequences that often accompany a long war – to include a deluge of that state's uniformed troops coming home in body bags – goes unnoticed by that state's domestic audience. Likewise, strategic concerns are often brushed aside because the operations or outcomes in question are 'someone else' or 'unruly partners', and not the actions of the state itself. Conflict elongation is the nature drift that each of these considerations embodies.

What about the technology's potential impact related to risk and urban warfare? Many commenters suggest that robots, autonomous systems, artificial intelligence, and machine learning will allow states to overcome the challenges of urban warfare. Precision guided munitions, both armed and unarmed reconnaissance drones, and sophisticated sensors have not yet been proven able to sidestep the inherent advantages associated with operating in urban environments. Technology might be able to circumvent the urban operating environment's ability to hide combatants amongst and within infrastructure and civilian populations. However, the cost of developing that technology might surpass the threshold of acceptability for even the most financially robust states. The end state nonetheless remains to be seen.

To summarize this section, risk is, and will remain, a significant strategic consideration for policymakers and military professionals forced to address the reality of urban warfare. Neither proxy strategies, nor technological innovation have made significant progress in decreasing the general risk associated with urban warfare. As policymakers and military professionals look to address urban warfare in contemporary and future armed conflict, risk should be the first among peers when developing strategy.

⁵⁴ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *Meatgrinder: Russian Tactics in the Second Year of Its Invasion of Ukraine*, (London: RUSI, 2023), 3-8.

⁵⁵ Mike Eckel, "The Bakhmut Meat Grinder: Russian Troops Are Pummeling This Donbas City. It's Unclear Why," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 13 December 2022, accessed 4 November 2023, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-bakhmut-russia-assault-invasion-analysis/32174980.html>.

⁵⁶ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, *War by Others' Means: Developing Effective Partner Force Capacity Building* (London: RUSI, 2021), 23-26.



Conclusion

Urban warfare presents a unique challenge for policymakers, military professionals, and scholars. Using the Ends-Ways-Means-Risk heuristic to examine those challenges is a useful thought exercise because it dissects the problem from a combined standpoint, utilizing theoretical ideas and balancing those with the realities that urban operating environments present. The ways of urban warfare, today, and for the foreseeable future, remain limited. There are only so many ways in which to address a military problem within an urban environment. Moreover, resources both bind a combatant's potential ways, yet afford the belligerent a range of military options, provided the assets to unlock those options are on one's resource menu, or readily available through external supporters.

Ends, like ways, are bound by a state's means. If a state does not possess the resources required to generate a preferential outcome in urban operating environments, then that outcome is not feasible, and must therefore be discarded. Moreover, one's ends must also account for a belligerent force's military operations. If an adversary is operating in such a way that makes one's policy or strategic military ends out of reach, then that too must be accounted for during the strategy process at both policy and military levels.

Risk, however, is the most paradoxical strategic element. The methods to decrease the risk to one's own forces and to unlocking the ends of a state's policy often create other significant challenges. Those challenges tend to include creating high casualties amongst involved military forces, high rates of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and conflict elongation. Conflict elongation, by virtue of expanding the duration of a conflict, also increases military and civilian casualties, and collateral damage. Taking a step back from the individual outcomes in urban warfare – increased military and civilian casualties, collateral damage, and a conflict's longer duration – finds that armed conflict within urban areas tend toward being defined as wars of attrition.

As a result, states wrestling with strategic considerations regarding urban warfare must realize that urban warfare is, and will always be, attritional. Moreover, given the rise in urban warfare in modern armed conflict, and the likelihood of that trend continuing for the foreseeable future, Western policy-makers and military professions would be better served not advocating for smaller, lighter land forces. Rather, they would do right by their respective militaries by investing in robust land forces with increasingly larger margins for error to account for the known, and unknown, challenges associated with rigorous urban warfare.

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