



POPULATION-CENTRIC WARFARE

Date: November 16, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 16th, 2023, Dr. David Kilcullen presented *Population-Centric Warfare* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the evolution of warfare with a focus on smaller, cheaper platforms, challenges in urban and coastal environments driven by electronic connectivity, and the crucial integration of internal security efforts with national security strategies to address ongoing global conflicts.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

The main themes covered included the evolution of warfare in complex and urban environments, the challenges posed by non-state actors adopting irregular methods, and the significance of understanding and adapting to these changes. The central issue addressed was the need to navigate the crowded, cluttered, and highly connected battlespace, where both state and non-state actors exploit diaspora access and political divisions in multicultural societies. This is crucial due to the evolving nature of conflicts, where resilience, cohesion, and strength at home are identified as critical defence missions in the face of ongoing global challenges in warfare.

BACKGROUND

Dr. Kilcullen's presentation highlighted the dynamic nature of contemporary conflicts, emphasizing the need for adaptive strategies and integrated security efforts to address evolving challenges and noting the continuities, emerging challenges, and changes. Dr. Kilcullen stressed that when thinking about warfare one needs to distinguish between continuity and change i.e., the enduring nature versus the changing character of warfare.

Continuing trends over the past two decades reveal state adversaries adopting techniques from non-state actors, who in turn gain lethal precision comparable to nation-states. This trend occurs in a cluttered, highly connected, urban, and rural coastal battlespace, and the influence stems from the widespread explosion of electronic connectivity and access to smart platforms since the 1990s. Particularly for Western nations engaged in the war on terrorism, there is a noticeable overstretch at the frontiers, coinciding with institutional and social weaknesses at home. Despite ongoing acceleration, these enduring trends persist without significant change. This has led to a shift towards adapting to new trends such as stealth, dispersion, and modularity, all while facing challenges related to overstretch and institutional weaknesses. Western militaries are seen moving away from traditional big, expensive platforms.

Dr. Kilcullen highlighted emerging challenges such as diaspora retaliation, crowdsourcing, and crowdfunding of weapon designs, along with the prevalence of population-centric warfare evident in the Gaza conflict and recent Ukraine discussions. These challenges reflect a broader trend and contribute to a larger shift in the dynamics of contemporary conflicts. Addressing the concept of diaspora retaliation, Dr. Kilcullen emphasised the potential for attacks on non-state actors to lead to retaliation in the adversary's homeland. Examples included recent protests and the rising trend of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding for weapon designs. These dynamics are reshaping traditional conflict scenarios.

Dr. Kilcullen pointed to the evolving nature of warfare under ubiquitous technical surveillance (UTS) and the emergence of cyber-kinetic operations, highlighting that the overlap of cyber and kinetic manoeuvres is becoming a crucial aspect of conflicts, challenging conventional warfare paradigms. Great Power competition is increasingly influencing conflicts, as seen in instances such as the Gaza conflict, and this raises the risk of rapid escalation from small-scale incidents to full-scale state-on-state conflicts. The integration of internal and homeland security with national security efforts is now imperative.

Dr. Kilcullen illustrated examples of the global impact of conflicts, such as a Ukrainian government fundraiser and a globally shared ambush in Ukraine and emphasised the complexity of operating in environments like Gaza, shaped by diverse perspectives and ubiquitous technical surveillance, driving a new era of global information conflict. He noted the alignment with Marshall McLuhan's vision of a guerrilla information war becoming a reality in modern conflicts.

Dr. Kilcullen addressed the complexities of global information conflict, where ubiquitous technical surveillance and diverse perspectives create a Rashomon

effect, influencing protests and counter-protests globally. He emphasised that warfare now occurs in crowded, connected, and urban environments against a mix of state and non-state actors. The critical defence missions of resilience, cohesion, and strength at home, he argued, must be integrated into a holistic national strategy to effectively navigate these evolving challenges.

In the realm of contemporary challenges, warfare is evolving to occur in crowded, cluttered, highly connected, predominantly urban and coastal environments and the adversaries—a mix of state and non-state actors—employ irregular methods to overwhelm each other with numerous small challenges. Dr. Kilcullen noted that diaspora access and political divisions in multicultural societies regularly create vulnerabilities that adversaries exploit.

Dr. Kilcullen stated that ubiquitous technical surveillance (UTS) significantly broadens the audience for warfare while simultaneously increasing the attack surface for both state and non-state cyber and kinetic threats. This dynamic landscape emphasises that those in the homeland security sector, distinct from national security, face similar challenges. Dr. Kilcullen suggested that resilience, cohesion, and strength at home are now critical defence missions, necessitating alignment within a comprehensive national strategy for effectiveness.

Question and Answer

Population centric enemies are problematic concepts and democratic plural states. How might we manage this as an issue of national defence?

Addressing population-centric enemies in democratic plural states poses challenges for national defence. Preservation of civil liberties is crucial, but the risk of internal threats turning societies into police states is real. Mobilising diaspora and immigrant populations can disrupt adversaries, complicating the delicate balance between protecting civil liberties and addressing security concerns. The approach varies among countries, with concerns about shifts in the perception of speech as harmful and the potential weaponization of counter-disinformation measures. Emphasising ethics and democratic values in training and tradecraft is essential to prevent external weaponization and maintain professional standards within the community. The issue is complex and lacks a straightforward solution.

Dr. Kilcullen stated that what is key for professionals in the field is to emphasise ethics and democratic values in training, tradecraft, and reporting procedures because, if it is not enforced by professionals within the community, it is very

hard to prevent weaponization by politically motivated people outside the community.

The structured crowd funding model for the Ukrainian navel drone fleet is very interesting. Do you think it will be adopted by both state and non-state actors in future conflicts? And if so, what implications do you think that will have on the already complex issues like providing funding or material support for terrorism or breaching sanctions regulations, etc?

Crowdsourcing of designs, particularly 3D printable weapon designs, has been ongoing for years. The ability to 3D print explosives is a technological advancement with significant implications. Crowdfunding for non-state actors faces regulatory hurdles within the government-controlled international banking system. Cryptocurrency, used by non-state actors like Hamas, poses challenges for governments in regulating untraceable financial transfers without infringing on civil liberties. The dilemma lies in crafting effective limits on adversarial actors while safeguarding individual freedoms in the modern environment.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Dr. Kilcullen underscored enduring trends, such as state adversaries adopting non-state actor techniques and the evolution of warfare in cluttered, urban, and coastal battlespaces influenced by electronic connectivity since the 1990s.
- Emerging challenges, including diaspora retaliation, crowdsourcing, and crowdfunding, were discussed as integral components of a larger shift in the dynamics of contemporary conflicts.
- Dr. Kilcullen emphasised the need for adaptive strategies, integration of internal security efforts with national strategies, and a focus on resilience, cohesion, and strength at home as critical defence missions in the face of ongoing global challenges in warfare.

FURTHER READING

Kilcullen D. (2009). *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press

Kilcullen D. (2023). Wake-Up Call: Pacific Islands are potential missile launch pads. *Australian Foreign Affairs* 17, 27 - 41. <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/essay/2023/02/girt-by-china>

Kilcullen D. (2022). Russia's War in the Ukraine is Complex and Probably Already Underway. *UNSW Opinion*. <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/general/russias-war-ukraine-complex-and-probably-already-underway>



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