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# **A New Kind of War: Strategic Culture and the War on Terrorism**

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This paper utilises practice theory to show how 'the war on terrorism' is redefining the United States' notion of what war is and how war is to be fought. By terming the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 as acts of war the Bush administration wanted not only wanted mobilise support for military action, it also wanted to show its commitment to fight what it believed to be 'a new kind of war'. The Bush administration was determined to transform the United States military to meet what it believed to be the threats of the future. Thus '9-11' was the beginning of a new discourse on war, which brought together two new warfare practices: the high-tech warfare of the United States and the network based terrorism of al-Qaida. Far too often constructivists study the new discourse of the Bush administration on its own, but the discourse has to be placed in the context of the new practices of warfare. By using practice theory this paper combines the analysis of practice and discourse in a study of culture. In times of change, culture fragments into 'ideologies' that offer new discourses and practices. Following 9-11, the paper argues, the Bush administration produced an ideology of military transformation, which redefines the strategic culture of the United States.



## **A New Kind of War: Strategic Culture and the War on Terrorism**

'It's a new kind of war,' president George W. Bush informed the American public following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on 11 September 2001.<sup>1</sup> Thus began the 'war on terrorism' which is redefining the American notion of what war is and how war is to be fought. Defining the attack as acts of war, the Bush administration stated that terrorism was no longer an acceptable risk of late-modern life but an existential threat to the security of the United States. The Bush administration was acutely aware that a new kind of war demanded a new capabilities and strategies. The war on terrorism has thus become the catalyst for a military transformation in the United States which is going to have far reaching consequences for how and why the United States uses its military capabilities. In fact, it is a transformation that is going to redefine the very definition of military power and how it relates to other means for achieving security.

The events of 11 September is a catalyst for a process of action and reaction in which the security policies of the United States government is determined by a need to respond to a changing security environment. This is a process in which the understanding of concepts such as war, security and terrorism is instrumental for policy. But this process cannot be understood exclusively in terms of how the Bush administration is redefining these concepts. The events of 11 September 2001 illustrate how the actions of the new type of enemies which al-Qaida epitomises make demands on policy and the perceptions on which it is based. Taking its point of departure in 'practice theory', this paper analyse the dialectic between action and reaction in the war on terrorism. The Bush administration's policy is analysed as a deliberate attempt to change the strategic culture of the United States in order to respond to new practices of warfare in a globalised world.

Strategic culture is the most often used to describe what constrains security actors from making certain choices. This paper shows how dramatic events like the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington can unsettle culture so culture become an ideology used to enable security actors to make a new type of choices to respond to threats materialised in the events.

The following section elaborates on the relationship between events, change and strategic culture. The second section describes how the events of 11 September 2001 brought home a new practice of conflict to the United States which made the Bush administration initiate a discourse of 'a new kind of war'. The third section describes the new strategic culture the Bush administration is pursuing; a culture defined by a practice of asymmetry and a discourse of military transformation.

### **Event, Change and Strategic Culture**

The events of 11 September 2001 have become a standard reference so fast that the strains of repetition soon shortened the date to the grim '9-11'. '9-11' was repeated so often because the event itself was believed to inaugurate a new chapter of history, like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the end of the Second World War. William Sewell argues that such 'historical events' are characterised by a definitiveness, which make their occurrence undeniable. Furthermore, historical events are 'recognised as notable by contemporaries' and 'results in a durable transformation of structures'.<sup>2</sup> The terrorist attacks

did not only have a very definite sequence, as they started with the hijacking of the planes and ended with the collapse of the Twin Towers, the event was very public because it also most immediately became the subject of live television coverage. People all over the world watched the event and that made it a part of their experience of life. No matter how the events were interpreted, the reactions of so many people should have some kind of multiplying effect. Perhaps the fact that millions watched it on television made the terrorist attacks instant history.

William Sewell notes that historical events are driven by 'a deep sense of insecurity, a real uncertainty about how to get on with life'.<sup>3</sup> This is also true of 9-11. How was Americans ever to be safe, if terrorists could strike in the heart of New York? The political challenge for the United States government was how to return what Anthony Giddens refers to as 'ontological security' to the American public.<sup>4</sup> Five days later, on the day of remembrance for the victims of 9-11, President Bush urged Americans to return to their work. 'Today, millions of Americans mourned and prayed, and tomorrow we go back to work,' the president said.<sup>5</sup> He said so partly out of fear that the attacks would spark a recession and partly to assure them that they could get on with life as before because the government would protect them against future attacks. 'My administration has a job to do, and we're going to do it. We will rid the world of the evil-doers,' the president assured the public.<sup>6</sup>

Sewell calls it the 'cascading character of events'.<sup>7</sup> Events become history because of the number of events that follow from the initial event, as well as by the way an event redefines the way we understand these events. Sewell bases his argument on an analysis of the French revolution arguing that storming the Bastille redefined the very notion of revolution.<sup>8</sup> In the case of 9-11, the terrorist attacks lead to a 'war on terrorism' that may reconfigure the concept of war itself.

In order to investigate this claim further, we have to take a closer look on what events are in fact changing. Sewell argues that events transforms the cultural schemas by which actors defines the meaning of their action, the resources (material or immaterial), which gives them reasons and means for action, and the power that regulate access to resources and the legitimate of cultural schemas.<sup>9</sup> So arguing, Sewell places his conception of historic events within 'practice theory'.<sup>10</sup> Basically, practice theory offers a way to overcome the controversy whether one should study what 'people are thinking' or what 'people are doing'. In the words of Ann Swidler:

'Practice theory moves the level of sociological attention "down" from the conscious ideas and values to the physical and the habitual. But this move is complemented by a move "up," from ideas located in individual consciousness to the impersonal arena of "discourse"'.<sup>11</sup>

Practice may be defined as the ways in which social actors engage each other in action, whereas discourse refers to the concepts whereby social actors understand the environment in which they act. Together practice and discourse constitute a culture. Swidler defines culture as the 'tool kit' that enables actors to form strategies of actions.<sup>12</sup> Swidler's definition of culture explicitly departs from what John March and Johan Olsen describes as a logic of expected outcome in favour of a logic of appropriate action.<sup>13</sup> Swidler sees 'culture's casual significance not in defining ends of action, but in providing

cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action'.<sup>14</sup> Cultural studies describe *how* actors act rather than *why* and for what purpose. However, practice theorists like Swidler ask the how-question different from most social constructivist studies<sup>15</sup> because they include discourse as well as practice in the analysis. As Barry Barnes notes, 'the practice should be treated as involving thought and action together.'<sup>16</sup> By including practice cultural studies are able to overcome the critique most often levelled at constructivist studies of international relations that they analyse ideas without showing how these ideas translate to political action.<sup>17</sup> Thus Iver Neumann argues that by embracing 'the practice turn' constructivism within IR can move beyond reflection on how the IR discourse shape policy, which followed from IR's 'linguistic turn' in the mid 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

War is one of those 'realities' most often called upon to illustrate the temporary and superficial nature of social constructions.<sup>19</sup> War will wash social institutions and discourses away, the argument goes.<sup>20</sup> However, comparative studies of military history suggest that 'culture is [...] a prime determinant of the nature of warfare'.<sup>21</sup> Though the ways of warfare is determined by culture, warfare itself might still be said to constitute the reality a discourse on how to achieve security must measure against. Focusing exclusively on discourse, constructivist studies of security policy risk presenting security policies as self-fulfilling prophecies that produce the radical others they claim defend themselves against.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, a discourse analysis might only be able to study international phenomena organised in a benign political environment, such as NATO where the actors in Karl Deutsch's formulation solve their problems by 'institutionalised procedures, without resort to large-scale physical force'.<sup>23</sup>

Studying practice as well as discourse enables one to take account of the issues on which security actors are reacting and to take account of impact of their policies. Furthermore, taking practice into account 'makes it possible to talk about the relative skill of performers of practices as well as of the quality of the performance itself', Iver Neumann argues.<sup>24</sup> Does a given culture provide the right tools for the job? This questioned cannot be answered by a discourse analysis in itself because such an analysis focuses on one subject's understanding of events only. This is a very rewarding way of studying the formation of foreign and security policy perceptions, but it does not explain the way events shape policy. The notion that war is real is in itself part of strategic discourse because war is one area where events may make something part of your practice, which may not be part of your discourse.

One example of this is the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The Aztec practice of war was ritual because Aztec discourse prescribed a religious function to battle. When Cortez' army arrived in Mexico the Aztec faced an enemy which sought a decisive battle and who's aims where those of political conquest. A discourse analysis can show the difference in the two cultures and narrate the perceptions of self and Other among Spaniards and Aztecs, but it takes a cultural approach to study the practice that developed when Spaniards and Aztecs fought each other. This practice of fighting forced the Aztecs to re-evaluate their discursive understanding of the Spaniards (they were no longer conceived as gods, as they were upon arrival) and transformed the Aztecs notion of war and its purpose.<sup>25</sup> However, transforming their strategic culture did not help the Aztecs because they changed too little too, so in spite of great numerical superiority they were not able to defeat the Spaniards in battle.

Practice theory makes it possible to study how war transforms discourse. Noting how events such as war or acts of war transforms culture Ann Swidler distinguishes between *settled* and *unsettled* cultures. Sewell points out how events create insecurity and uncertainty. Swidler shows how in such unsettled periods culture is no longer homogenous and implicitly constraining action, but culture disintegrate into 'competing ways of organizing action are developed or contending for dominance'.<sup>26</sup> Culture becomes 'ideologies – explicitly, articulated, highly organized meaning systems (both political and religious) – [which] *establish* new styles or strategies of action'.<sup>27</sup>

Studies of strategic culture have so far focused mainly on settled cultures.<sup>28</sup> Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff observe that 'studies in military culture thus far have concentrated on examining how norms specific to national or organizational communities have produced behavioral pattern peculiar to these communities, such as national strategic styles or organizational ways of warfare'.<sup>29</sup> The present debate on the RMA in the United States leads Farrell and Terriff to point to the need for the study of 'planned change' in culture as well as the effects of 'external shock'.<sup>30</sup> Planned change originates on the level of discourse and 'external shocks' on the level of practice. 9-11 shows how events can combine the two in a dialectic of the moment in which discourse changes practice and practice changes discourse.

In this paper I will argue that defining the events of 11 September 2001 as war, the Bush administration identified terrorism as a part of the practice war and set out to produce a strategic response to this new type of warfare. The strategic culture was unsettled by what had happened and in order to recreate ontological security the Bush administration promoted a new strategic cultural ideology.

### **War on Terrorism**

The Bush administration defined the attacks of 11 September 2001 as acts of war because of the response the administration believed to be required. Such a response could not be accommodated within the existing strategic culture. Declaring the attacks of 11 September 'acts of war'.<sup>31</sup> President Bush mobilised the existing discourse of warfare in order to respond, but had to change this discourse in order to join the war he believed al-Qaida had begun that September morning. On 12 September 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell was asked on CNN to explain the consequences of perceiving the attacks an act of war. Secretary Powell answered:

'It means that we will use our full resources to go after those who are responsible for this. And it is not an action that will be over in a week or two. This has got to be a full-scale assault on terrorism. And it has to be fought on the political front. It has to be fought on the diplomatic front, the military front and the intelligence front.'<sup>32</sup>

Powell defined war in terms of commitment. The 'full resources' of the United States were to be mobilised to punish those responsible for the attacks of the day before. Secretary Powell assured the American people that these resources would be actively used in a 'full-scale assault' on terrorism. The metaphor invokes the image of large-scale infantry attacks, but President Bush made it clear that 'this is a conflict without battlefields or beachheads'.<sup>33</sup>

And on CNN, Powell explained that the war on terrorism was multidimensional: the war was to be fought by military means, as well as the means of politics, diplomacy and intelligence. This was not a war like the one Powell had supervised as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff against Iraq 10 years before. It was a new kind of war.

This illustrates that the administration regarded speaking of war as an act.<sup>34</sup> The notion of a speech act is not merely a theoretical explanation of what happened, it reflects the Bush administration's understanding of what it was doing. As Secretary Powell explained, 'I am speaking about war; the President is speaking about war as a way of focusing the energy of American and the energy of international community.'<sup>35</sup> That speaking of war constituted an action was emphasised by the substantial number reactions to the administration's position. Speaking of war was debated as an important political event. Analysing this debate shows how in discussing war the discourse of war was redefined.

Michael Howard argued that the Bush administration focused its energy the wrong place by invoking the rules of war. Declaring war was 'a terrible and irrevocable error' in ontological as well as epistemological terms, Howard argued. On the ontological level, Howard argued that the Bush administration gave terrorists a new ontological status by making them belligerents. As the editor of the standard English version of *On War*,<sup>36</sup> Michael Howard was keenly aware that according to the modern strategic culture a belligerent was a legitimate unit of the international order. By declaring al-Qaida capable of conducting acts of war and taking up the challenge to fight a war with it, the Bush administration was taking part in a Hegelian struggle for recognition. A struggle in which the United States by declaring war had awarded al-Qaida with the same status as a sovereign state. This would legitimate al-Qaida at a time when the core of a strategy to defeat the terror network ought to have been to delegitimize it.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, Howard believed that the ontological misconception of the status of the terrorists led to misunderstanding of the epistemology of terrorism: "'Terrorism' is itself simply a technique for waging war, so it makes little sense to talk about 'waging war' against it'.<sup>38</sup> *The Independent* supported that argument concluding that if George Bush could declare war on 'terrorism' following 11 September, then President Roosevelt ought to have declared war on bombing following Pearl Harbor.<sup>39</sup>

According to the modern strategic culture there could be no 'war on terror', but practice questioned the relevance of this culture. Concluding that the war on terrorism could not be a war in the legal sense, Machel Berlin argued that 'all this definitional talk is of no consequence when the legal concept of war has long been overtaken by the reality of international and intra-national hostilities, and by the activities of terrorist'.<sup>40</sup> The events of 11 September were too momentous for the strategic discourse to have any relevance as a 'tool kit' for achieving security, if it did not take the new practices of terrorism into account. 'The meaning of "defense" is different today,' Representative R.L. Livingston told CNN; 'I am different. We are different. The whole nation, even the world, is different, all because of these horrific acts.' This is not to say that strategic culture changed instantly on that September morning. The very point is that terrorism had been changing the practice of conflict for some time. Discourse had been taking account of these changes in the 1990s, as the security community was debating the 'new

threats' in the 1990s. In 1999, the bipartisan Hart-Rudman commission on national security concluded that:

'States, terrorists, and other disaffected groups, will acquire weapons of mass destruction and disruption, and some will use them. Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers.'<sup>41</sup>

Before 11 September 2001, this discursive awareness of the transformation of security practices did not translate into fundamentally new practices of across the whole spectrum of security policies. Therefore the discourse and practice of 'national security' continued to guide American security policy. Only when an event unsettled the terms of the strategic culture did the evolution of a new security discourse and practice transform into bids for a new strategic culture. As Senator Kerry told CNN on 16 September: 'There is a lot of thinking to do, there's a huge amount of adjusting to do.'<sup>42</sup> The ability to manage the transformation of the strategic practice by developing new discourses and practices of security became the criteria for political success. President Bush was acutely aware of this: 'I understand it's a new kind of war. And this government will adjust'.<sup>43</sup> By terming the attacks of 11 September acts of war, the president signalled that he was aware for the transformation of strategic practice. By making military transformation in general and the war on terrorism in particular pivotal to his political agenda, George Bush was able to deflect possible criticism of the government for not having anticipated the attacks and present his administration as one able to manage the threats of the future. In times of change, governments' are measured by their ability to adjust to changing circumstances. Therefore the Bush administration seized the challenge and made the formulation of a new strategic culture its mission.

What happened on 11 September was 'not just an act of war', according to Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, 'it was a window into our future.'<sup>44</sup> Wolfowitz argued that the events of 11 September was no just a single instance, but the example of a new strategic practice. The United States government had to develop the conceptual and practical tools to deal with it. It is striking how the opponents of terming the response to the events of 11 September a war used history to make their point, whereas the Bush administration justified its policy in terms of the future. Secretary Wolfowitz described the future this way:

'A future where new enemies visit violence on us in startling ways; a future in which our cities are among the battlefields and our people are among the targets; a future in which more and more adversaries will possess the capability to bring war to the American homeland; a future where the old methods of deterrence are no longer sufficient – and new strategies and capabilities are needed to ensure peace and security.'<sup>45</sup>

The future strategic practice described by Wolfowitz made *terrorism* an enemy. Because the US government regarded terrorism a discourse as well as a practice, terrorism was *not* constructed as a means that could be placed in the service of any end. Al-Qaida's discourse of Islamic fundamentalism and its practice of terrorism were regarded as two sides of the same coin. On the discursive level, the Bush administration believed al-Qaida turned against what it perceived to be Western hegemony spurred by the process of globalisation. As such al-Qaida was constructed as a challenge to Western

values and the world order they embodied like Communism and Nazism had been. 'We have seen their kind before,' President Bush declared, 'they are the heirs to the murderous ideologies of the 20th century.'<sup>46</sup> In terms of discourse, 'terrorism' was an enemy no more abstract than 'communism' or 'nazism' had been. Thus the Bush administration regarded terrorism as an anti-globalisation ideology based on a fundamentalist reading of Islam. On the level of practice, the civilian infrastructure of globalisation enabled al-Qaida to conduct large-scale, world-wide operations at very low costs. The abstract reference to the enemy thus signalled a concern for the new capabilities for mass-violence globalisation gave *any* enemy of the United States. In the words, of Secretary Wolfowitz:

'Along with the globalization that is creating interdependence among the world's free economies, there is a parallel globalization of terror, in which rouge states and terrorist organizations share information, intelligence, technology, weapons materials and know-how.'<sup>47</sup>

Globalisation provided reasons as well as resources. Neither could be denied al-Qaida, because the West believed its own peace and prosperity depended upon globalisation.<sup>48</sup> With globalisation the enabling condition of the terrorist attack, there was every reason for the United States government to believe that 'today's terrorist threat is a precursor of even greater threats to come'.<sup>49</sup> In time, globalisation would enable other persons or groups to translate their specific grievances into generalised violence. Furthermore, globalisation proliferate new technologies of conflict enabling other states or groups to take violent action against the United States on an unprecedented scale. Thus the threat was an abstract noun because it proliferated in space and, in terms of time, the threat was projected into the future. The threat was not only al-Qaida, but the other organisations or states to which al-Qaida was networked, as well as the future networks or states which globalisation might enable to attack the United States. In face of such abstract threats, the United States government could not possibly present specific policies or weapons systems as the answer, it had to present a policy framework for managing such threats. A new strategic culture would constitute such a framework.

### **New Strategic Culture**

Culture is a 'tool kit' enabling one to organise action by means of discourse and practice. The strategic culture, which the Bush administration champions, is based on a discourse of military transformation and an understanding of practice in terms of asymmetry. 11 September had shown the dangers of asymmetric attacks. The political challenge was to provide a discourse that enabled the defence establishment to conceptualise the new threats and develop new strategies to meet them. The expeditious conduct of the campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 became the Bush administration's best argument for its blueprint for a new American strategic culture. As the success of the Gulf War of 1990-1991 had spurred the debate on the RMA, the Afghan campaign illustrated the power of RMA-technology in the face of asymmetrical threats. The successful conduct of the campaign in Afghanistan thus made military action against Iraq a much more promising option and thus strengthened the hand of those in the Bush administration that had continuously argued for the intervention against Saddam Huessin. In theoretical terms, the practice of warfare had a powerful impact on discourse.

### *Asymmetry*

The United States and its enemies share a practice of war, but they do not share the culture. Where modern generals could reasonably expect their opponents to fight by the same practice as they did, post-modern strategists are fighting enemies very unlikely themselves. For that reason war does not constitute a symmetrical learning process for the combatants. Modern armed forces were very much alike because they shared a practice in which a fierce competition meant that only those able to adopt the opponent's successful organisational, strategic, tactical or operational innovations were victorious. Thus organisational features like general staffs were quickly copied from the Prussian original 19th century and in the 1930s the German army copied British innovations in tank-warfare.<sup>50</sup> Today, the US armed forces have little to learn from al-Qaida. Not only is their situation asymmetrical, but the culture of these two warfighting organisations negate one another. Unlike modern armies, they do not regard each other as legitimate 'colleagues', but define themselves in opposition to one another. It is hardly a valid argument in the Pentagon that one should fight in a given way because al-Qaida does it with great success.

Asymmetry goes both ways. When the RMA discourse came into being after the Gulf War the apologists of RMA focused on the asymmetric advantage the United States enjoyed in terms of RMA technology and strategies. Terrorism is one of first examples of how practice circumvent this advantage by using asymmetry against the United States. The RMA discourse prepared the United States to fight the perfect Clausewitzian battle, but the enemies of the United States wisely avoided such a battle. Instead they took the battle to the United States.

'Everything in war is very simple,' Carl von Clausewitz noted, 'but the simplest thing is difficult.'<sup>51</sup> In one of the greatest passages of *On War*, Clausewitz takes his reader on a trip from the edge of the battlefield to its centre in order to show how the ability to ascertain what is happening and making clear-headed decisions gradually diminishes, at the same time as weather, terrain and logistics limits the number of things it is actually possible to do.<sup>52</sup> Clausewitz terms it friction and argued friction makes warfare like walking in water: the simple tasks of battle are extremely difficult to execute.<sup>53</sup> What if one could lift this 'fog of war'? Then one could precisely identify and destroy the enemy's centre of gravity. One could make war simple for oneself and extremely difficult for the enemy. When the Gulf War of 1991-1992 started the RMA discourse, RMA was seen as a way to lift the fog of war. 'Vastly reducing the fog of war,'<sup>54</sup> then Secretary of Defence William Cohen argued, information technology will enable the United States' armed forces 'to collect and distribute a steady flow of information to US forces throughout the battlespace, while denying the enemy the ability to do the same'.<sup>55</sup> The US military terms this information system 'the system of systems'.<sup>56</sup> The system of systems is to integrate existing military systems (i.e., tanks or aircraft carriers) into a single information system that will allow them 'dominant battlespace awareness'.<sup>57</sup> With that awareness forces will no longer need to take the road Clausewitz described. Not knowing what lay ahead, and with less than perfect control of forces in the heat of battle, Western militaries have traditionally massed forces to overwhelm any obstacle ahead.<sup>58</sup> The system of systems makes that unnecessary. 'Instead of relying on massed forces and sequential operations,' the Joint Chiefs of Staff's *Joint Vision 2010* states, 'we will achieve massed effects in other ways.'<sup>59</sup> By removing friction it becomes

possible to apply the right force, at the right place and at the right time. It becomes possible for US forces, Secretary Cohen argued, 'to manoeuvre and engage the enemy at the times and places of our choosing throughout the entire battlespace.'<sup>60</sup>

With an asymmetric advantage as great as that of the United States, the gravest danger the United States faces is to be deprived of this advantage. *The Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of 1997 notes that 'U.S. dominance in the conventional military arena may encourage adversaries to use such asymmetric means to attack our forces and interests overseas and Americans at home'.<sup>61</sup> This was exactly what al-Qaida did. In January 2001 Osama bin Laden recited a poem on how an al-Qaida suicide squad rammed the USS Cole with a dinghy filled with explosives killing 17 US sailors. The poem not only shows the al-Qaida leader's fascination with the technology of his opponent, but also his belief in the hubristic nature the power of the RMA:

'A destroyer, even the brave might fear,  
She inspires horror in the harbour and the open sea,  
She goes into the waves flanked by arrogance, haughtiness and false might,  
To her doom she progresses slowly, clothed in a huge illusion,  
Awaiting her is a dinghy, bobbing in the waves.'<sup>62</sup>

Osama bin Laden follows a military strategy that transcends the Clausewitzian notion of a symmetrical battle. Where Clausewitz used water as a metaphor for what comes in the way of 'real' war, the ancient Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu uses water as a metaphor for war itself. 'An army may be likened to water,' Sun Tzu states in his *The Art of War*, 'for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness.'<sup>63</sup> Sun Tzu rejects the direct approach (Cheng) in favour of the indirect approach (Ch'i).<sup>64</sup> Instead of offering battle, Sun Tzu argues that one should avoid battle, unless one is absolutely certain to win. Otherwise one should focus on depriving the enemy the possibility for carrying out its strategy.

The United States' strategy is to use the system of system to achieve 'full-spectrum dominance'.<sup>65</sup> Terrorism is the perfect asymmetric strategy against this. The United States may dominate the battle-space, but al-Qaida takes the battle to the civilian sphere in which the RMA technology offers little protection. Thus, al-Qaida makes it impossible for the United States to defend itself on symmetrical terms; and being a transnational network al-Qaida does not present a centre of gravity for the United States to strike back at.<sup>66</sup> President Bush called it 'cowardly'<sup>67</sup> that the terrorists attacked civilian targets and afterwards hid in the 'shadows',<sup>68</sup> but from al-Qaida could not possible offer an open battle if it wanted to strike at the United States.

The attacks on 11 September 2001 thus presented a challenge to the RMA discourse. By beginning the RMA the United States has crowded out any opposition on the symmetrical level, leaving it for its enemies to fight asymmetrical battles. Thus, the practice the RMA creates is not the perfect Clausewitzian battle promised by the initial RMA discourse. Faced with the new practice of terrorism, the RMA discourse adjusted to asymmetrical battles.

### *Military Transformation*

The war in Afghanistan constituted a 'reality check' on the RMA discourse. The reality was asymmetric in the sense that the United States and its enemies were fighting by different military cultures. Practice made the most obvious show of this difference in terms of the technology employed on their side. The bulk of American firepower was high-tech platforms in the air, while the Afghans', friends as well as foes, most important fighting tools was pick-up trucks and small arms. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld believes that one of the most important achievements of the campaign was the United States' military culture's ability to combine the two practices. Rumsfeld refers again and again to the battle of Mazar-e-Sharif on 9 November 2001. The battle involved American aircraft bombing Taliban positions in the town of Mazar-e-Sharif with advanced munitions guided to their target by special forces on the ground. The special forces were on the one hand guiding the most sophisticated ordnance, while they on the other hand were fighting on horse back with their Afghan allies in what Secretary Rumsfeld likes to refer to as 'the first cavalry attack of the 21st century'.<sup>69</sup> As such, Secretary Rumsfeld believes the battle of Mazar-e-Sharif to be a 'transformational battle'.<sup>70</sup>

A transformational battle is a very important part of the RMA-literature where battles serve to date and illustrate the decisive advantages of new technologies or doctrines.<sup>71</sup> In the paper that inaugurated the discourse on RMA, Andrew Marshall of the US Defense Department thus compared the Gulf War to the battle of Cambrai in 1917 in which tanks were used for the first time.<sup>72</sup> To Donald Rumsfeld, the battle of Mazar-e-Sharif taught a similar lesson in military transformation:

'It showed that a revolution in military affairs is about more than building high tech weapons, though that is certainly part of it. It's also about ways of thinking, and new ways of fighting.'<sup>73</sup>

In Vietnam and, more recently, in Somalia the United States was not able to utilise its technological advantages because it failed to shape the battle according to its strategic culture.<sup>74</sup> In Afghanistan, the United States was able to utilise its technological advantages because it took better account of the local strategic context. What make Rumsfeld most proud was the American forces ability to fit in the existing strategic context (e.g. fighting on horse back), while using the power in the air as a force multiplier that allowed the United States allies to defeat the Taliban forces. As the battle of Cambrai had shown the offensive possibilities of mechanised formations, the battle of Mazar-e-Sharif had shown the importance of transforming the United States' armed forces into a network defined by missions.

The events of 11 September was pivotal for propelling the United States armed forces into a network culture. 'We live in [an] age,' Secretary Wolfowitz argued citing 11 September as an example of this, 'in which the availability of the means of conducting surprise or making surprises abounds.'<sup>75</sup> Globalisation provides a civilian infrastructure that enables non-state actors to project large-scale violence across great distance. Furthermore, globalisation facilitates the proliferation of military technology (including technology of the production of weapons of mass-destruction) to regimes hostile to the United States. The practices of globalisation transform the discourse of threats. Ian Roxborough concludes that "'globalization" has

become a code-word for a presumed military challenge that is very bit as menacing as “communism” was once held to be.<sup>76</sup> Actually, globalisation is regarded more menacing than communism because globalisation is defined as a practice determining social development in the West itself, whereas Cold War discourse found communism an external ideological threat.<sup>77</sup>

Because the capabilities of potential adversaries are in a process of constant change, it is no longer possible to deter adversaries. First, globalisation empowers non-state organisations with capabilities only states had before. The costs of entering the business of war have thus being lowered dramatically and therefore it seems logical to assume that a lot of new actors will enter. This makes it difficult to predict who will constitute a threat, but, secondly, this also makes it difficult to deter these new groups.<sup>78</sup> As you do not know who your enemies are and what their capabilities are, it is difficult to mount a credible deterrence. Third, because the Bush administration has defined the new terrorist enemy as a heir to the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, the administration believes that the these groups fundamentally challenges the power and identity of the United States. In the view of the US government, the terrorists grievances with the United States are such that they cannot compromise – with no compromise option there is little possibility for deterrence.

States hostile to the United States benefit from the same tendencies of globalisation that allow non-state actors to enter the strategic arena. States may either use the same tactics as non-state actors, thus drastically reducing the costs of striking at the United States, or states may benefit for the proliferation of technologies for warfare. These practices are translated into a discourse of pre-emptive strategy by the Bush administration. The president’s National Security Strategy of September 2002 thus states:

‘The United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today’s threats, and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries’ choice of weapons, do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first.’<sup>79</sup>

If its adversaries are not to strike first, the argument goes, the United States must to strike first. This strategy of pre-emptive defence was not only the result of the Bush administration’s ‘unilateralism’, but rather the operative core of a new strategic culture based on the practice of globalisation. Knowing that the number and type of adversaries, as well as their capabilities, would proliferate in time, the *Quadrennial Defense Review* stated the need for a new ‘defense strategy [...] built around the concept of shifting to a “capabilities-based” approach to defense’.<sup>80</sup> This approach focuses on *how* an adversary might fight rather than whom that adversary might be or where he would pick a fight. Such an approach required the United States to transform its military in pace with the transformation of capabilities among its adversaries, the QDR concluded:

‘It requires identifying capabilities that U.S. military forces will need to deter and defeat adversaries who will rely on surprise, deception and asymmetric warfare to achieve their objectives.’<sup>81</sup>

The United States armed forces have to become a network-based organisation in order to shadow the capabilities developed by potential adversaries and to scramble the right set of forces to meet an actual adversary. It is in the difference between the potential and the actual adversary the dangers of this strategy lies. What if the United States is not able to match the capabilities developed by potential adversaries? Military research and development is extremely costly and time consuming. The results of modernisation programmes only show after considerable time. Is that the time when the capabilities are needed? Or will it be clear at that time that an adversary has followed a different path of military transformation, thus producing capabilities the United States is not able to match? Military transformation is a shaky foundation to build future security on. The Bush administration's solution to present insecurity, a strategic culture of military transformation, defines a new set of security issues of pivotal importance. These issues deal with the proliferation of weapons technology and the adoption of new strategies that might undermine US military superiority. In other word, military transformation becomes a security issue in itself.

This is why the Bush administration focused on Iraq in the second stage of the war on terrorism. The Iraqi regime represented what the president refers to as 'the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology'.<sup>82</sup> Where the events of 11 September made a new strategic culture a political necessity, and Afghanistan campaign proved how RMA practices might work within the framework of a network culture, the threat from Iraq became the defining issue for formulating the strategic thinking of the new culture. In focusing on the capabilities on its adversaries, the Bush administration came to define the culture by how its own capabilities were to be used.

## **Conclusions**

Declaring the reaction against the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. a war was a way for the Bush administration to show its commitment to strike back those responsible and mobilise national and international support to do so. One could argue that like the 'war on drugs' or the 'war on poverty' in the 1960s the fight against terrorism got its martial designation because it signalled decisive solutions to problems that in reality eluded quick fixes. As real wars, like those in Korea or Vietnam, were not termed war, one might even argue that terming something war is really a sign of indecisiveness. The political signal of terming a policy a war reflects the mobilising effect of terming something a war. The Bush administration clearly wanted that effect, but the war on terrorism is different from the other American 'wars'. The 'war on drugs' and the 'war on poverty' were discourse disassociated from practice. As the war on terrorism, they were a way to conceptualise the threat from a certain practice, but this discourse was not followed by a new practice on how to deal with the issues of drug abuse and the issues of poverty. As such, they did not change the cultural structures regulating the policies on drug abuse and poverty. One might even argue that they reinforced them.

The war on terrorism, however, is the battle cry for a new strategic ideology that dictates a new culture of warfare. A culture that is based on asymmetrical practice between the United States technological powers and the asymmetrical strategies, such as terrorism, developed to counter US military superiority. Furthermore, the new strategic culture in the United

States is configured by a discourse on military transformation that focuses on how to manage the development of new US capabilities to deal with the proliferation of capabilities to potential enemies of the United States. This new practice and strategy will interact further in the future as the strategies for pre-emption, which follow from the new strategic discourse, will produce new practices that influence threat perceptions. The events of 9-11 have thus set a cascade of events in motion. The first of these may be an American invasion of Iraq.

The war on terrorism shows culture as politics. In IR culture is mostly studied as an intervening variable that prevents actors from acting, as we would otherwise expect. The actions of the Bush administration following 9-11 show that in times of change culture becomes an ideology which can be used to reconfigure the very expectations to the security environment.

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