Moderator: What does the Western Way of War mean to you?

Amos C Fox: Peter, thanks for inviting me on. It's a true pleasure to be on here. A big fan of the show and I've been listening since day 1, so extremely excited to be a part of this. So, to answer the question, I'll provide you a slightly different answer to the question than most of your guests in the past have provided. At the base, the western way of war is bound in dissonance. On one hand, it's a useful soothing narrative, while on the other it's an applied way of war that's bloody, destructive, exploitative, and in many cases exacerbates the problems it attempts to solve. In answering this question, previous guests revert to the narrative-based answer. This falls in line with the western way of war being a rules-based, proportional and discriminate way of war that leverages precision and is routed in manoeuvre. As part of this narrative, precision and manoeuvre as you mentioned have taken on near-panacea status and are often an end unto themselves, through the discussion. It's dominated by futurist thought in many cases, this narrative approach, or this narrative aspect of the western way of war. And I like to think of it too as being being guided by Clausewitzian and Jominian interpretations of Napoleonic warfare to describe how to operate on a 21st century battlefield. I like to think of the way that the current narrative works as using the mechanics of a wind-up wristwatch to explain how an Apple Watch works. So, to describe the applied western way of war, so it's a bifurcated way of war. So, there's the narrative that we have, that we use, that we talk about, but then there's the applied way of war, the way that we actually go about fighting war. And in reality this is 180 degrees the opposite of the narrative. And in this, in my assessment, it's just the real western way of war.

And this applied way of war is not manoeuvre-centric but is fundamentally positional and attrition-based. The western way of war has become more precise but that has done little to limit the death, destruction, collateral damage, and suffering in modern war. As battles like Mosul in Iraq, or Marawi in the Philippines demonstrate, it's dominated by realist techniques. So, we talk about the futurists and these high-tech solutions to war but, in the end, the applied western way of war is realist. There's good ideas, and then technology goes out of the window once folks like ISIS have hunkered down in cities like Mosul, and you have to physically go in and fight your way through that and remove that threat from that city.

Moderator: So, all this thought about, 'We'll bypass the city and we'll out-think the adversary,' just doesn't tend to work? That's what you're saying is the real experience, the lived experience of the western way of war, right?

Amos C Fox: (TC 00:10:00) Yes, that's correct, Peter. I think what you see is today, in many cases, as much as we talk about great power of conflict, right? And big-nation states fighting big-nation states. That's not you see happening on the ground, and in many cases what you see on the ground is big states fighting either non-state actors or proxies of other nation states. And when you have that arrangement, what you see is that weaker actor seeking parity and trying to offset the strength of the stronger state actor. And so the best
place and the best way to do that is to fall back into an urban area, because in many cases that negates and offsets the capabilities of the state actor. So, ISIS goes into Mosul and that automatically knocks out a good bit of the coalition that existed to combat ISIS. It knocks out a lot of their ability to observe physically where they're at and what they're doing. And so as much as you'd like to espouse the virtues of manoeuvre warfare, what you find yourself doing is fighting this positional battle of attrition where you have to physically go in and clear block by block. And you may be using precision weapons but in many cases what you'll find is a precision paradox where you may precisely strike the target, you may precisely strike the building that you're trying to hit, but that precision is ineffective, and you have to continually re-engage as folks run from one target of location to another. And what you have is a spidering effect, destruction, and collateral damage in an urban area as opposed to some clean, nice manoeuvre solution that quickly causes collapse of the opponent.

Moderator: This is how the western way of war is gearing itself in the future, it will be technical, beautiful, clean, and the reality just doesn't feel like that.

Amos C Fox: That's correct. So, there was a recent article that came out a week or 2 ago, War on the Rocks, and it talked about futurist versus traditional points of views in terms of strategic theory and how militaries operate. And this is something I've been kicking around for a couple of months myself and I was a bit surprised when I saw that article come out. But, in my assessment, there's actually 4 categories they're employing. So, essentially there's a fight for the cognitive soul of how we think about, and go about, conducting war. So, there's the futurist camp, I think there's no argument there and that is the August Cole, Peter Singer camp. And then there's the realist camp, like I mentioned, you know there's a variety of people who fall into that category. I think a lot of the stuff RUSI produces falls into that category. Shaun McPhee (ph 13.01), he falls into that category as well. And the updated stuff that David Kilcullen's been producing, I think, as well falls into that. His Snakes and Dragons book is, in my opinion, a realist interpretation of war. And then you have the conservatives, those are primarily your historians who always point back to Clausewitz and just talk about the continuity and change in war. And then you have your conformists, and I think that's where a lot of military officers fall. They go with what they're told and they do whatever doctrine tells them to do. And so you have, in effect, this back and forth between those 4 camps. Although I think that the fourth camp, the conformists, don't have as much skin in the game in regards to this fight. So, what you have is this western way of war that's being fought over between these camps. Again, I think the conservatives, they have less input than do the realists and the futurists but that's where the real rub is, it's between those 2 camps on what's the future of war. And I think when you look at the futurists, they look out into the future and they describe an environment that's detached from reality. They don't look at hard constraints, strategic hard constraints, like can China do what they're actually talking about doing, and some of those books. I don't know. But they look at that and then they come up with this concept and the steering and that's what they push. But then on the realist side I think what they do is they look at the future and then they look back just a bit, but then they take the present and they project that into the future, and then that forms their vision of the future. So, while the futurists have this fancy, technologically-savvy way of war that they espouse, the realists push a way of war that's quite a bit different, that talks about in the future war is going to continue to see sieges, it's going to continue to be proxy wars, it's going to continue to be bloody and very destructive, and not this clean approach to warfare.

Moderator: The article that I read from you talked a lot about positional warfare and how the West actually wages positional warfare in a lot of the fighting it's been doing recently, right?

Amos C Fox: Yes, that's correct. In a lot of the fights that you see us engage in today in the West is fighting far weaker opponents and because of that they fall back into urban environments, and that urban environment provides them a degree of parity. It lets them offset the capabilities of the opponent, it increases their likelihood to survive. I think the fundamental thing to remember too when we talk about war, and this often gets overlooked, since you mention Russia, is Alexander Svech in. His book Strategy, published in whenever it was, 1920, talks about-, one of the best things in that whole book in my opinion, he says, 'the
first rule of war is to guard against the decisive blow'. And that’s buried way in the book. It's just a sentence buried way in the book. But I found that to be the most profound thing in that whole book. And I think that should be the baseline for how anybody thinks and understands the conduct of war. So, the first principle of war that any actor's going to do is they're going to protect against a decisive blow. They're going to fight in such a way that keeps them from getting exterminated, because at the end of the day nobody wants to go out and get beat, nobody wants to go out and get destroyed and wiped off the battlefield. And so that's why you see this increasing prevalence of positional warfare. So, again, the cities are important because they offset these capabilities that the stronger actor has, it gives you a degree of strength that you wouldn’t otherwise have. Like Anthony King mentioned, nobody’s going to go out and fight us out in the wide-open desert. They're going to go hunker down in a place that gives them the opportunity to avoid the decisive blow. I think part of this discussion that's getting overlooked when we talk about this western way of war is that war has evolved-, going back to my comment earlier about the Napoleonic wars and the Clausewitzian and Jominian interpretations, war has evolved to the point where it's systems, right? It's systems fighting systems. And non-state actors have systems as well. And so what you have is these systems are operating in such a way, and they have learning, right? They're capable of learning. They sense, they adapt, they react, and they do things to keep that system alive.

Moderator: We still go after things like decapitation strategies, knowing full well from our experience that against these non-state actors our decapitation strategies, no matter how brilliant our ISR, how wonderful our precision, they don't lead us to the kind of battlefield victory we think we're going to have.

Amos C Fox: That’s correct and it goes back to that protecting against the decisive blow and the war against the systems here. I think in many cases, and it goes back to that narrative on the western way of war, we have this mindset that the enemy's going to fight us in the way that we want them to fight us. And in many cases western doctrine’s written that way. They're going to pull up. They're going to park their tanks. They're going to say, 'Hey, here we are. Come kill us.' But that's not reality. Reality is, positional warfare gives an advantage that manoeuvre just doesn't provide. So, while we may think manoeuvre is a more high-minded way of warfare, in many cases it just doesn't deliver the battlefield success that we need, that any actor needs. And so actors modify how they operate, and they transition to these positional ways of war, or positional war fighting, because it gives them an advantage that manoeuvre just doesn't provide.

Moderator: (TC 00:20:00) If you look at some of the great American Civil War leaders, they knew how to surge between manoeuvre, attrition and positional warfare. Grant and Sherman were both exceptional at this, right?

Amos C Fox: Right, Grant's Vicksburg campaign's an excellent example of how these 3 dynamics, manoeuvre, positional warfare, and attrition, you have to oscillate between the 3 to wage effect campaigns because, again, manoeuvre in many cases will get you where you want to go, it will set you up, but then that sets up a positional fight. I would also make the argument that manoeuvre warfare is actually subcomponent of positional warfare, if you think about the emphasis that it places on relative position of advantage in relation to an adversary. Personally, I think that manoeuvre warfare is just a subcomponent of positional warfare, but, yes, Grant moving down the Yazoo river, there in Vicksburg, and then just a series of smaller battles once he got to Milliken's Bend and then he pushes out to Jackson. And then works his way back from east to west back towards Vicksburg itself, and then they go into a full blown siege there at Vicksburg. It's a perfect case study in that.

Moderator: I found it absolutely astounding that manoeuvre warfare is not even taught in a lot of professional military education courses. I find it very strange.

Amos C Fox: Yes, I completely agree. What's interesting too, one of the papers I've written on this, when I was at Fort Leavenworth, I had a German officer there, in the school with me and I had him proofread it.
said, 'Who better than a German officer to proofread this article that says that manoeuvre's not the end all and be all?' He gave me great feedback and we talked about it and we talked about this concept that everything that I'd laid out, but at the end of the day he kept coming back to, 'Yes, but it's to set up manoeuvre.' He couldn't even see beyond it either. He said that positional and attrition aspects of this are to set up manoeuvre. And I was like, 'No, no, no, you're missing the point.' The point is these 3 things you have to be able to oscillate between based off the conditions, right? Because everything's conditional. Everything's situational. And, again, if you're not in favourable terrain, you're not doing manoeuvre. If you don't have good reaction time and space, you're not going to be able to do a manoeuvre. And so we kept coming back to this, and he was a buddy of mine so it was a good conversation, but he kept coming back to that, and it just blew me away that even he couldn't see beyond manoeuvre either. All of us in the west, I suppose, at this point are so blinded by manoeuvre being the best way that we can't see any other way.

Moderator: Now, if we're not doing manoeuvre we're not relevant, so it's got to be manoeuvre. But that makes us even think about campaigns in a certain way. So, if you're not doing manoeuvre then you're fixed, you should be going home, and it's someone else's problems, or you should be doing handing over and partnering. Or you're in counter insurgency. Or in you're in the CT. But you can't just be in a position of siege warfare, or slow siege warfare, or positional or slow, long-term attrition. They're not open as even ideas, right?

Amos C Fox: That's the way that it appears. It's funny too when you talk to folks about manoeuvre campaigns versus other types of campaigns. One of the more recent campaigns that folks point to as a manoeuvre campaign is the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where the US-led coalition invades Iraq, pushes up to Baghdad. That situation in itself, in my opinion, there was nothing manoeuvre about that. That was a frontal attack on a singular point of operation. But if you say that, folks are like, 'No, no, no, that was manoeuvre.' But really if you think about it, it was essentially a corps operating on 1 avenue of approach with a couple of divisions moving straight down a road. It's just manoeuvre's taken on this place of cognitive dominance, for lack of a better phrase, to were everything that we see and think is manoeuvre and we can't tend to see beyond it. And this is what I don't understand is, why did manoeuvre become the answer? It's a solution looking for a problem in many cases, as opposed to a conditional solution based off environmental factors and threat based factors. And so, looking back at, at least, US military history, it seems to be a by-product of, what was it, the late '70s, when we transitioned from active defence to air/land battle. For whatever reason there was some sort of cognitive shift at that time where we said, 'No, no, we can't be this defensive based.' Essentially, that there was positional and attrition-based doctrine, but we couldn't do that, we had to do something more proactive. And I think it goes back to we advocate certain principles of war. Seizing the initiative is a big thing we talk in the West and in the western way of war, and perhaps it's tied to that. Maybe it's something where manoeuvre is viewed more as a proactive solution as opposed to a reactive solution, but again, at the end of the day, it's conditional, just like any other way of fighting, and so without those conditions it's not useful.

Moderator: I do think there's something about understanding this, where we go back to Svechin and the great Russian writers, the great Russian generals, of the 1900s, the 1920s, who really thought about this very deeply and got the balance difference between manoeuvre and positional and attrition, and understood how you needed to bat between. It's almost just a shame that Ulysses Grant never put this down because I think it would have-, we would nail it then. But because it's by a Russian the West is never going to pick it up properly.

Amos C Fox: That's right, that and then we had General Halleck at the time espousing the virtues of Jomini at the time, and he was teaching all that Jominian thought there at West Point too. So, I mean, that set the arc in many cases too, I think, at least on the American side. But you're right JFC Fuller is the first place I see it, the Foundations of the Science of War where he talks about it. And that really is the arc for where it gets started. But again, how it takes the place of prominence, I don't know because today especially, this book is an obscure book where you have to have an interest in military theory to even have read the book. And so
it's just an interesting situation where manoeuvre has taken this place of dominance in current military thought that is out of step with reality in those cases.

**Moderator:** Do you think there is an opportunity that the West is going to recapture military theory and that we're going to see a generation of people who do start to understand that positional and attritional warfare own a place as equal to manoeuvre in our doctrine and theory?

Amos C Fox: Just based off the current situation, I don't think that the current environment is such that we can get things like positional warfare, or attrition-based thinking back into a place of prominence. I think right now the futurists hold so much of a position of power within military thought at this time that for the foreseeable future, unless something significant actually happens that causes us to step back and then reassess how we're thinking about war, I don't think that will happen.

**Moderator:** So, we're still going to be lonely voices in the wilderness screaming at people saying, 'Take manoeuvre down from the pedestal that you've put it on and even it out with others?'

Amos C Fox: Yes, that's right. You can only point to so many sieges and positional battles of attrition before you turn blue in the face. Again, recently in Iraq, we had the battle of Mosul. There in Syria you had Raqqa, Aleppo, Qabaniya (ph 29.44), al-Qusayr (ph 29.45) (mw 29.46). In the Philippines with the counter-ISIS fight there, you had the battle of Marawi. All these are just massive positional battles of attrition that are the defining feature of current conflict. And then if you step away and look into Russia and how Russia's fighting currently (TC 00:30:00) you have the same thing. The siege of Ilovaisk (ph 30.02) that was a fairly short siege, but it was about a 2-day siege where a lot of Ukrainian soldiers were killed, and then you look at Donetsk airport, Donetsk airport was a massive siege. Luhansk airport was another small-level siege. And then the battle of Debaltseve, again that was basically the battle that broke the Ukrainians back big picture, and that drove the Minsk 2 protocol which basically set the conditions for where we are today. And so all these positional battles of attrition are going on but we continue to talk about manoeuvre as though it's the only answer. And that it's a higher-minded way of fighting. But the reality is you need to fight in such a way that allows you to win. In many cases positional battles of attrition are the way to do that.

**Moderator:** We do both believe that there is a place for manoeuvre. We just don't believe that it's the singular place, right?

Amos C Fox: Right, yes, and it's totally tied to conditions again. There's a variety of things that factor into that. (1) is are you in a physical space that allows you to do manoeuvre? If you're in an urban environment, if you're in a city, and you're doing basic fix and flank, that's not manoeuvre. You're just trying to fight and survive there, that's not manoeuvre. And a lot of times that's what you'll see equated to manoeuvre. But, yes, I totally think manoeuvre has a place in war but again it oscillates based off conditions and it's not a higher-minded way of approaching warfare or war fighting, it's just one tool in the kitbag of war fighting.

**Moderator:** Amos, listen, thanks very much for that.