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War as an Art: The Human Factor in Modern Warfare

While success on the battlefield requires art and science, war is primarily an art than a science.

This viewpoint is grounded in twenty years in the defense industry, particularly in the intelligence support to command and control (ISC2) domain, where technology mainly facilitates the art of human intuition, experience, and resolve, shaping strategy and decision-making.

Successful strategy and decision-making rely on human intuition. Even though the intelligence lifecycle has a structured planning, collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination approach, it largely depends on interpretation. For instance, intelligence tools often serve contradictory, stale, and duplicative content. When tools pull from multiple sources without correlation or fusion, the user interface will likely display multiple objects representing the same entity.

Analysts must assess the confidence level based on timeliness, accuracy of the source, and corroboration. Even the best collections can contain gaps like simple cloud coverage leading to partial observation. So, while science and technology offer data and tooling that helps warfighters, human intuition turns it into actionable intelligence.

Similarly, experience enables commanders to rise above the confines of doctrine and procedural red tape. Through experience, commanders can creatively recognize patterns, determine enemy deception and threats, understand context, and foresee consequences that the data cannot depict.

Take, for instance, targeting tools that assist in the targeting cycle of finding, fixing, tracking, targeting, and engaging the enemy. These tools improve accuracy and weapons selection. However, the commander must decide if a strike is worth the risk compared to their objectives, laws, political considerations, collateral damage, and ethical concerns. Sometimes, unconventional thinking is a more effective course of action rather than following precise procedures. If warfighters strictly adhere to rigid processes, they risk being outmaneuvered by warfighters who think outside of the box.

This kind of resilience and adaptability is crucial in the fog of war. Unpredictability from Denied, Disrupted, Intermittent, and Limited (DDIL) communication environments can cause systems and processes to fail. Even well-thought-out Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans make assumptions like the connectivity of resources, which likely would not exist with a pacing challenger in a high-intensity fight. If systems go dark, warfighters must have flexible courses of action (COAs) that do not rely solely on discreet processes.

However, the case can be made that war is a science because of its dependence on technology, doctrine, and defined Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs). Without question, artificial intelligence, nuclear technology, attritable swarms of drones, hypersonic and precision-guided missiles, and network-centric operations are among many scientific advancements that dominate the modern battlefield. However, winning the battle takes the strategic and tactical applications of science, modern tradecraft, and the human ability to adapt and outmaneuver a given algorithm. The most powerful science is useless without strong leaders who can apply it effectively.

Overall, war is more art than science. As Sun Tzu states, “In war, the way is to avoid what is strong and to strike at what is weak.” Success in warfare is not always about force but

understanding the art of human nature to deter it in the first place. Though there are applications of science that create valuable tools for planning and execution, the human combination of intuition, experience, and resilience proves victorious on the battlefield. That requires adaptability to adjust to uncertainty, to be able to pull together complex data and to respond to changing circumstances continuously.