

## Facing the Complex Battleground: Urbanized Terrain

It's a dirty business, but somebody has to do it. (URBAN COMBAT)  
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Military operations in urban terrain have always been the worst scenario for the armed forces of every nation. It was underlined by Sun Tzu, who pointed out in his famous *Art of War* that “*The worst policy in war is to attack the walled cities. Attacking cities is the last resort when there is no other alternative.*”<sup>2</sup> Next, he emphasized the long time which was necessary to start the siege including all the equipment and soldiers’ preparations. On the other hand, he mentioned that “*those skilled in war, ..., capture enemy’s cities without laying siege to them and overthrow their kingdom without lengthy operations.*”<sup>3</sup> Such an understanding of the issue was probably common among Chinese military thinkers during the end of slavery society in China, in which cities played an important role.<sup>4</sup>

Having in mind Sun Tzu’s point of view one can note that, in general, fortified cities have played for millennia an important role as centers of economic, political and cultural activities all over the world. Cities were connected with their military function and often used as anchors for defensive lines.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes their fall was connected with the final defeat of an opponent. Urban areas also played an important role during revolutionary warfare. The various revolutionary theories expressed different points of view as to how one might best exploit cities. These views were affected by the different regional settings, the level of support from the masses, and the ideas, experience and background of the revolutionary leaders. For example, in Russia Lenin believed that the revolution had to begin in urban centers. A different attitude concerning the role of cities was presented by Mao, who assumed that revolution should be launched from rural areas, as he stated: “*Take small and medium cities and extensive rural areas first; take big cities later*”<sup>6</sup>. A similar attitude was presented by Che Guevara, who believed that the revolution should start in the countryside. On the opposite side, Carlos Marighella preferred early military action within the urban setting.<sup>7</sup> Such is the function of cities that the term „*urban guerrilla war*” became an important factor in fighting internal civil wars, or when facing a conventional invasion by another

country.<sup>8</sup> The past and present conflicts, and the lessons learned from them, constantly present the likelihood that future warfare will face “*walled cities*” and it to win their seizure will be unavoidable.

### 1. Urbanization as a constant process

At present urban operations, as a military environment, are continuing to challenge the world’s most technologically developed, well trained and experienced armed forces,<sup>9</sup> and the outcome is not so obvious when counting only relative strengths. At the same time it is important to underline that urban operations were largely forgotten during the Cold War period. But military involvement in peacekeeping operations, humanitarian relief and combat operations have recently influenced military thinkers and the topic is back on the desk. Thus, the situation in regards to cities has changed rather quickly after collapse of the bipolar world. It is strictly connected with the fact that human race is crowding into cities and “*a demographic upheaval of seismic proportions is today transforming almost the entire developing world from a predominantly rural society to an urban one.*”<sup>10</sup>

For example, such a trend is ongoing in the most populated country in the world – China. The country’s population pattern is changing rapidly and China’s “*urban population surged to 607 million with an urbanization rate of 45.7 percent at the end of 2008*”.<sup>11</sup> So, since 2000, China had increased by 148 million. To compare in the early 1980s, the rural population accounted for nearly 80 percent of the total. The same development is ongoing in the rest of the world. In general, during last 30 years world’s urbanization has increased rather quickly and such a trend will continue parallel to geographical and social phenomenon.

The global tendency in conflict today is naturally encouraging inferior forces, military and non-military organizations including non-state actors, to move in a calculated manner into heavily populated areas to partially neutralize adversaries’ advantages and to search for political, economic and logistical support there. In a parallel development, the situation is changing the pattern of present conflicts and will influence them in the nearest future. For future enemies, who will mainly engage in asymmetric warfare, exploiting the urban environment will be a matter of life or death. Such an attitude will be particularly valuable when technologically underdeveloped forces struggle with any army that can dominate them by more advanced

technological weapon systems. From a military point of view, urban areas will create the main centers of gravity of operations as they are still very important in several dimensions, among them as a symbol, a political nucleus, a communication and transportation net, an economic heart, and as mass media centers. As such, there will always be doctrinally important major military objectives to be controlled. It has been proven repeatedly in conflicts over the last century that such urban operations are unavoidable.

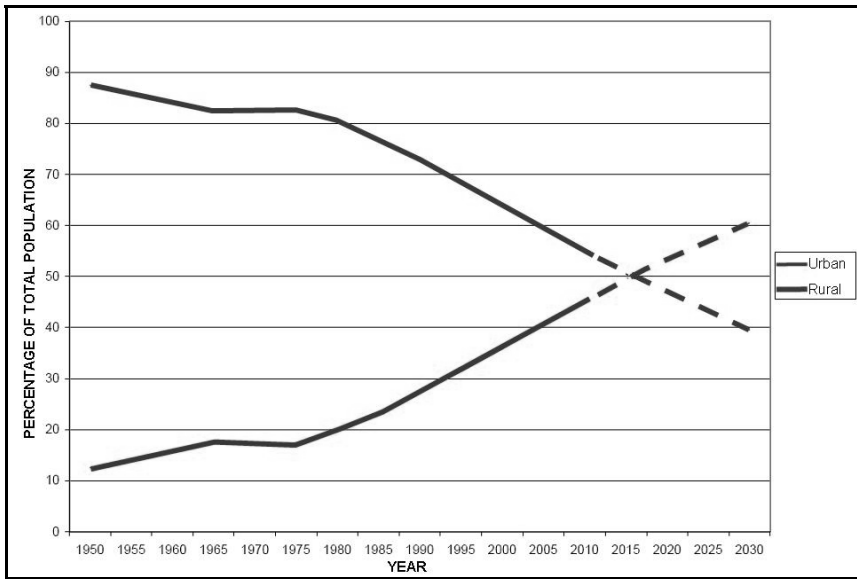


Fig. 1. China's Urban and Rural Population 1950 – 2030.

Source: China Statistical Yearbook, various years. Compare: K. C. Seto, *Urban Growth in China: Challenges and Prospects*, Department of Geological and Environmental Sciences and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies Stanford University, 2007.

## 2. Urbanized terrain as battleground

From a historical perspective, urban combat has been connected with heavy casualties among soldiers and non-combatants, devastation of the area's infrastructure, the heavy use of logistics resources and, especially in recent years, with political concern by national and international society. To avoid the cruelty of such combat in the future, urban doctrines and

combat systems should be revised to improve their combat efficiency in this environment in order to preserve one's own troops and, what is also very important, to protect the lives of non-combatants and the vital urban infrastructure. The difficulty of the urban battle was demonstrated during many urban struggles during World War II. One of the most important battles occurred in Stalingrad and, according to Mao Zedong "*this battle was not only the turning point of the Soviet – German war, ..., it was the turning point in the history of all kind.*"<sup>12</sup> In the post-war world the problems of urban war have persisted. During the Vietnam War the North Vietnamese Army attacking Hue city took advantage of US and South Vietnamese lack of keenness to bombard the city as cultural sanctuary inhabited by a friendly population. So, when heavy fighting started, fighting that including air attacks and artillery fire against targets within the city, the fight was carried out under the lenses of the media cameras. As a result, international public opinion saw the cruelty of the war and the US tactical victory became a part of the strategic defeat that came about as a result of the Tet Offensive of 1968. Moreover, the Hue battle was a very bloody one as the NVA lost 5,000 soldiers, the ARVN more then 380 dead with nearly 2,000 wounded and American lost 210 dead and 1,360 wounded<sup>13</sup>. Urban warfare in Mogadishu in 1993 was another example of cruel nature of urban war. The events of 1993 came as a shock for the intervention forces and public opinion about the intervention was greatly affected by the death of Special Forces soldiers and the destroyed helicopters.<sup>14</sup> The outcome of the fight pushed the US to review its urban warfare doctrine and this was very helpful later during Iraqi War. It is important to mention that urban challenges face leaders at every echelon and, in many cases, the lack of joint urban operations training has been painfully obvious as this gap in training has influenced the outcome of the urban battle at all levels. At the same time, the urban struggle proves that warfare is changing to meet various threats. For instance, in Mogadishu the troops inside the city were supervised and commanded by US generals and officers sitting in the camp located kilometers away.

Urban warfare has been a very important factor in the Iraqi war, as was predicted by Tariq Aziz, former Iraqi foreign minister, who said in October 2002: "*Some people say to me that the Iraqis are not the Vietnamese! They have no jungles or swamps to hide in. I reply, 'let our cities be our swamps and our buildings our jungles.'*"<sup>15</sup> Such conclusions were the outcome of the First Gulf War (1991) as the results of the war convinced Iraqi leaders that there was no benefit from facing US and Coalition forces in open terrain. Similar

conclusions came from the Second Iraq Wars and the initial operations against the Taliban in 2001, which led them to conduct an asymmetric war mainly in cities in order to confront the Western armies' weaknesses and to avoid their strengths. As a result, the Taliban and al Qaeda are still conducting this form of struggle with some success as such critical assets that give the Western armies their advantage-- intelligence, surveillance, maneuver and firepower-- are largely negated.<sup>16</sup> According to some military thinkers, urban warfare is an important part of antiterrorism war especially because, *"For Western military forces, asymmetric warfare in urban areas will be the greatest challenge.... The city will be the strategic high ground – whoever controls it will dictate the course of future events in the world."*<sup>17</sup> This is an area where the media will influence policy even at the strategic level as happened during U.S. intervention in Somalia. In the period before the intervention the repeated media images of starving Somali children speeded up the US and American intervention. Later, the images of US soldiers being dragged along the streets helped end that commitment.

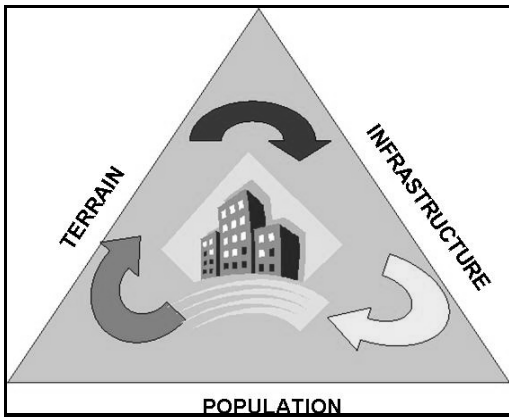


Fig. 2. Urban triad.

It looks like the media will remain a major factor for any operation from the strategic to the tactical level. The worldwide media exposure of media companies such as CNN and the BBC can quickly give turn a tactical action into one with strategic impact.<sup>18</sup> This is all connected with the fact that the urban environment is a very complex one and covers three main dimensions (fig. 2): population, terrain, and infrastructure. And all of these are mutually connected.

### 3. The complex approach to the urban environment

Such is the complexity of cities that, among US military thinkers, some have developed ideas along the so called “*indirect approach*”<sup>19</sup> to urban warfare. Alternate theories have been developed concerning the direct fight in cities that might be necessary because of political or military circumstances.<sup>20</sup> One statement notes that, “*Tomorrow’s objective is not the top of a hill; it lies in the middle of a city block, surrounded by noncombatants.*”<sup>21</sup> Urban warfare is still under the process of evolution and this evolution is closely connected with an increased dependence on technologies and the evolution of fighting tactics for this difficult environment. For example, a central category in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) conception of the new urban operations is “swarming.” This refers to well coordinated joint actions undertaken by a network form of organization whose well equipped, and temporarily separated units, can operate semi-autonomously, but in general synergy with all others.<sup>22</sup> Such a focus on urban operations is also very important for Western modern armies.

As a parallel development, it is necessary to stress that the search for technological solutions never should be pursued at the expense of personnel, as the need to focus on the human element of any military operation is the most important factor if one wants to achieve the desired end state. This is especially important as there is high probability that in the future soldiers will be involved in urban warfare and in such difficult terrain the many technological advantages Western soldiers have over the enemy will be reduced by the complexity of cities and human elements involved within it.<sup>23</sup> People are the most important dynamic during the combat in this type of terrain. As the Russian General Wasilij Chuikov once said: “*Fighting in a city is much more involving than fighting in the field. Here the ‘big chiefs’ have practically no influence on the officers and squad leaders commanding the units and subunits.*”<sup>24</sup> His words are still valid for combat leaders at all levels, but especially at the tactical level, because that level of war is the most important. In modern warfare, and in particular urban warfare, success requires the dispersal of numerous physically isolated units and requires small and autonomous actions based on tactical creativity. So, the proper training of leaders must be improved and redesigned as soon as possible.<sup>25</sup> Of course technology, and modern concepts such as INFOOPS, PSYOPS, SIGINT and precision targeting are excellent force multipliers, but in urban operations there is no substitute for well trained,

resolute, moral soldiers led by capable commanders on the ground who at the same time, are able to provide a sense of security to the civilian population.

Additionally, according to R. Collyer, the present situation in the world requires further development of military capabilities to effectively operate in urban terrain in joint and coalition environments.<sup>26</sup> These capabilities are all closely connected with creating modern doctrine, effective training systems and with determining the appropriate structures and equipment for MOUT<sup>27</sup> that makes the soldier a central element in any combat system. The current state of thinking on urban operations takes into account the fact that in Chechnya in Grozny dedicated combatants, armed only with light weapons (mines, mortars, RPGs, AK-47) were able to inflict heavy casualties to Russian troops that were unacceptable even to Russian public opinion.<sup>28</sup> So modern military thinking has to consider built-up areas as potential global areas of military operations which require updated MOUT doctrine and the right tools to deal with that environment. At present the term RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs) is very popular, but according to S. Graham in the light of the political consequences from the difficulties of Iraqi operations the current US RMA is faced by an “*urban turn*, which is connected with ongoing changes in military programs, structure, and training.”<sup>29</sup> To improve its urban war capabilities the US Army has created an urban training area at Fort Polk and the USMC has constructed the Yoda Village in Arizona. In a similar manner, NATO has started new programs to improve its readiness that include operating inside build-up areas. The NATO effort includes the RTO Study Group „*Urban Operations in the Year 2020*.”<sup>30</sup>

As the terrain is clearly important, urban warfare capabilities are a part of many doctrines e.g. Canadian doctrine is bearing in mind that future conflicts will be distinguished by features such as precision, lethality, compression in time, expansion in volume, dominance of knowledge and simultaneously (asynchronous) operations rather than sequentially phased operations. The Canadians note the influence on doctrine “*by the very high likelihood of operations in urban terrain*.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, in the future many armies will be involved in urban operations depending on location, politics and international involvement of the operations. This is true especially when supporting peace, providing humanitarian aid, fighting with terrorists or fighting asymmetric enemies. Such Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC) will require appropriately prepared forces to face challenges in this demanding

environment. Such a necessity is usually connected with developing suitable doctrine, tactics, training, equipment and supporting technologies which have to be prepared well before any engagement.

Such the understanding of the importance of MOUT can be seen among new rising military powers, including China. As stated by Zheng Qinsheng, Chairman Jiang Zemin pointed out in “*China's Declaration of the XXI Century*” that she should first turn itself into a powerful country and next be ready to make a greater contribution to the progress of mankind and world peace. This is connected with an increase of the world's population and tighter supplies of natural resources and a relatively smaller space for subsistence. As a result, the tasks of the military struggle that China may currently face have not yet been totally separated from the nature of taking cities and seizing territory.<sup>32</sup> The PLA will be an instrument to support new China and to defend political power. Such a situation will require defending cities and more places in future conflicts.<sup>33</sup> The political situation in the world is generally indicating that urban operations will not be a challenge for China as internal issue. But the quickly developing country is more and more involved in international security arrangements and some of the potential hotspots are located in areas which are rich in natural resources. Resource exploitation, which is critical for Chinese economy, will require a safe and secure environment in those regions will be of vital interest to that nation. Consequently, and having in mind that present low intensity conflicts are mainly connected with MOUT, the PLA has to be prepared to fight an adversary hiding inside buildings and ruins.

### Conclusions

Looking back, Sun Tzu was definitely right in the *Art of War*, but his perspective comes from an agrarian age when storming walls was rather unwise and avoidable. But the present age realities are connected with the need to carry out urban operations because the enemy is using this environment.<sup>34</sup> So, as it has been proven many times, there is a need to conduct urban operations with all possible means and technologies that modern troops possess. For example, some years ago it was not easy to fight during the night, but now soldiers of developed armies own the night, and the same will probably happen with urban warfare. This is all connected with the complex effort to prepare armed forces for the future and to transform them by the following means: modernization, change of organizational structure, creating strong reserves, development of strong

and adaptive leadership.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the process of collecting lessons learned from modern urban operations fought during last asymmetric conflicts should be ongoing continuously to avoid mistakes done by other countries.<sup>36</sup> So, it looks like many countries have to consider that, up to some extent, “*cities are the most likely battlefield in the 21st century.*”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Liu Chunzi, Zhu Chenghu, *Art of War by Sunzi* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), 98.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Compare: Huang Zu'an, *Theory of Stress on Peace in Chinese Military Strategy* (Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> A. Vick, J. Stillon, D. Frelinger, *Aerospace Operations in Urban Environments. Exploring new concepts* (Santa Monica: RAND, National Defense Research Institute, 2000), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Li Hongjing, *China's Military Thought*, Training Department (Beijing: PLA National Defense University, 2007), 59.

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<sup>19</sup> For details see R. H. Scales, Jr., “The Indirect Approach, How US Military Forces Can Avoid The Pitfalls of Future Urban Warfare,” *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 1998.

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<sup>21</sup> R. R. Leonhard, *Sun Tzu’s Bad Advice: Urban Warfare in the Information Age*, Army, April 2003.

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