



The future of combat is urban

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On 29 August the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) announced on Twitter that its tactical technology office wanted to begin testing a new project in complex, human-made “university-owned or commercially managed underground urban tunnels and facilities”.

While this may seem out of place, it reflects the US defence community’s preparations for an assumed future where the military will be fighting in ‘megacities’ or urban environments with 10 million or more inhabitants. This priority is likely informed by the recent policy decisions of great power rivals and other governments, the opinions and findings of senior Department of Defense (DoD) officials, predictions about impending global demographic change, and the tactical machinations of non-state actors that threaten US interests, such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

This is hardly the first time the US government has prepared for future urban conflict. Back in 2014 the US Army’s Strategic Studies Group released a report entitled ‘Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a Complex and Uncertain Future’ that described the strategic significance and challenges of future megacity operations. In January 2017 the National Intelligence Council, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s internal think tank, released its most recent Global Trends report recognising increasing urbanisation and human migration to cities as a looming security challenge.

In 2018 the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities advocated for the creation of a dedicated urban combat training school. This summer hundreds of US marines participated in ‘Project Metropolis’ and ‘Project Metropolis II’: two prominent urban warfare training exercises jointly carried out with their British counterparts. The quickening pace of US defence planning for heavily urban conflict is informed by several discrete factors. The first is a global shift in demographics: already, over half of humanity lives in urban environments. By 2050 nearly 70% of all people will call cities home, according to the United Nations. If strategic thinkers believe instability will inevitably follow this great migration, planning to address it makes sense.

The second factor is a current capabilities deficit relating to urban combat. There is no shortage of evidence of the US military underperforming in urban locations. Back in October 2016 then US Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley noted, “We need to man, organise, train and equip the force for operations in urban areas – highly dense urban areas – and that’s a different construct.” The United States, Gen Milley added, was “not organised like that right now” largely due to the army’s history of mostly operating in rural areas.

Three years on little has changed doctrinally. The Asymmetric Warfare Group was reported in April to have concluded that US Army sergeants lag in their understanding of the fundamentals of room-clearing operations or basic land navigation: both crucial to operating in urban environments. Meanwhile, other complicating factors have arisen. The DoD, for example, is seeking to replace unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) it previously used for urban reconnaissance because they were manufactured by DJI: a Chinese tech company that has shared data with the Chinese government, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

The government’s efforts are being driven by a need to keep up with foreign powers’ investments in next-generation urban combat technologies. My colleague Samuel Bendett recently wrote with Georgetown University’s Margarita Konaev that Russian military strategists are introducing or planning to introduce several new UAV types into their urban combat operations.

The Chinese military has already invested in urban-specific technology: a 2018 article from the People’s Liberation Army Daily noted that the Chinese government is altering the specifications of its helicopters and training its pilots to fly in urban airspace. The previous year the Turkish military announced its intention to open an urban warfare school to improve its future combat operations in heavily populated residential areas after struggling in operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

A final reason concerns long-running threats posed by extremist groups that are now adapting their tactics to better exploit urban environments. While the Islamic State may be declining in relevance in some parts of the world, it remains prominent in urbanising countries such as Indonesia, Libya, and the Philippines and can be expected to exploit such environments to its advantage, as can other extremist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, that already have a track record operating in cities.

Thus, DARPA’s announcement reflects a growing realisation among security planners that the planet’s cities are tomorrow’s battlefield. Emerging global trends and the current shortcomings of US warfighting capabilities make such military planning especially urgent.

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