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Megacities and Urban Warfare in the 21st Century: The City as the Cemetery of Revolutionaries and Resources

Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla. By David Kilcullen. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-19-023096-8. Figures. Photographs. Notes. Sources cited. Appendix. Pp. x, 342. \$27.95

Blood and Concrete: 21st Century Conflict in Urban Centers and Megacities. By Dave Dilegge, Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and Alma Keshavarz (Editors). Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2019. ISBN 978-1-9845-7375-9. Acronyms, Photos, Figures, Tables, Recommended Reading, Selected References, Notes. Pp. Lx, 705. \$22.99

Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance. By Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen (eds.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-231-18539-4. Maps. Figures. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp.250. \$ 30.00

Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century. By Anthony King. Melford, MA: Polity Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-5095-4365-6. Preface. Figures. Maps. Tables. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. x. 270. \$ 26.95.

Introduction

The world of the twenty-first century and beyond will be more complex, globalized, and interdependent, and it will also be more dangerous. There will be more conflicts in cities than in any other place. As Lt. Col. Craig A. Broyles and Charlotte Richter argued, “there is a greater likelihood that most of the battlefields U.S. forces will face in the future will be urban fights.”¹ Conflicts in different parts of the world will not be an isolated event. It will have repercussions worldwide, especially as megacities become the focus point of those conflicts.

Scholars define megacity as a world city with more than ten million or more inhabitants.² Today, more than half of the world’s population lives in cities. Over the next 30 years, that figure will likely increase to 66 percent.³ Those large population concentrations will be the new urban jungles where military forces will be deployed to fight the subsequent future wars. Those large population concentrations will be deeply interconnected globally, especially given the technological revolution and the Revolution

in Military Affairs (RMA) underway worldwide. Urban security is the new national security. Yet, despite the call to action by the four books here under review, we are still far from fully understanding the intricacies and nuances of major global cities as the new battlefields of the future. As Michael Evans succinctly points out, “the art of war must seek closer interaction with the science of cities.”⁴

The books under review offer a seminal set for urban security researchers and practitioners to understand how megacities are in the rural jungles in the future. The first book reviewed is David Kilcullen’s *Out of the Mountain*, which sets a paradigm shift in urban warfare studies. Kilcullen’s book set the stage for the next decade and called out a missing link of conflicts in the post-9/11 world—the importance of cities as the new battleground.

After reviewing Kilcullen’s *Out of the Mountain*, we continue our study of megacities with an eye-opening anthology edited by colleagues Dave Dilegge, Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and Alma Keshavarz in their fascinating book *Blood and Concrete: 21st Century Conflict in Urban Centers and Megacities*. As conflicts proliferate in megacities, the US military, due to its lack of training or understanding regarding megacities, will pay a heavy price in terms of “blood” as they fight in the “concrete” jungles of the Global South.

Next, we review Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen’s book *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance*. Kaldor and Sassen argue that “the urban built environment has become the equivalent of jungles and mountains—both as a way to hide and evade fighting and as a source of succor and support.”⁵ We conclude our review essay with Anthony King’s *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*. King is a Professor of War Studies at the University of Warwick and a leading authority in warfare. King argues that rebels have long left the mountains and are integral to the megacities’ social fabric. All four books reviewed point to a single concern regarding urban warfare: the “continuing weaknesses of Western strategic studies is the paucity of serious research on the city’s role in armed conflict.”⁶ Let us begin our review.

Out of the Mountains, Into the City

A decade ago, David Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains* offered military practitioners and scholars a new perspective on the nature of future conflicts, given four powerful tectonic forces impacting the twenty-first-century world: population, urbanization, coastal settlement, and connectedness. Fast forward to the 2020s, and Kilcullen's concepts have proven true as battles in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown the importance of a clear understanding of urban warfare.

Kilcullen's thesis is that the cities of the future—primarily coastal, highly urbanized, and heavily populated—will be the central focus of tomorrow's conflicts, which will be heavily impacted by the four megatrends of population growth, urbanization, littoralization, and connectedness. He emphasizes that “more people than ever before in history will be competing for scarcer and scarcer resources in poorly governed areas that lack adequate infrastructure, and these areas will be more and more closely connected to the global system so that local conflict will have far wider effects.”⁷

Within this heavily populated, highly urbanized, littoralized, and connected world,

adversaries are likely to be non-state armed groups, whether criminal or military, or to adopt asymmetric methods of fighting, and even the most conventional hypothetical war scenarios turn out, when closely examined, to involve very significant irregular aspects.⁸

Kilcullen defines nonstate armed groups as “any group that includes armed individuals who apply violence but who aren't members of the regular forces of a nation-state.”⁹ Kilcullen's nonstate armed groups include

urban street gangs, communitarian or sectarian militias, insurgents, bandits, pirates, armed smugglers or drug traffickers, violent organized criminal organizations, warlord armies, and certain paramilitary forces. The term encompasses both combatants and

individuals who don't personally carry arms or use violence but who belong to groups that do.¹⁰

In Kilcullen's analysis, as the four megatrends impact the world, some cities in the developing world will become a breeding ground for conflict. Those cities will become "urban no-go areas," where government presence and authority are minimal, if not nonexistent at all. Those so-called "urban no-go areas" of megacities have become

safe havens for criminal networks or non-state armed groups, creating a vacuum that is filled by local youth who have no shortage of grievances, whether arising from their new urban circumstances or imported from their home villages.¹¹

Kilcullen explains,

rapid urban growth in coastal, underdeveloped areas is overloading economic, social, and governance systems, straining city infrastructure, and overburdening the carrying capacity of cities designed for much smaller populations . . . the implications for future conflict are profound with more people competing for scarcer resources in crowded, under-serviced, and under governed urban areas.¹²

One essential contribution by Kilcullen is his theory of competitive control. Kilcullen defines the theory of competitive control as follows: In regular conflicts (that is, in conflicts where at least one combatant is a nonstate armed group), the local armed actor that a given population perceives as best able to establish a predictable, consistent, wide-spectrum normative system of control is most likely to dominate that population and its residential area.¹³

Kilcullen's theory of competitive control holds that

nonstate armed groups, of many kinds, draw their strength and freedom of action primarily from their ability to manipulate and mobilize populations.

Furthermore, Kilcullen argues nonstate armed groups

use a spectrum of methods from coercion to persuasion, by creating a normative system that makes people feel safe through the predictability and order that it generates.¹⁴

The theory also suggests

a behavioral explanation for how armed groups of all kinds control populations . . . It also suggests that group behaviors may be an emergent phenomenon at the level of the population group, implying that traditional counterinsurgency notions, including “hearts and minds,” may need a rethink.¹⁵

In the following review, we move out of the mountains and into the new century's concrete jungles called the city. The twenty-first-century cities are unique places where an island composed of the wealthy and well-to-do is surrounded by a sea of poverty, despair, and hopelessness coexist side-by-side.

The Urban Jungle of the Twenty-First Century: Long Live the City

Blood and Concrete: 21st Century Conflict in Urban Centers and Megacities, edited by Dave Dilege, Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and Alma Keshavarz, provides a foundation for understanding urban operations and sustaining urban warfare research—this *Small Wars Journal* (SWJ) Anthology documents over a decade of writings on urban conflict.

In addition to essays originally published at SWJ, it adds new content, including an introduction by the editors, a preface on “Blood and Concrete” by David Kilcullen, a foreword “Urban Warfare Studies” by John Spencer, a postscript “Cities in the Crossfire: The Rise of Urban Violence” by Margarita Konaev, and an afterword “Urban Operations: Meeting Challenges, Seizing Opportunities, Improving the Approach” by Russell W. Glenn. These essays frame the discussion found in the collection's forty-nine chapters.

This anthology also addresses various issues faced by military forces worldwide when “fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA) or policing urban communities.”¹⁶ As the editors point out, “urban conflict is dominated by blood in terms of casualties and concrete in terms of the built environment,” which is where future conflicts will occur.¹⁷ While some military leaders still romanticize conflicts in remote jungles worldwide, the reality of future military conflict is quite different.

Future conflicts, or so-called mega-urban operations, will occur in a megacity. A megacity is any large urban center, common in the twenty-first century, with a population of ten million or more. Megacities are present in the developing world. Those major urban centers are often loosely integrated, and many parts of its sovereign territory may be ungoverned areas or “no-go zones” controlled by transnational organized crime (TOCs), criminal factions, militias, or cartels. An ungoverned area is

a sector where the government has lost control and capacity to manage the population. Security is challenged by non-state actors such as terrorists, insurgents, criminals, and extremist organizations.¹⁸

The provision of essential services, usually a traditional function of the government, is relegated to militia that prey on the poor and marginalized members of society.

Several characteristics of megacities make them a suitable environment for conflict in the future. For instance, most megacities have the following attributes: potential for massive poverty and social unrest, possible for environmental concerns; the likelihood of ungoverned spaces; quick mobilization of the population by social media during times of social unrest, and demographic indications of higher birth rates, city migration, and young unemployed masses.¹⁹

Furthermore, due to urbanization, littoralization, and connectedness, megacities will be the new “bazaar of violence” in the future.²⁰ According to this idea, urban insurgents will attempt to destabilize governments through strategies of sheer violence indiscriminately applied to government officials and civilian populations. Those heinous acts of

violence aim to demonstrate to the people that the authorities cannot help them and that they are helpless against the power of the gun.²¹

After reading this anthology, an important lesson is that, in many instances, government response to the challenges in megacities may exacerbate the problem. As John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus pointed out in their essay “Postcard from Mumbai: Modern Urban Siege,”

Government responses to urban terrorism, however well-intentioned, have exacerbated the problem through the usage of urban military special operations and the construction of militarized space.²²

In many instances, the community, rather than partnering with the authorities to identify criminals and drug dealers, resents the police for how they treat members of the shantytowns. Rather than becoming an asset in warfighting against criminal elements in the megacities, the citizens become abettors. For the police forces operating within those megacities’ shanties, “there is little distinction made between residents of the favela [shantytown] and drug traffickers.”²³

The megacities of the twenty-first century also resemble Richard J. Norton’s idea of the “feral city.” According to Norton’s seminal essay “Feral Cities,” a feral city is

a metropolis . . . of more than a million people in a state the government of which has lost the ability to maintain the rule of law within the city’s boundaries yet remains a functioning actor in the greater international system.²⁴

In the megacities or feral cities of the developing world, militants can easily blend into the local civilian population and use the city’s complex and dense terrain for cover and concealment. Furthermore, the unwillingness, or perhaps the inability of governments in megacities or feral cities, to address issues such as urban poverty, youth unemployment, and social and economic marginalization allows criminal networks to gain ground, enabling the flow of illicit drugs, arms, and money into those already relatively deprived communities.

While some military leaders may believe that future conflicts will be open terrain, the reality of most present-day conflicts is quite different. In 2014, then Chief of Staff of the Army General Raymond T. Odierno convened a strategic studies group to research a new reality facing the US Army. In the foreword of the group's report, *Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a Complex and Uncertain Future*, Odierno wrote:

Our Army has [had] experience throughout its history of operating in urban environments, from Aachen to Seoul to Baghdad. We have not, however, operated in urban areas with populations of over 10 million people— the megacity.²⁵

As the strategic studies group concluded, “the Army is currently unprepared” for conflicts in megacities, and “...although the Army has a long history of urban fighting, it has never dealt with an environment so complex and beyond the scope of its resources.”²⁶ Margarita Konaev succinctly states, “As the world’s urban population continues to grow, the future of global security will be determined by what happens in the cities.”²⁷

Any responsible military force understands that the megacities of the twenty-first century and beyond can no longer be ignored as part of its strategic planning. To ignore the centrality of megacities in conflicts is to ignore the future of combat. In their book *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance*, Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen follows, clearly illustrate the centrality of cities given that “cities are the strategic ground for armed conflict because it is mostly in cities that irregular combatants are safest.”²⁸

Negotiation of Space in the City

The next book in this review essay is Mary Kaldor’s and Saskia Sassen’s *Cities at War: Global Insecurity and Urban Resistance* (2020). Mary Kaldor is a professor of global governance and director of the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit in the Department of International Development at the London School of Economics. At the same time, Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and a member of the Committee for Global Thought at Columbia University.

As the book title implies, Kaldor and Sassen's primary focus is on the city as the new milieu for future conflicts, whether the conflict is between nation-states, irregular warfare, criminal organizations fighting for fiefdom control, or terrorist attacks. Cities have become the "equivalent of jungles and mountains," according to Kaldor and Sassen.²⁹ The authors further state that as cities become the equivalent of jungles and mountains in the new battlefields of the 21st Century, they provide "a way to hide and evade fighting" and become a "source of succor and support."³⁰

Kaldor and Sassen's primary contribution to the literature with their book is the fact that while the literature on cities and war focuses almost exclusively on the militarization and securitization of cities, the authors treat the city as a lens through which to understand contemporary violence as well as contemporary peace.³¹ They utilize empirical case studies of various cities worldwide and provide perspectives from the inhabitants' viewpoint, thus shedding "light on how to explain, interpret, perceive twenty-first-century war without the blinkers of geopolitical preoccupations."³²

Another significant contribution by Kaldor and Sassen to the global insecurity in the cities is their discussion of "new wars" vis-à-vis "old wars." The "old wars," as the authors indicate, took place between the late eighteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, and it was primarily restricted to the countryside, where battles were fought in fields. During World War II, the Allies destroyed cities during the liberation process from German forces. Yet, cities were hardly the main center of gravity during the conflict. Cities "were bombed or under siege; they were not necessarily theaters of war in the way they are today."³³ For example, think about Russia's unprovoked and illegal war of annexation against Ukraine. Russian military forces and paramilitary forces, composed of the Wagner Group, have continuously bombed significant city centers in Ukraine, disregarding the rules of military engagement and protecting civilian populations as non-combatants. Furthermore, the "old wars" were caused by deep-seated political contests.³⁴

The "old wars" would continue targeting cities as a significant focus of conflicts until the Cold War, when a sudden shift began. This shift during the Cold War is exemplified by the Battle of Algiers (1957), Hue in Vietnam

(1968), and the Northern Ireland conflicts. As Kaldor and Sassen explained, those conflicts represented

three examples of an emergent pattern of asymmetric war: regular armies confronting insurgencies fought by so-called irregular combatants who lacked airplanes and tanks but had only guns and bombs and thus found in urban space a strategic space for their types of operations.³⁵

Those conflicts represent the beginning of what Kaldor and Sassen referred to as the “new wars,” where “both conventional forces and irregular combatants including militias, private security contractors, terrorists, paramilitary groups, warlords, and criminal gangs” strive and the urban space become a new tool in their arsenal for war.³⁶

There are several key characteristics of the “new wars” in the post-Cold War world of the 21st Century and how its characteristics fit in with the world’s megacities. First, new wars are fought by networks of state and non-state actors that are both global and local.³⁷ Recruits for the “new wars” can be village residents with unresolved issues with the local authorities or the newly arrived rural-urban migrants searching for a job and a better life in the city. However, since those individuals do not have the same safety network as they would in rural areas, they cannot find decent jobs. Therefore, a life of crime as a mercenary may be the only hope of survival in the new urban concrete jungle. The second characteristic of the “new wars” is that new identity politics are being nurtured in cities.³⁸ While the “old wars” conflicts were primarily ideological, identity politics fueled today’s “new wars.”

Identity politics has a tremendous impact on the lives of ordinary citizens and has recently been the primary source of political polarization worldwide, especially in the United States.³⁹ Identity politics creates a division between “Us” and “Them.” “Them” are the undesirable members of society. They are replaceable and discarded. They are the residents of shantytowns worldwide. They are often uneducated and easily convinced that their interests are better advanced by a particular segment of the population, traditionally the elite and well-educated. Identity politics within the context of “new wars” can have a devastating impact on the

nation-state. It can destroy the social fabric of society. Turn friends into foes. Neighbors into enemies.⁴⁰

The third characteristic of the “new wars,” perhaps one of the most consequential, is that military-style battles are avoided, and most violence is directed against civilians.⁴¹ Kaldor and Sassen explained, “In such wars, the aim is political control of territory, which is achieved through expelling or terrorizing those who might challenge political control.”⁴² Again, Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine is the best current example. Russian forces have wreaked havoc on the cities of Schastia and Volnovakha in Ukraine in retaliation for its citizens standing up against Russian aggression.⁴³ As one resident testified:

In the city, there is not any building that has not suffered from direct or collateral damage. So, some buildings have major, minor destruction; some are destroyed to the ground.⁴⁴

Kaldor and Sassen also argue that the “new wars” suit cities due to their lack of infrastructure and disorganized architectural design. This disorganized environment, which lacks police protection and basic living conditions, has created an environment where *urbicide*⁴⁵ is the norm. As Kaldor and Sassen explained,

urbicide is used to describe how new wars deliberately target the very fabric of society—the notion of publicness and the idea of a civic community on which cities are based.⁴⁶

The cities of the twenty-first century and the “new wars” have developed a security culture among their population. The authors define a security culture a

style or a pattern of doing security that brings together a range of interlinked components (narratives, rules, tools, practices, etc.) and that are embedded in a specific set of power relations.⁴⁷

From this perspective, an issue becomes a problem depending on where we stand. For example, Mary Martin argues in her essay “A Tale of Two Cities,” in Kaldor and Sassen’s *Cities at War*, that Ciudad Juarez has a border security culture, a public and citizen security problem, and a

neoliberal security problem. Each seeks to describe the city's predicament differently, articulate a particular set of threats and risks, identify distinct referent objects as requiring protection, and prescribe responses to the violence."⁴⁸

In addition to developing a security culture, the "news wars" in megacities are also developing a process called "*enclavization*." The process of *enclavization*, according to Sobia Ahmad Kaker in her essay "Responding to, or Perpetuating, Urban Insecurity," denotes

the process of enclave-making. Processes of *enclavization* are therefore the ongoing means—material and/or discursive—through which enclaves are created and upheld.⁴⁹

Enclavization further delineates the separation between those in and those outside the city limits. Again, as Kaker argued, the primary purpose of *enclavization* "is to ensure collective security and create distance between those living inside and the wilder city outside."⁵⁰ *Enclavization* creates by its very nature a group of second-class citizens as it highlights the differences between the haves and have-nots of society and further alienates some segments of society. Kaker states that the

processes of *enclavization* generate extreme marginality and vulnerability for the urban poor, who are forced to return to their forms of community protection and preservation in the face of elite-led violence and state terror.⁵¹

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the "marvelous city," is an excellent example of this extreme marginalization and vulnerability to residents of Rio's *favelas* or shantytowns. According to a recent study conducted by the *Instituto Fogo Cruzado*, in partnership with *the Grupo de Estudos de Novos Ilegalismos at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (GENI/UFF)*, militias are the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in Rio de Janeiro. The study asserts that militia-controlled areas grew 387.3 percent over the past 16 years. As a result, militias control essentially half of Rio's areas dominated by criminal armed groups (CAGs).⁵²

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Rio de Janeiro, gangs played a significant role in preventing the spread of the virus among poor

communities by imposing curfews in areas dominated by criminal armed groups. These vulnerable populations often lack essential lifelines like adequate potable water supply, sewage, and public services like policing.

When the police intervene in those communities, their abuse of authority and use of force is displayed once they exist in those communities. For example, in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, a police raid has left forty-five dead. In Rio de Janeiro, ten people were killed on Wednesday, including two suspected drug-trafficking kingpins, according to Brazil's state news agency. Officials say 19 suspects were killed over the weekend in the northeast state of Bahia. An additional 16 died at the hands of the police during a five-day raid this week in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous state, after a police officer on patrol was shot dead.⁵³ Yet, the gangs and CAGs often fill the void in governance and, in collusion with corrupt public officials, provide access to services.⁵⁴ In the final analysis, Kaldor and Sassen argued that "cities become the key strategic ground for armed conflict because it is mostly in cities that irregular combatants are safest."⁵⁵

Another important issue discussed regarding the future megacities under "new wars" will rely heavily on digitization. Today, cities, from London to São Paulo, are under the watchful eyes of government officials as the aesthetics of cities are transformed from planted trees to installed cameras monitoring every movement of every single citizen. We are witnessing what *The Economist* has called "a civilianisation of the digital battlefield."⁵⁶ Wars in the future megacities show that "connectivity is increasingly a vital military resource."⁵⁷ Ordinary citizens armed with the latest iPhone or a laptop will be a force multiplier as they become part of a crowd-sourced "civilian sensor network," providing enemy troops' location and movement.⁵⁸

The final book in this review essay answers the following question: What are the defining characteristics of urban warfare today? Anthony King argues that not all urban warfare operations are novel. What is novel is how cities have transformed the nature of warfare, given the shrinking of military forces worldwide. As former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once stated, "You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you might want or wish to have a later time."⁵⁹

The Rise of Urban Warfare: A Complicated History

Anthony King's *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* emphasizes the dynamics of urban warfare. It uses examples to show that while the rise of urban warfare is deeply troubling, urban warfare is as old as civilizations. As King succinctly states, "It would be wrong to suggest that urban warfare itself is new. Urban warfare was a regular occurrence in antiquity."⁶⁰

Using historical and Biblical examples, King highlights that urban warfare is as old as cities. He argues that warfare has always been and always will be integral to city life, stating that "from the moment humans, as aggressive, intelligent and highly social primates, began to live in urban settlements, they also began to fight each other for them and to kill each other in them."⁶¹ Since urban warfare seems to be an ingrained and innate part of humanity, urban warfare, according to King,

will continue to increase in the coming decades. It will remain a global issue, affecting the lives of millions, threatening major political, economic, and cultural centers.⁶²

King's central argument in *Urban Warfare* is that while scholars and practitioners of urban warfare have attributed its rise to the explosion in the global population of megacities to understand urban warfare in the twenty-first century, a better focus would be the tremendous decrease in the size of armed forces themselves.⁶³

This is a direct challenge to David Kilcullen's *Out of the Mountains* assertion that demography and asymmetry have been the main forces driving the increased incidence of urban warfare. Instead, King argues that smaller and more precise weapons are the key drivers of the carnage and violence in places such as Sarajevo, Mogadishu, and Grozny, to name a few. As King points out, the operational significance of urban warfare in the early modern period is directly correlated with the size of armies: "In any historical era, the smaller the armies," according to King's observation:

the more important cities become, urban warfare attains priority as military forces contract. By

contrast, the larger the armies, the more likely open warfare will predominate over siegecraft. As forces expand, cities become less operationally significant. The frequency and importance of urban warfare is, therefore, substantially a function of the size of military forces.⁶⁴

King also disagrees with Kilcullen's argument that insurgents have come out of the mountains in recent decades. Instead, King argues that urban insurgency was already a constant feature of the twentieth-century battlefields.⁶⁵ This more significant presence of urban insurgency directly correlates with the size of armed forces worldwide. As King points out,

The reduction of combat densities on the battlefield should be expected in and of itself to increase the frequency of urban fighting. Reduced state forces necessarily converge on cities and towns.⁶⁶

King also argues that

combat density—the sheer number of military personnel deployed into a theater—is likely to play an increasingly important role in the modernization of warfare over the twenty-first century.⁶⁷

According to King, there are two schools of thought regarding urban warfare in megacities. One school of thought argues that urban warfare is a novelty and an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of revolution in military affairs (RMA). Proponents contend that “a profound military transformation –even an urban revolution- has occurred, altering the characteristics of contemporary military operations in cities.”⁶⁸ The other school of thought rejects the novelty and the revolution in military affairs arguments. Instead, they argue that “nothing fundamental has changed.”⁶⁹ King rejects both schools of thought. Instead, he contends that “it is insufficient to focus on specific weapons or individual techniques; it is, rather, necessary to consider the urban battlefield as a whole.”⁷⁰

Using an interdisciplinary or “transcend disciplinary boundaries” approach, King argues that urban warfare consists of three fundamental elements: cities, weaponry, and forces:

Urban warfare is defined by the scale and geography of the urban settlements in which fighting occurs, the weaponry available to the combatants, and the size of the military forces...These three factors constitute the atomic elements of urban warfare...The interplay of these three factors is key to understanding urban warfare.⁷¹

Furthermore, the topographies of urban warfare are also being transformed by the forces of fortification, airpower, firepower, armor, partnering with local forces, and information operations.

The Debates and Concurrence

One theme discussed by all four books is Brazil's gang proliferation and how those gangs manifest failed policy by the federal government and remnants of early urban guerrilla activists such as Abraham Guillén in Uruguay or Carlos Marighella in Brazil. King states, "Urban super-gangs have replaced Marighella's urban guerrillas."⁷² Armed criminal organizations (ACOs) such as *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command/CV), *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (First Command of the Capital/PCC), and *Amigos dos Amigos* (Friends of Friends) dominate cities and *barrios* in Brazil today. They are influential transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and fully integrated into the interdependent economy of the twenty-first century. Another important characteristic of Brazil's gangs is controlling and dominating territories. As King points out,

Brazil's super-gangs are intimately attached to specific *favelas*, in which their leadership and organization are based. The *favelas* are crucial to the super-gangs because they allow the gang members to operate away from government interference.⁷³

As King once again highlights, the urban guerrilla is not new, nor have they recently come out of the mountains in the twenty-first century. The urban guerrilla has always been in the city. One important point mentioned by the four books under review is that "insurgents now typically situate their enclaves inside cities; they dominate neighborhoods, which they transform into no-go-areas."⁷⁴ In this process of *enclavization*, King, Kaldor, and Sassen respectively argued that modern cities typically contained poor areas and ethnic minorities, often segregated into ghettos.⁷⁵

In King's conclusion, he examines the future of megacities in 2040. According to King, four essential elements define global cities: size, height, polarization, and globalization.⁷⁶ Furthermore, three interrelated factors explain why megacities will be the future battles' center of gravity in the twenty-first century. According to King, "cities have grown so big that it is difficult for forces to avoid them, especially since they are political, economic, and social hubs." Second, King further argues, "weapons are more accurate; as the field has become more lethal, state and nonstate forces have sought refuge in cities." Finally, "military forces are much smaller. Consequently, standing state armies can no longer envelop or inundate cities."⁷⁷ Therefore, according to King, there are three possible trajectories or "Armageddon" in 2040: megacity war, autonomized urban warfare,⁷⁸ and nuclear holocaust.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The greatest Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*, argues that military strategists should avoid urban warfare unless necessary.⁸⁰ In other words, attack cities only when there is no alternative (TINA). There is no alternative in future wars. Warfare is an urban phenomenon. As King states,

megacities are rapidly becoming the epicenters of human activity on the planet and, as such, they will generate most of the friction which compels future military intervention.⁸¹

Conflicts, political violence, and war will most likely occur in urban megacities as those cities become a conurbation of complexities "interconnected globally by many different mediums, including economics, culture, modern communication technology, and social media."⁸²

As King points out,

The war of fronts, defined by large engagements in the field, has been replaced by more dispersed operations, which converge on urban areas, where the decisive tactical and operations objective have been located. As fronts disappear, towns and cities, having

become the focus of military operations, are where the major battles now occur.⁸³

The megacities of the twenty-first century, as pointed out by Dave Dilegge, Robert J. Bunker, John P. Sullivan, and Alma Keshavarz, due to urbanization, littoralization, and connectedness, megacities will be the new “bazaar of violence” in the future. This “bazaar of violence” represents one of the most complex operational environments “due to the coalescence of various domains and scales”⁸⁴ in which the urban guerrillas want to “win without fighting.”⁸⁵

Any responsible military force understands that the megacities of the twenty-first century and beyond can no longer be ignored as part of its strategic planning and operations. To ignore the centrality of megacities in conflicts is to ignore the future of combat. The megacities’ conflicts occur not only between conventional armed forces but also among non-state actors. As the White House’s National Security Strategy, released in October 2022, makes clear,

nefarious actors—some state-sponsored, some not—are exploiting the digital economy to raise and move funds to support illicit weapons programs, terrorist attacks, fuel conflict, and to extort everyday citizens targeted by ransomware or cyber-attacks on national health systems, financial institutions, and critical infrastructure.⁸⁶

Military leaders ignore megacities at their perils. The proliferation of emerging destructive technologies (EDTs) and new players in the international system is creating a “world adrift.” According to the National Intelligence Council (NIC) *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World*, “in a world adrift the international system

is directionless, chaotic, and volatile as international rules and institutions are largely ignored by major powers like China, regional players, and nonstate actors.⁸⁷

I highly recommend those four books seminal books on urban security. They should be on the bookshelves of military strategy and history

students and provide a solid foundation for any course on urban security operations, insurgency-counterinsurgency, and urban warfare.

Endnotes

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