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COMMENTARY / WORLD

The changing battlefield and winning future conflicts

The powerful supercarrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, the largest warship ever built by Britain, with its crew of 2,500, has now arrived in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean where it is holding joint drills and manoeuvres with units of the Maritime Self-Defense Force.

This great naval rendezvous, which will be joined by contingents from other countries, has received much media coverage and will undoubtedly be an awe-inspiring affair. The immediate purpose is clear and will become clearer still as the carrier strike group, with its fleet of lethal F-35s and its attendant flotilla of protective support vessels, heads on in its journey toward the Taiwan Strait.

It will be one more reminder both that all international waterways must be kept open for peaceful commerce and that attempts to settle disputes and quarrels in the region by force of arms will always be frustrated by equal force and with global backing — China's increasing saber-rattling over Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands being very much in mind.

But behind this classic exercise in deterrence lie much deeper questions about modern power deployment and conflict resolution. Those questions include whether traditional, and invariably costly displays of land and sea power, backed by weaponry of unimaginable power and complexity, are the most effective ways to defeat tyranny and contain terror (the two often allied). And with such power, is it still possible to prevent anarchy and violence in their many new forms, which often spread like skin rashes across the globe and threaten every society in unfamiliar, yet deadly ways.

This demands the kind of continuous campaigning and integrated operating concepts that today's defense strategists, certainly in the U.K. and in America, but in most other democracies as well, are beginning to discuss and develop. Can such military hardware on the scale of aircraft carriers, however heavily armed, win alone against these kinds of new threats that poison from within and undermine and destabilize whole societies?

The importance of such questions is best acutely exemplified at this moment by events in another theater, in this case on land, with the withdrawal of NATO troops (notably American and British) from Afghanistan. There, despite the application of superior outside military force for almost 20 years, and with the expenditures on weaponry and attempts at pacification running into the multibillions of dollars (possibly a trillion in the U.S.'s case), the quagmire of violence persists in which terrorism breeds and instability infects all the countries around it, including China.

Some 2,300 American and 454 young British soldiers have lost their lives fighting in that theater, yet no mission was accomplished. The same dismal reality can be seen in Syria as well as in Libya and Yemen and many other places where the battle can only be won — or lost — in the mind and through methods that require the experts to think quite differently from the past.

Over the last few decades it can be seen how war and war preparation (the best way to ensure peace, as the Romans well knew) have changed in character. Hybrid, gray-zone warfare using unmanned killing machines, cyberattacks, constant hacking, faked news and sustained domestic demoralization campaigns all form part of the changing picture. The most powerful military hardware, on both land and sea, present little beyond just mere gestures against this insidious process.

Big data and artificial intelligence have become the secretive weapons and primary covert methods with which hostile states and their outriders disrupt legitimate governments and peaceful societies.

There is another fundamental problem, or contradiction, to be resolved in managing modern defense and deterrence as well. Big and expensive equipment, such as ships and aircraft, require years of planning, designing and building. This is why military experts and government officials are always calling for long-term strategies so that they can know what to procure and on what to prioritize resources.

Yet technology races ahead and many times invalidates new weapons projects almost before they are off the drawing board. The very nature of the threat and the character of warfare changes and evolves continuously.

This demands ever greater flexibility and resilience (the new favorite word), if a country's national defenses are to remain on the front foot and instantly ready to confront new dangers.

The new and impressive HMS Queen Elizabeth and its sister carrier, the HMS Prince of Wales, are both the product of strategic planning formulated in the British defense review of 1998. Paying for them dug a colossal hole in the U.K.'s defense budget. Yet the world into which they were eventually commissioned, is quite different from anything imagined two decades ago.

There is always a new chapter calling for a new review. And anyway, as the elder German Gen. Helmuth von Moltke long ago observed, no carefully contrived strategic plan ever survives a first encounter with the enemy. Defense planners therefore now face permanent and increasing procurement dilemmas and questions. What should they plan for? What weapons should they design and build to counter the threats that lie years, even decades, ahead?

High visibility, state-of-the-art military hardware may look fearsome, but is it now addressing the real threats, far below the radar, which are gnawing away insistently at free societies and world peace?

Towering warships such as those now sailing the high seas and in the Indian Ocean may look the part of the conqueror. But just a few hundred miles down the east coast of Africa, Tanzania is joining with the Chinese in building an extensive new port. It is just one of many such projects in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

Deterring projects like this, or rivaling them, will come not from sea power, missiles, tanks or the kind of expeditionary forces now leaving Afghanistan. Effecting positive outcomes will come from winning hearts and minds, requiring advanced communications technology, subtle persuasion, intelligence, deep psychological persistence — all enabled by revolutionary innovation.

Meanwhile, completely unmanned warships and submarines are already on the horizon, with the U.S. now in the process of building such weaponry. Perhaps it is too soon to think about virtual warships and carriers, but one can be pretty sure that nothing like HMS Queen Elizabeth will ever be built again.
