

*The Origins of Victory. How Disruptive Military Innovation Determines the Fates of Great Powers*

Andrew Krepinevich

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This is a typical example of the magic bullet approach to military affairs, past, present and future. As such, it faces the standard problems with such literature. Clearly, if the fundamental assumptions are taken for granted, then Krepinevich, a well-established exponent of such work, is well-able to serve up another good book, and has indeed done so. If, however, you are somewhat sceptical about the approach, and, possibly, seek more nuance, complexity, contextualisation, and the cross-currents of the inherently diverse politics and economics of international relations then this work is less happy.

For an historian, Krepinevich is overly simplistic and, for a caller upon innovation, a bit behind the times. Take the following warning in an Introduction that boldly proclaims: ‘History shows that a military that first masters the new form of warfare enjoys a clear and potentially decisive advantage over its rivals.’ (4) Sounds obvious? Well the second example is less happy:

‘In the spring of 1940, Germany’s integration of aviation, mechanisation, and wireless (radio) to create Blitzkrieg enabled it to defeat France in six weeks, something it had failed to accomplish despite four years of effort a generation before’ (54).

A well-established view, but there are also others, notably the recent focus on the allocation of the French reserves to the far left of the front, and the extent to which the political response magnified what were essentially limited operational advantages. In short, strategic factors trumped the technology with which Krepinevich is most happy.

And so throughout the book. There is a focus on dated views. Thus, for Barbarossa, Alan Clark is cited and German failure is attributed to deficiencies in German force structure, notably the lack of sufficient motorised infantry. In contrast, ‘those Russian forces not already destroyed or captured were mostly in disarray’ (p. 419). So much for more recent work that has stressed the continued fighting quality of Soviet units and the ability to inflict heavy losses on the Smolensk front. Krepinevich might have advanced a different viewpoint incorporating but lessening such factors, but as he offers an essentially one-dimensional view, with the past pillaged to support his account of the present, that is not on offer.

Indeed, there is an essential failure to address issues of strategic choice and complexity adequately, and, instead, a preference for seeing victory essentially in operational terms and with the focus on battle. There is a model of military development that assumes a should-be mechanistic search for efficiency and a related maximisation of force. There is a seriously flawed approach that does violence to the highly complex process by which interests in new methods interact with powerful elements of continuity; and will continue to do so. In part, the notion of effectiveness is framed and

applied in terms of military norms and institutional patterns, both of which reflect broader social, political and cultural situation. However innovative, military technologies repeatedly end up accommodating entrenched conceptions of power and this will continue. And does Krepinevich really want disruptive innovation. The most obvious recent example in America was the attempted coup in January 2021.

Krepinevich argues that America is failing to match 'its great-power rivals, China and Russia' (443) essentially because it lacks the necessary engagement with disruptive innovation. Leaving aside the problematic inclusion of Russia, China indeed is making impressive efforts. Krepinevich sees a foolish focus for three decades on minor wars and the War on Terror as setting America back. I agree about the problems of matching strategic prioritisation to military capabilities, in the case of America and indeed other powers. However, I am less clear that Krepinevich adequately tackles the nature of the Chinese challenge. Moreover, his catch-all central thesis should be replaced by a multivalent one fully open to additional and, indeed, alternative explanations and factors.

The fundamental problem with the book is not its problematic, not to say poor, history for that could be put to one side in order to offer an account of the present and prescription for the future. Instead, the real difficulty is with the latter. By its very nature, there is a need for caution about both tasking and capabilities. There is some interesting material on the latter, notably about AI, but the discussion of tasking is simplistic or non-existent. Not a book for strategists.

(713)

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