



GENERATIONS OF WARFARE: An Outdated Concept?

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The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.

Carl von Clausewitz

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE: NATO Cold War archives https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_138233.htm. Norwegian Armed Forces Cyber Security Centre, photo by Forsvaret. NH-90 prepares to take off during TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018. Photos by NATO

IN DISCUSSIONS OF WARFARE, there is often mention of distinct generations. These range from the first to the present-day sixth generation, which Russian military theorist Major General Vladimir Slipchenko defined in 1999, in the aftermath of Desert Storm. But how relevant is this distinction of generations of warfare, especially in the context of warfare development?

The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the concept of identifying different generations of warfare. This is done based on the concept of fourth-generation warfare as developed by William S. Lind in 1989. This article will not discuss the fifth generation as defined by Donald J. Reed, or the sixth generation as defined by Slipchenko, because I do not regard these as explicitly distinct generations, but rather as variations on the fourth generation.

The concept of fourth-generation warfare was introduced by Lind, together with co-authors Nightingale, Schmitt, Sutton, and Wilson in an article for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in October 1989.¹ They developed this concept based on the acknowledgement that three distinct generations of warfare



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had already been identified and the development of the most recent one, the third generation, dated back to 1918.

The driving factor to identify a possible fourth generation was the idea that whoever was able to recognize, understand, and adapt to this new generation of warfare first would gain a decisive advantage. Despite seeing warfare development as a continuous evolutionary process, Lind identifies the previous three generations of warfare based on what he refers to as “three watersheds in which change has been dialectically qualitative”, and defines them based on their different characteristics and drivers:

The first generation of warfare is characterized by the tactics of line and column, close-order formations, resulting partly from technological factors, especially the use of the smoothbore musket. The tactics of line and column offered the ability to maximize firepower through rigid drills, regardless of the low level of training of troops. The focus was on the enemy's front and combat forces, as well as ownership of the battlefield. With the replacement of the smoothbore musket by the rifled musket, most of these characteristics of the first generation became obsolete. Nevertheless, the desire for linearity on the battlefield remained and is still visible in current tactics.

The second generation of warfare, although

essentially still linear in nature, is characterized by tactics based on fire, the management of firepower, and movement with a heavy reliance on indirect fire driven by technology. Technology delivered not only the extensive firepower, but also the economic means to provide the required material. Massed firepower replaced massed manpower, which was mainly visible in attacks with a laterally dispersed line, advanced by rushes in small groups. The focus was still on the front, the battlefield and attrition, but now together with an operational focus on the enemy's rear. Although most aspects of this generation of warfare are now obsolete, a number of aspects can still be recognized in current tactics. Perhaps the most important one is the use of the operational art.

The third generation of warfare saw the use of the first non-linear tactics with a focus on manoeuvre and precise firepower rather than attrition, with infiltration used to bypass and collapse the enemy forces. The focus was now fully on the enemy's rear. Defence was focused on creating depth in preparation for a counter-attack. This third generation of warfare came to full development by the use of tanks in the German concept of blitzkrieg. In the context of operational art, blitzkrieg was the basis for the focus shift from space to time.

Where the first and second generations were mainly driven by both ideas and technology, the third generation was primarily driven by ideas. Lind identifies a number of central ideas from the first three generations that could also be relevant for future generations of warfare. These central ideas are:

- **Mission orders:** Because of greater dispersion on the battlefield, there was clearly a need for flexibility and smaller groups of combatants to operate on the basis of the commanders' intent.
- **Logistics:** Greater dispersion and a higher operational tempo resulted in a decreasing dependence on centralized logistics, necessitating the use of other logistical means.
- **Manoeuvre:** A clear shift away from the use of massive man- and firepower towards smaller, highly manoeuvrable, and more agile forces.

- **Impact:** The focus on mass attrition and physical destruction is shifting towards bringing about the internal collapse of the enemy and undermining popular support for their forces.

Based on these central ideas defined by Lind, future warfare will be widely dispersed and largely undefined. But there is more to consider, because the distinction between war and peace will be blurred, and ultimately vanish, to be replaced by a non-linear and undefinable battleground or front. The clear distinction between civilians and military actors will disappear and actions will take place concurrently throughout all participants' depth, including civilians as a cultural entity.

As political infrastructure and civilians become targets, targeting becomes more a political and cultural decision and less of a military one. Terms such as “front” and “rear” may be replaced with “targeted” and “untargeted”, with more emphasis on the civilian than the military sector. Psychological operations may become the dominant operational and strategic weapon, manipulating media to alter opinions including popular support of government and war.

Though it would be wrong to describe terrorism as a version of fourth-generation warfare, some elements of fourth-generation warfare as defined by Lind are visible in terrorism. The focus of terrorists is on causing the collapse of their opponents from within through bypassing the military completely and striking directly at civilian targets. Terrorists predominantly aim for a moral victory, making the military as an opponent irrelevant to terrorist activities.

A very interesting observation made by Lind is that over the last 500 years, warfare was defined by Western models and based on the West's technology. But this is changing, and non-Western nations and cultures are gaining a more dominant position. Aligned with this aspect is the tradition of military culture. The current military culture of uniforms, ranks, and drills is a culture of order and a typical result of the first generation of warfare. Although during the following generations this order shifted towards disorder, the military culture did not adjust accordingly. Different militaries adapted in various ways to this contradiction between military order and battlefield disorder.



In an article for the *Marine Corps Gazette*,² written five years after the first, Lind stated that the fourth generation of warfare had arrived. Here, he shares his developing thoughts on the fourth generation, especially on an idea-based rather than a technology-based generation of warfare. He defines three central ideas: the nation-state's loss of its monopoly on war, the return to a world of cultures in conflict, and as Lind saw it, the abandonment of Western culture and values.

But can we really define a fourth generation of warfare as a cultural conflict outside the nation-state framework? Lind's concept of fourth-generation warfare is characterized as highly irregular, asymmetric, with a focus on bypassing opposing military forces and striking directly at cultural, political or population targets. The operations are mostly conducted by decentralized non-state actors that are able to fully understand, plan and exploit the psychological impact of their operations. Furthermore, they are unhampered by conventions, they amalgamate with the local population, and they use new and innovative means. As a result, the military contribution to countering these operations is very limited and must focus on eroding popular support for these non-state actors.³

Since the Second World War, we have witnessed a mix of unconventional and conventional conflicts. But the conventional conflicts almost never caused participants to alter

their strategies. Contrary to that, the unconventional conflicts have almost all resulted in a major shift in political, economic, or social structures of one or more of the participants. Based on this it appears that using unconventional methods with focused influencing of policy- and decision-makers is a preferred way to shift the political balance. Ultimately this is nothing new: war is a political act.

Fifteen years after introducing the concept of a fourth generation of warfare, Lind wrote another article, this time for the *Military Review*, introducing the framework for the four generations of modern war.⁴ The main aim of this framework was to develop a better understanding of conflicts. Lind concluded that the fourth was the generation of warfare that had introduced the most significant changes since 1648. The fourth generation's key drivers of conflict are the states losing their monopoly on war with non-state actors fighting states, the universal crisis of the legitimacy of the state, and the growing differences in culture, which is how Lind conceived of multiculturalism.

Creating an answer to this fourth generation of warfare threat is quite challenging. Lind says, "We have no magic solutions to offer, only some thoughts. We recognized from the outset that the whole task might be hopeless; state militaries might not be able to come to grips with fourth generation enemies no matter what they do."

But as U.S. Marine Corps General (Ret.) James Mattis says, quoted in Lind's *Military Review* article: "For the fourth generation of war, intellectuals running around today saying that the nature of war has fundamentally changed, the tactics are wholly new, and so on, I must respectfully say, 'not really'."

Lind agrees with this by stating that fourth generation warfare is not truly new, but rather a return to the way war was conducted before the rise of the state: different non-state actors are fighting wars for many different reasons, using various methods and tactics with which states' armed forces are unable to deal.

Fourth generation war, like its predecessors, will continue to evolve in ways that mirror global society as a whole. The key to providing security lies in recognizing these changes for what they are. We must understand the kind of war being fought and not attempt to shape it into something it is not. Opponents cannot be forced into a specific generation of war that maximizes our strengths; they will fight a war that challenges our weaknesses. Clausewitz's admonition to national leaders remains as valid as ever, and it must guide the planning for future wars.

In this context, it is useful to realize that insurgency, often referred to as guerrilla warfare, is not new. The name guerrilla ("little war") dates back to the Spanish resistance against Napoleon's occupation of Spain

BELOW: Artificial intelligence plays a big role in today's sophisticated security landscape. **MIDDLE:** STEADFAST DEFENDER 2021, urban operations training, photo by NATO. **RIGHT:** Instructor performing tests on Black Hornet drones, photo by Simen Rudi, Forsvaret



"Future warfare will be widely dispersed and largely undefined."



(1809–1813). But in fact, insurgency far pre-dates that campaign. Darius the Great, King of Persia (558–486 BCE), and Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE) both fought insurgents during their reigns. Insurgency continued as a form of war through the ages. In all cases, the weaker side used tactics to counter the superior military power of its enemies. However, in the twentieth century, the political aspects came to dominate these struggles. Advances in communications technology and the growth of networks have greatly increased the ability of insurgents to attack the will of enemy decision-makers directly.

In his article "4GW—Myth, or the Future of Warfare?", U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel (Ret.) John Sayen⁵ also stresses that conflicts involving non-state entities are nothing new. Simply put, what we are seeing is a return of non-state entities in conflicts, for example, in the form of private security companies conducting law enforcement and military tasks where nation-states lack the capacity or the willingness to act openly.

To return to the question asked in the beginning of the article: What is the relevance of a distinction in generations of warfare, such as the generations defined by Lind, especially in the context of warfare development? The

answer is that its relevance is limited, both in the context of looking back in history and of looking forward in time. Of course, Lind was right when he stated that being first to recognize, understand, and adapt to new approaches to warfare confers a decisive advantage. However, using the construct of generations in this sense is not very helpful. One might even say that thinking in generations of warfare can be counterproductive because forcing aspects of warfare into a framework may result in a loss of nuances. The three "watersheds" Lind saw as defining the different generations are merely moments in time in the ever-evolving development of warfare.

Warfare development is a continuous process that mirrors and adapts to global developments, be they current or projected. It does not have stages with a clear start and end, like a generation of electronic devices. Specific aspects of warfare may endure, but their importance may vary over time. New aspects arise, while others fade into the background. Militaries must understand this evolution of warfare and based on that understanding they need to adapt to this fluid situation.

As most of us can attest to, however, old habits are some of the hardest things to change.

Relics of the past such as the desire for linearity on the battlefield, dating back to Lind's first generation, are no longer useful — and in fact they are often counterproductive.

For the past 500 years, we have seen warfare through a Western lens. But, with a shift of global power away from the West, militaries ought to start viewing warfare in new ways. Thinking in generations of warfare and timelines, as we have done so far, will not be helpful in the least. Believing that history will only repeat itself may just cause us to repeat our mistakes. ✦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation; Lind, Nightingale, Sutton, Wilson; October 1989
- 2 Fourth-Generation Warfare: Another Look; Lind, Schmitt, Wilson; December 1994
- 3 Fourth-Generation Warfare; Vest; December 2001
- 4 Understanding Fourth-Generation War; Lind; Military Review, October 2004.
- 5 4GW – Myth, or the Future of Warfare? A reply to Antulio Echevarria; Sayen; 2012

BELOW: ISAF Spanish and U.S. soldiers boarding a CH-47 in Afghanistan, September 2008. **MIDDLE:** The urban warfare setting for NATO Exercise FLAMING SWORD. Photos by NATO. **RIGHT:** Badges of a Canadian military police officer and a Norwegian military police officer during NATO Exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018. Photo by MCpl Stuart MacNeil, Canadian Navy

