The Evolution of Great Powers

by George Friedman - June 21, 2022

The evolution of military power is one of the most important if underrated geopolitical changes happening in the world today. Throughout the 20th century, military power was the province of large nations. Machines dominated the battlefield, and the production of these machines, the materials that fueled them and the ordnance they used required access to complex factories and massive amounts of raw materials. This, in turn, required vast numbers of workers – and the housing and food the workers needed to function. An economy of this scale needed to produce large numbers of ships, planes, tanks and all other manners of wartime materiel, even as they required functioning economies outside the wartime economy, providing the basic necessities of life and, ideally, maintaining national morale.

Battlefields are black holes of consumption. Any nation can build a plane or tank or send a man to his death, but wars were won by nations that could build enormous numbers of planes and tanks and replace the ones that had been destroyed by the enemy – not to mention replenish the steady stream of dead soldiers.

Small nations could not engage in high-intensity war because they lacked the resources to do so. The definition of a great power, then, was a country with a large population, the agricultural system that fed it and the mineral base that could arm it. Given the deaths and damage the enemy could inflict, the key to military power was the size of the population and its resources. It also ideally had to be vast, with resources dispersed such that an enemy victory in one region would not mean a victory in all regions.

As important, successful wartime nations needed technical expertise. Aircraft, warships and tanks needed to be planned and built, and the designs needed constant upgrading in response to the technical evolutions of the enemy. This meant that great powers had large numbers of inherently scarce technicians.

After World War II, only the United States and the Soviet Union had the potential to wage war as great powers. (They were later joined by China.) Before the war, smaller powers, like Germany, the United Kingdom, France or Japan could be considered great powers too, but in the end, they either lost or participated in an alliance.

In the intervening years, there has been a vast evolution of martial technology. It was once necessary to bring a 40-ton tank 2,000 miles away to deliver 40 or 50 pounds of explosives on an enemy position. The first British bomber attack was so inaccurate that the Germans couldn't figure out what the British target was. Ships could not see farther than the horizon, where an enemy fleet could be lurking. Special aircraft had to be launched simply to see deep. Paradoxically, the more primitive the system, the more resources were required to sustain it. The more aware of its environment and the more accurate the guidance, the lower the drain. For example, a satellite can provide an enemy's location, and automated internal guidance systems on munitions can strike precisely. There are new satellites that belong in a new class. As a result of accuracy, a force requires fewer munitions. The concentration of manpower shifts from the active battlefield to managing intelligence and rapidly innovating technologies. War no longer required a massive population, nor does it require massive consumption of raw material.

This has significant geopolitical consequences. Small and even very small countries can wage war, particularly against older model militaries that lack the precision and range of the new class of countries. These small countries shift from a dependence on depth to time. The more room a country had, the more room it had to disperse. In the emerging model of war, the more time they have in which to react to dangers, the more effective they are. It is not a single evolution so much as a set of evolutions, from space-based intelligence to long-range autotargeted weapons to automated anti-missile systems.

We can see this evolution most clearly in Israel. Founded first on French and then American weapons, the Israeli military now has homegrown capabilities that it (ironically) can sell to others. They are designed around the principle that putting troops at risk is a possible but rare event, while using unmanned force as the dominant element of strategy. Israel has come the furthest with this strategy, but it can be seen also in places such as the United Arab Emirates and Singapore. As a result, each wields international political power far beyond what might have been expected from it during the prior era. New technologies enable small powers to engage much larger powers. The core of the force is the technologists who maintain and upgrade systems – a fraction of the manpower needed by the old definition of great powers.

Of course, manned militaries remain indispensable. But the conversion to a new mode of thought is well underway. Israel has a striking amount of regional influence, but its technology cannot fully defend against a massive force from the last era's great power. Maintaining one culture while creating new ones sparks crises between cultures – and within budgets. The new technology is

ready for operation, but by itself it is not yet proven.

Still, the evolution is underway, and that means that the definition of great power will have to change. Russia expected to defeat Ukraine with older weapons. That has not happened, at least not yet. Russia has to evolve its military. So will other large great powers if they wish to have effective forces. There is no inherent reason they can't evolve, but their size is no longer decisive. Smaller nations can become great powers, decisive and dangerous.

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