The Great Equalizer. Lessons From Iraq and Lebanon

Gabriel Kolko

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By Gabriel Kolko

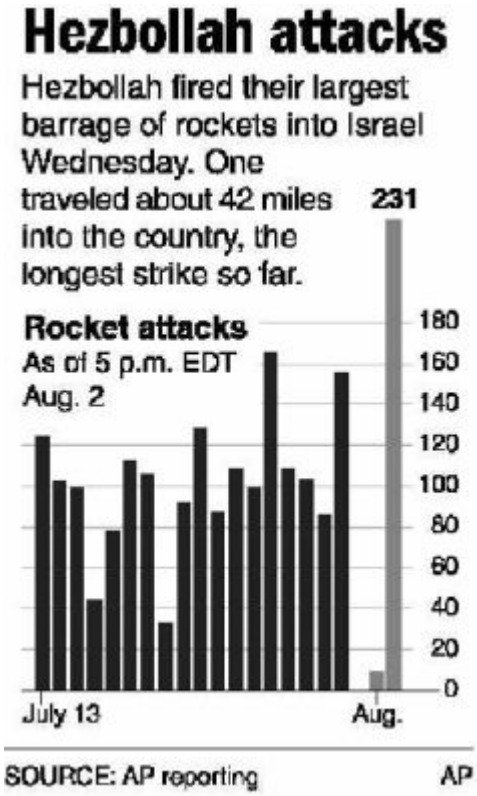
The United States had a monopoly of nuclear weaponry only a few years before other nations challenged it, but from 1949 until roughly the 1990s deterrence theory worked—nations knew that if they used the awesome bomb they were likely to be devastated in the riposte. Despite such examples of brinkmanship as the Cuban missile crisis and numerous threats of nuclear annihilation against non-nuclear powers, by and large the few nations that possessed the bomb concluded that nuclear war was not worth its horrendous risks. Today, by contrast, weapons of mass destruction or precision and power are within the capacity of dozens of nations either to produce or purchase. With the multiplicity of weapons now available, deterrence theory is increasingly irrelevant and the equations of military power that existed in the period after World War Two no longer hold.

This process began in Korea after 1950, where the war ended in a stand off despite the nominal vast superiority of America's military power, and the Pentagon discovered that great space combined with guerrilla warfare was more than a match for it in Vietnam, where the U.S. was defeated. Both wars caused the American military and establishment strategists to reflect on the limits of high tech warfare, and for a time it seemed as if appropriate lessons would be learned and costly errors not repeated.

The conclusion drawn from these major wars should have been that there were decisive limits to American military and political power, and that the U. S. should drastically tailor its foreign policy and cease intervening anywhere it chose to. In short, it was necessary to accept the fact that it could not guide the world as it wished to. But such a conclusion, justified by experience, was far too radical for either party to fully embrace, and defense contractors never ceased promising the ultimate new weapon. America's leaders and military establishment in the wake of 9/11 argued that technology would rescue it from more political failures. But such illusions—fed by the technological fetishism which is the hallmark of their civilization—led to the Iraq debacle.

There has now been a qualitative leap in technology that makes all inherited conventional wisdom, and war as an instrument of political policy, utterly irrelevant, not just to the U.S. but to any other nation that embarks upon it.

Technology is now moving much faster than the diplomatic and political resources or will to control its inevitable consequences—not to mention traditional strategic theories. Hezbollah has far better and more lethal rockets than it had a few years ago, and American experts believe that the Iranians compelled them to keep in reserve the far more powerful and longer range cruise missiles they already possess. Iran itself possesses large quantities of these missiles and American experts believe they may very well be capable of destroying aircraft carrier battle groups. All attempts to devise defenses against these rockets, even the most primitive, have been expensive failures, and anti-missile technology everywhere has remained, after decades of effort and billions of dollars, unreliable. [1]



Even more ominous, the U. S. Army has just released a report that light water reactors--which 25 nations, from Armenia to Slovenia as well as Spain, already have and are covered by no existing arms control treaties—can be used to obtain near weapons-grade plutonium easily and cheaply. [2] Within a few years, many more countries than the present ten or so—the Army study thinks Saudi Arabia and even Egypt most likely--will have nuclear bombs and far more destructive and accurate rockets and missiles. Weapons-poor fighters will have far more sophisticated guerilla tactics as well as far more lethal equipment, which deprives the heavily equipped and armed nations of the advantages of their overwhelming firepower, as demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. The battle between a few thousand Hezbullah fighters and a massive, ultra-modern Israeli army backed and financed by the U.S. proves this. Among many things, the war in Lebanon is a window of the future. The outcome suggests that either the Israelis cease their policy of destruction and intimidation, and accept the political prerequisites of peace with the Arab world, or they too will eventually be devastated by cheaper and more accurate missiles and nuclear weapons in the hands of at least two Arab nations and Iran.

What is now occurring in the Middle East reveals lessons just as relevant in the future to festering problems in East Asia, Latin America, Africa and elsewhere. Access to nuclear weapons, cheap missiles of greater portability and accuracy, and the inherent limits of all antimissile systems, will set the context for whatever crises arise in North Korea, Iran, Taiwan…or Venezuela. Trends which increase the limits of technology in warfare are not only applicable to relations between nations but also to groups within them—ranging from small conspiratorial entities up the scale of size to large guerilla movements. The events in the Middle East have proven that warfare has changed dramatically everywhere, and American hegemony can now be successfully challenged throughout the globe.

Iranian Missile Exercise

American power has been dependent to a large extent on its highly mobile navy. But ships are increasingly vulnerable to missiles, and while they are a long way from finished they are more-and-more circumscribed tactically and, ultimately, strategically. There is a greater balance-of-power militarily, the reemergence of a kind of deterrence that means all future wars will be increasingly protracted, expensive—and very costly politically to politicians who blunder into

wars with illusions they will be short and decisive. Olmert and Peretz are very likely to lose power in Israel, and destroying Lebanon will not save their political futures. This too is a message not likely to be lost on politicians.

To this extent, what is emerging is a new era of more equal rivals. Enforceable universal disarmament of every kind of weapon would be far preferable. But short of this presently unattainable goal, this emergence of a new equivalency is a vital factor leading less to peace in the real meaning of that term than perhaps to greater prudence. Such restraint could be an important factor leading to less war.

We live with 21st century technology and also with primitive political attitudes, nationalisms of assorted sorts, and cults of heroism and irrationality existing across the political spectrum and the power spectrum. The world will destroy itself unless it realistically confronts the new technological equations. Israel must now accept this reality, and if it does not develop the political skills required to make serious compromises, this new equation warrants that it will be liquidated even as it rains destruction on its enemies.

This is the message of the conflicts in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon—to use only the examples in today's papers. Walls are no longer protection for the Israelis—one shoots over them. Their much-vaunted Merkava tanks have proven highly vulnerable to new weapons that are becoming more and more common and are soon likely to be in Palestinian hands as well. At least 20 of the tanks were seriously damaged or destroyed.

Israeli missiles target Beirut

The U.S. war in Iraq is a political disaster against the guerrillas—a half trillion dollars spent there and in Afghanistan have left America on the verge of defeat in both places. The "shock and awe" military strategy has utterly failed save to produce contracts for weapons makers—indeed, it has also contributed heavily to de facto U.S. economic bankruptcy.

The Bush Administration has deeply alienated more of America's nominal allies than any government in modern times. The Iraq war and subsequent conflict in Lebanon have left its Middle East policy in shambles and made Iranian strategic predominance even more likely, all of which was predicted before the Iraq invasion. Its coalitions, as Thomas Ricks shows in his wordy but utterly convincing and critical book, Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, are finished. Its sublime confidence and reliance on the power of its awesome weaponry is a crucial cause of its failure, although we cannot minimize its preemptory hubris and nationalist myopia. The United States, whose costliest political and military adventures since 1950 have ended in failure, now must face the fact that the technology for confronting its power is rapidly becoming widespread and cheap. It is within the reach of not merely states but of relatively small groups of people. Destructive power is now virtually "democratized." [3}

If the challenges of producing a realistic concept of the world that confronts the mounting dangers and limits of military technology seriously are not resolved soon, recognizing that a decisive equality of military power is today in the process of being re-imposed, there is nothing more than wars and mankind's eventual destruction to look forward to.

[1] Mark Williams, "The Missiles of August: The Lebanon War and the democratization of missile technology," Technology Review {MIT}, August 16, 2006.

[2] Henry Sokolski, ed., Taming the Next Set of Strategic Weapons Threats, U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, June 2006, pp. 33ff., 86.

[3] For another compelling dimension of the more level playing field in battlefield communications, see Iason Athanasiadis, "How hi-tech Hezbollah called the shots," **Asia Times,** (http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HI09Ak01.html) September 9, 2006.

Gabriel Kolko is the leading historian of modern warfare. His latest book is The Age of War. (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1588264394/ref=sr_11_1/104-2527566-0806310?ie=UTF8) He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted at Japan Focus on August 25, 2006; updated September 9, 2006.

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