



## The Future of Complex Conflict

**March 20, 2012  
Dinner Discussion Highlights**



We discussed the **future of complex conflict** and **what we must do today** in order to prepare for it.

As we move deeper into the 21st century, global issues and conflicts are becoming increasingly complex. **Seemingly disparate public and private sectors are intersecting in ways never before imagined**, and the roles of these actors are forcing the world to take a systems approach to conflict management and resolution.

We asked questions such as “How are **innovation and emerging developments** across various sectors **changing what conflict means** in the world of tomorrow?”



On March 20<sup>th</sup>, Toffler Associates hosted a dinner with leaders from both public and private sectors to discuss the future of complex conflict. This report is a summary of our discussion. Please note that it is not a transcript, but rather a “rendering” that condenses, eliminates, expands, and recombines some areas of discussion to illuminate themes that we believe emerged. Any errors in the interpretation or nuances are ours.

We posed several questions to spark the conversation:

- *Is innovation really that important in this environment? Do we really need innovation, or is it just a fad?*
- *How much should we invest in innovation? How do you measure success?*
- *What is it that we need to do to tactically and specifically in all organizations to make innovation grow?*

Participants shared a wide range of views on multiple aspects of complex conflict, innovation, and potential ways for the US to leverage innovation to improve its posture. Over the course of the evening, several primary themes emerged:

- **There is no clear definition of what it means to be at war** in today’s world, nor in tomorrow’s. Are we at war with China? Libya? Iran? How does the cyber domain relate to preexisting domains across DoD, and how are we defining relationships with various actors? We are in an era of ‘contested dominance.’
- Innovation and complex conflicts are not challenges that can be addressed solely by funding: **‘We cannot buy our way out of this problem.’**
- Organizations must not solely promote innovation for the sake of innovation; it must be **focused, synchronized, and delegated** correctly. One cannot simply ‘appoint’ innovation officers.
- Technology does not solely benefit the innovator; it also creates significant asymmetric opportunities for our adversaries.
- Fostering **successful innovation requires more than technology** and resources; it requires a clearly defined problem and a willingness to accept failure, learn from it, and try again.

Knowing when you are innovating successfully in a state of contested dominance is immensely difficult. Sometimes there are no clear adversaries, and thus, no clear victories. **What does winning mean?**



The evening's discussion explored the relevance of innovation to current and emerging conflict environments. The group agreed that innovation is not simply relevant to complex conflict; it is integral to countering asymmetric adversaries. Participants examined current US public and private sector organizational models and discussed whether these structures enhanced or impeded innovation, as well as how the United States could optimize these structures and develop relevant policies to promote innovation. We explored the flat, unencumbered networks within which our adversaries operate, enabling them to rapidly develop low cost, high impact, innovative solutions. For example, our enemies can produce effective IEDs for less than \$200, while we spend billions of dollars to counter this threat with only short-term success. **For every advance and innovation that the United States achieves, the enemy is able to find a rapid and inexpensive way to exploit a different vulnerability.** Although these tactics and devices have different names, they are very similar in their impact and effect. The United States needs to stop viewing current conflicts as something new and instead identify what we can learn from the past.

Though the United States is working to address the question of future warfare and is developing and implementing relevant solutions, there was consensus among participants that the nature of warfare in the future will require a more strategic construct (we currently dedicate most of our time, effort and money to a tactical construct). The group agreed that the United States and its allies are applying lessons learned as the preponderance of conflict has shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan and beyond; despite this, **we continue to have a reactive response—not a proactive, strategic framework that addresses this problem from the perspective of innovation.**

Participants generally agreed that US strategy and security architecture must address the growing complexities across future conflict. US national strategic planning is not conducive to supporting either the fight that we are in, or the ones that we may encounter in the future. Participants felt that the United States does not have a strategic vision. There is still a lack of understanding of our grand, national and policy strategies. Many senior leaders who are hired to think strategically tend to get very tactical in developing mission plans. Ultimately, we have to figure out how to plan at the strategic level and then allow operational commanders, tactical planners, and stakeholders execute on immediate and long-term goals. **We must allow innovation to come from all levels of leadership.**

There was also discussion on the outdated rules, laws, and processes that inhibit progress in executing the current war. Participants believed that these structures were modeled on the conditions of World War II, and are no longer relevant or effective today. Currently, many US structures focus on nation-to-nation and boundary-to-boundary limitations. However, adversaries do not concern themselves with these constraints, nor do they confine themselves within sectors, organizational hierarchies, or geographical boundaries. **How can we address conflict with non-state actors such**



**as hackers, terrorist groups, and multinational companies? How can we keep pace with flat, networked, and agile adversaries?** There was no easy answer to this among the dinner guests.

Participants also discussed the role of younger servicemen and women in today's fight. As the US improves its strategies and structures, we must acknowledge that we are fighting a war with servicemen and women who span generations. Many of the participants felt that quite a few of the senior leaders directing the current fight have outdated views of the world and warfare, while today's young men and women have the experience, knowledge, and critical thinking necessary to develop tomorrow's strategies. The US needs more leaders from the younger generation to develop new modes of operating and reinvigorate strategic planning. **Some felt that the military is taking a better approach to incorporating views from the younger generation by restructuring into a flatter configuration that leverages creativity, technological experience, innovation, and a future focus.** It is time for the government to unshackle itself from the old adage, "Wars are fought by young men and led by old fools," and fortify itself for a new era of conflict.

Our guests agreed that one of the major challenges in today's conflict environment is that the **US does not have a clear understanding of how to determine when we are at war versus when we are in aggressive competition with another country.** When one guest asked, "how does the U.S. determine when we are at war?" and "what is the process for determining when we go into war?" many did not have an answer. Some questioned if the US is at war with China, or if current tensions are purely a result of competition. Some believed we are at war with China due to its aggressiveness, investments, and recent moves in places such as South America, Africa, and Afghanistan. The notion of an era of "Contested Dominance" versus "Persistent Conflict" was raised and **many participants felt that the current environment was better characterized by contested dominance with friends and foes alike.** As economic hardships continue, competing nations will look for ways to attack our economic infrastructure, impact our way of life, and recruit other countries to join them in attacking US interests. Therefore, the US will need to be aware of the perspectives, desires, and concerns of current and emerging powers, as well as their implications for US interests worldwide.

We also discussed the challenges of "harnessing innovation" and measuring the impact and success of innovation on current and future conflicts. **When prosecuting conflict against irregular and non-state adversaries, how does the US know when it is successful?** What is winning? How do organizations create and foster an innovative atmosphere without losing focus of the mission at hand? There was agreement among guests that this was a challenge faced by commercial and public sector organizations alike, with some guests opting to describe innovation as a business model, and others describing the challenges of sustaining innovation for enduring time periods. **The US**



**must establish and maintain a collaborative and innovative culture that does not measure itself solely by funds allocated to R&D or innovation studies, but by the value of outcomes created and effects generated.** Innovation is and must remain an integral part of the U.S. operating model for conflict worldwide.

In the future, leaders will have to rely as much on their human and interpersonal skills as they will on their systems and technological abilities. Some believed that technology is an enabler, but it is no longer the driving force in today's fight, which has become human and population centric. **As the conflict continues to be more focused on humans and populations, technology actually distances us from the people and context that we seek to shape and influence.** If certain forecasts are correct, then we are going to increasingly interact with small groups in both isolated and urban environments where our soldiers will need to seize upon this cross-cultural competency to effectively support their missions.

There was consensus, however, that though technology presents a number of challenges and is not the solution in itself, we still require certain core technologies across the spectrum of warfare to deal with a variety of threats. The systems and technology used in today's wars include vintage 1947 equipment, but do not include the capacity required for soldiers on the ground to operate and conduct system-to-system connectivity. While technology can provide beneficial capabilities to war fighters and policymakers alike, it also presents a number of opportunities for adversaries to disrupt US operations. **The risks and benefits of a technological solution can only be understood after leaders fully appreciate the complexity of current and future conflict and the challenges that come with both.** Decision makers must balance the desire for advanced technology with a better understanding of the situations in which we may employ it.

As we wrapped up the evening's discussion, we agreed that are a myriad of challenges surrounding innovation and conflict and highlighted immediate areas of focus:

- **Conflict is growing immensely more complex, and current definitions and concepts of threats, risks, and warfare as a whole must be revisited.**
- Innovation is not only relevant and important to future conflict, it is critical to US strategic growth and global progress.
- Innovation is not fostered solely by rapid and large scale investment, and cannot be limited to the technology realm. Creative, non-linear thinking is the only way to address the future of complex conflict.
- **Innovation is not doing more with less;** innovative thinking results in 'doing the right things with what you have.'
- The U.S. needs to not only promote, but also reward and value innovation.



- **Public-private sector partnerships and leveraging of innovative best practices could yield large benefits for the Defense and Intelligence Communities.**
- Innovation must not be stovepiped. Organizations must be willing to foster 'open innovation' and understand that strategic partnerships, crowd sourcing, and other methods can yield tremendous value in enabling innovation.

### Conclusion

Most of the attendees left the dinner feeling confident in the ability of the US to continue to innovate and adapt to emerging and yet undefined future challenges. We agreed that while the nature of conflict will stay the same, the character of conflict will continue to change. As we move further into the knowledge economy, we must continue to value and facilitate open innovation and non-linear thinking. **Organizations must be adaptable and able to recognize innovation, leverage strategic partnerships, recognize the indicators of a changing future, and understand the relationship between capabilities and requirements.** We cannot buy our way out of this problem. There was general consensus that, though the US has a lot of improvements to make, we taking the right steps to foster innovative approaches that can prepare the United States and its allies for the challenges of future conflict.



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**TOFFLER ASSOCIATES**

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Toffler Associates is a strategy consultancy, helping leaders build the extraordinary organizations of tomorrow. We serve as a catalyst for change for clients with tough problems to solve, creating impact through knowledge of the forces of change that will shape the future.

To accomplish this, we employ a collaborative approach to guide clients in the development of Knowledge Age business strategies. Our Future Proof<sup>SM</sup> business consulting service provides clarity by identifying the risks and opportunities that may lie ahead, enabling leaders to implement the changes necessary to create value, to sustain growth and to succeed in future operating environments.

We work with public-sector clients, such as federal agencies, the intelligence community, associations and educational institutions, to develop and implement ways to use resources more effectively and to build lasting public trust. We work with private-sector clients, like those in the transportation, aerospace, chemical, advanced materials, information technology and defense markets, to create and execute strategies that drive top-line growth.

We find daily inspiration in working with commercial enterprises and government agencies that are creating something that really matters to people, clients who are trying to make a difference in all of our lives. Our purpose is to help them achieve that. It is the passion that unites our firm as one community.



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