

SPECIAL COMMENT

Ever since the expression ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA) first emerged in the United States strategic literature a decade ago, something of a cottage industry has arisen offering a host of possible definitions for RMA along with contradictory views as to its significance.¹ Without attempting here to choose between conflicting definitions or to offer yet another definition, several tentative conclusions can be drawn from the implementation² of various aspects of what has become RMA.

- RMA is revolutionary in the same sense as the military consequences of the industrial revolution. RMA may appear to be evolutionary in terms of the time frame, which extends over the decades, but it is deeply transforming all aspects (social, political, cultural—and not simply technical and material) of the area of activity it covers.

What counts in the end is the impact of RMA on the nature, size and use of armed force(s)—the analogy here being the long-term implications of the industrial revolution which led during the nineteenth century to the industrialization of warfare and the militarization of society.

- RMA is not a stand-alone process. To the contrary, RMA is the daughter of the much broader revolution in information technology (IT) which itself lies at the heart of the set of process known as globalization. This is another way of saying that RMA is not emerging in a strategic void: it is not by chance that its ascendancy coincides with the surge of post-Cold War globalization, in the same way that the military consequences of the industrial revolution coincided with the age of nationalism.
- Further, RMA is indeed a process (and a wide-ranging one), meaning that different aspects of RMA will be absorbed at different rates and in differing forms from one set of armed forces to another. Some countries will rapidly incorporate some of the most advanced elements of RMA, while continuing to sustain archaic force structures; others will attempt to modernize their armed forces as a whole. From this flows a corollary.
- Today, RMA (like globalization) is strongly identified with the United States and, to a lesser extent, its allies. But, much as the industrial revolution rapidly ceased to be an essentially British phenomenon, RMA—like the broader IT and globalization processes—is no one’s permanent property: only over a period of decades will it be possible to determine who are the winners and the losers of this revolution. The ability to integrate and exploit the full potential of RMA will lead to a hierarchy of military powers, which will make the world of 2090 look as different from today’s as the international system of 1910 was vis-à-vis post-Napoleonic Europe ninety years earlier.

RMA is not going to quasi-instantaneously transform the art of war or the alignment of powers. But it would be singularly unwise to assume that RMA is just a passing acronym which may be of interest only to countries with American-style armies and strategies, and therefore of minimal relevance to all other societies. Over the decades the effect of RMA will be as radical on the use of military force as those trends which accompanied the rise of nation states and the industrial revolution some two centuries ago.

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Notes

- 1 One of the best overviews of the terms of this debate is to be found in Lawrence Freedman, 'The Revolution in Strategic Affairs', *Adelphi Paper n° 318*, IISS, London, 1998.
- 2 The first large-scale and militarily significant use of some of the tools of RMA occurred between the early 1970s (with precision-guided weapons during the closing stages of the Viet Nam War, and through the course of the Yom Kippur War) and the early 1980s (with Israeli C³I dominance in the Beqaa Valley clashes of 1982).