

AI and Quantum Supremacy Will Not Defeat Revolutionary Warfare

By [Nathaniel L. Moir](#) November 13, 2019

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Google's recent "Quantum Breakthrough" is great for American science but irrelevant for foreseeable conflict. It is ironic that "quantum supremacy" emerged in late October while America conceded its small but stabilizing position in Syria. The Syria decision is understandably construed as unwise because it relieves pressure on ISIS, forfeits a presence now occupied by Russia, and it provides Iran a corridor to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As it currently stands, the U.S. may possess the most advanced computing power known to humankind. Still, none of it ensures commitment to allies, such as Kurds forsaken by the United States, let alone the formation of wise foreign policy elsewhere. Quantum supremacy, A.I., and other technological advancements will not compensate for commitments and partnerships we abandon.

The dissonance between advancing technology and retreating political commitments to allies should buzz between the ears. The problem is also embodied by the fact that, while the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) poses over a dozen essential and enduring questions on A.I.'s future, the most basic components of warfare -- political rationale for operations and partnered cooperation -- are kicked to the curb. How can we square the circle when the problem is more like a parallelogram?

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It is good to answer the National Security Commission's questions concerning A.I. But it is better to recognize that, with ISIS, the United States confronts Revolutionary Warfare. It is not just an insurgency of a perpetual or global character. To understand this, it is best to internalize the idea that Applied History is the most suitable means to understand this form of conflict. Even if ISIS is eventually defeated, we will encounter similar warfare elsewhere. Despite all the advancements in A.I., quantum computing, and hypersonic weaponry, technology is insufficient to confront, let alone comprehend, what the United States faced in the past, what it confronts today, and what it will encounter in the future.

The Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front used Revolutionary Warfare effectively during the wars in Indochina between 1946 and 1975. Recently, ISIS relied on it, and the Taliban continues to employ it as well. Revolutionary Warfare is not insurgency or guerrilla warfare. Instead, it transcends tactical competency due to its far greater and holistic political nature. It utilizes insurgency and guerrilla tactics and information warfare, especially today, for broader goals focused on administrative control of a targeted society. It is driven by ideology and commitment, not technology. The

key characteristic of Revolutionary Warfare is its political and qualitative nature. Targeting, in a military sense, is mostly useless and even counterproductive in cases. A.I. and quantum supremacy can't help us assess it, no matter how many exponents these technologies raise the computational bar.

Vietnam War scholar Bernard Fall described Revolutionary Warfare in the late 1950s, writing, "It is the application of irregular warfare methods to the propagation of an ideology or political system." The political factor, Fall emphasized, is the primary component, and the military aspect is the secondary aspect. Where is Quantum computing, A.I., or hypersonic missiles in all this? They will evolve and surely dominate a lot of news to come, but they will form only a part of the secondary aspect of warfare, the military aspect. Unlike nuclear arms, these innovations do not currently determine the political but, instead, they serve the political aspect of warfare.

Revolutionary Warfare's ideological function, expressed through political processes such as parallel hierarchies and other forms, enables it to endure. These characteristics also explain why technologically inferior organizations may potentially triumph over much stronger military forces. Revolutionary Warfare's foundation is the perceived legitimacy of its political rationale among the population in which it is propagated. Most importantly, its' existence as a function, not as a form, enables adaptation, and this eludes targeting, let alone subsequent Battle Damage Assessment. Revolutionary Warfare is a ghost, and it is real.

Revolutionary Warfare is not an anachronism. Contemporary military operations, even those relying upon A.I. may win battles, but to what end? According to Bernard Fall, writing about escalating American involvement in Vietnam in 1961, "To win the military battle but lose the political war could well become the fate of the U.S. in Vietnam...a U.S Marine can fly a helicopter better than anybody else, but he simply cannot indoctrinate peasants with an ideology worth fighting for." This is a lesson too many leaders chose to ignore after 1961.

Will they continue to ignore the lessons this statement provides in years to come? History tells us yes. And infatuation with impressive scientific achievement consistently and historically overinflates confidence where serious concern should reside. This contributes to our failure to learn.

Technological supremacy is not irrelevant, but it is all too often touted as our most important strength.

Instead, our ideals and commitments to alliances and partners should be primary. This imbalance was demonstrated in late October as the amazing array of technologically advanced equipment, used within U.S. armored vehicles, left positions in Northern Syria that were subsequently occupied by Russian and Turkish troops. Bernard Fall was, and still is correct: the political is the primary aspect of war, the military aspect is secondary. Technology will not change this fact.

The type of conflict the United States faced in the past, confronts today, and must plan for in the future will undoubtedly include A.I. and other advancements. Yet, it is critical to remember that technological innovations make up only a part of a vaster political contest demanding clear policy and sound decision-making creating policy. No matter how expertly or technologically advanced contemporary conflict is fought, it will not compensate for lack of political rationale. As Bernard Fall explained, "A dead special forces sergeant is not spontaneously replaced by his own social environment. A dead revolutionary usually is." A.I. can't help us figure out why this may be true. Applied history can.

The only way to understand Fall's point is through sound historical methods found in Applied History. Applied History is the study of the past to comprehend contemporary challenges. It shows us that there are too many historical cases in which tactical and operational skill failed to guarantee enduring strategic success.

Undeniably, technological innovations have shaped warfare throughout history as they will in the future. However, as we cannot rely only on tactical and operational skill, we must not let quantum computing, A.I., or hypersonic missiles blind us to the importance of sound human decision-making and wise political judgment. Applying historical study for evaluating sensible balances between technology and decision-making is a guide we need more than ever. As history shows, proponents using Revolutionary Warfare consistently proved they do not need quantum computing to function or adapt. Applied history may help us better understand why this is true.

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