

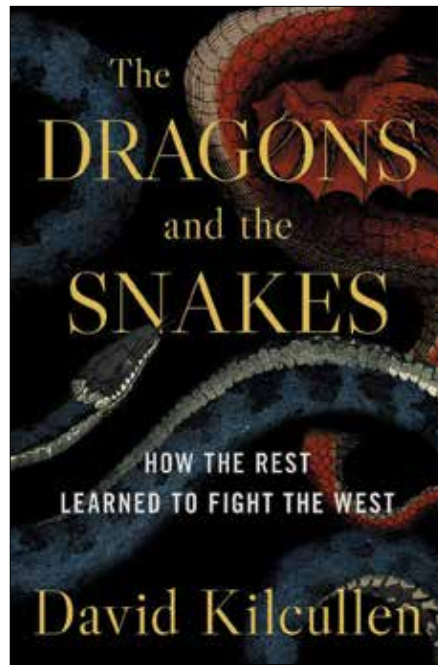
### The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder

By Sean McFate  
William Morrow, 2019  
336 pp. \$29.99  
ISBN: 978-0062843586

Reviewed by Frank Hoffman

It is said that generals always want to refight the last war. Often scholars are willing to do the same. Martin Van Creveld's *Transformation of War* (Free Press, 1991) was heavily influenced by the painful intifadas in his native Israel. Mary Kaldor's *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford University Press, 1999) was based on the criminal warlords of the ethnic Balkan clashes. In his *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Knopf, 2007), British general Rupert Smith declared that war, as he was taught, no longer existed and drew heavily on the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and his tour in Bosnia. Conventional warfare was thrown into history's dustbin and "wars amongst the people" presented as a novel paradigm shift.

These two books follow this tradition. They should prove useful in helping the U.S. policy community and modern



### The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West

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practitioners learn from recent conflicts that absorbed a great deal of the national treasury for modest gains. Yet just as those books were accused of "presentism," these books will also be accused of extrapolating the immediate past into the future.

These authors and their books share common ground. Both are experienced former military officers, with excellent academic credentials. Both have served in multiple theaters and published extensively. Sean McFate is a U.S. Army veteran and a professor in the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense. He holds a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science. His past research leveraged his experience in private military security organizations. David Kilcullen, a retired Australian soldier, was a noted counterinsurgency advisor in Iraq and Afghanistan. He served with the U.S. Department of State during the Iraq War and provided substantial advice to the development of U.S. defense

strategies since 2006. His last book, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford University Press, 2013), offered numerous insights into urban warfare. Both authors are frequent contributors to professional military education.

The odor of burnt sacred cows wafts from McFate's book, where the overpriced F-35 jet aircraft, American notions of war, and the myths of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine are torched. The U.S. addiction to technology is also taken to task: "Sexy technology does not win wars. Since World War II, high-tech militaries have been thwarted consistently by low-tech opponents. The humble roadside bomb still outsmarts America's smart weapons, and the lowly AK-47 is the world's true weapon of mass destruction if measured by people killed."

The author lays out a set of new rules that are more a series of assertions that the book is organized around. McFate concludes that "Conventional Warfare is Dead," the "Best Weapons Do Not Kill," "Mercenaries Will Return," and "Shadow Wars Will Dominate." To McFate, the salience of indigenous militias, foreign fighters, and proxy support from major competitors is rising. For those who envision the coming era of Great Power conflict as a purely conventional challenge, *New Rules* is a cold shower. The author evidently sees the recent past as prologue: "Wars will move further into shadows. In the information age, anonymity is the weapon of choice. Strategic subversion will win wars, not battlefield victory. Conventional military forces will be replaced by masked ones that offer plausible deniability, and nonkinetic weapons like deception and influence will prove decisive."

*New Rules* reminds that we do not get to reliably dictate the terms of war and that our opponents do not design their operations to fit our preferred paradigms. McFate wrote this book for a popular audience to help Americans understand the persistent state of crisis that he argues will exist around the world. He succeeds with a sense of passion and urgency that forces the reader to reconsider conventional logic and Western illusions about war.

His prescriptions are debatable, however. Proposals to invest in strategic education are sound, as are his ideas for better leveraging special operations forces and proxies. However, his recommendation to establish a Foreign Legion has dubious merit and is likely to be quickly dismissed by the American public.

In *The Dragons and the Snakes*, Kilcullen aligns with McFate. “It is clear,” he states, “that the utility of the current Western military model as a set of techniques and technologies is fading.” Kilcullen examines the major and minor threats to U.S. interests, namely Russia and China as the major problems or “dragons.” His “snakes” include the current versions of al Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State, Hizballah, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Early chapters trace the development of these nonstate actors and their active learning from the West’s campaigns to eradicate them. All chapters reflect solid scholarship and trace the evolution of each “reptile.”

Kilcullen’s China chapter is a good overview that is appropriate for classroom use, but it should be augmented with recent work on military reforms (see Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, NDU Press, 2019) and scholarship on Chinese concepts on “systems destruction” to prepare students for a more competitive People’s Liberation Army. The author makes it clear that Chinese thinking has conceptually enveloped the West and embraces combinations “that lie outside the ken of Western warfighters and thus invoke limited direct military competition.”

Kilcullen’s Russia chapter is equally useful; he offers his own version of gray zone conflict called “liminal warfare.” *Liminal* (Latin for threshold) is a term used in anthropology to capture ambiguity experienced by societies transitioning between two states of being. Kilcullen uses it to capture the transition zones between peoples and their activities that have ambiguous political, legal, and psychological status. Applied to warfare, the term aptly depicts the blurring of guerrillas, militias, terrorists, and resistance movements. The author expertly incorporates various interpretations of

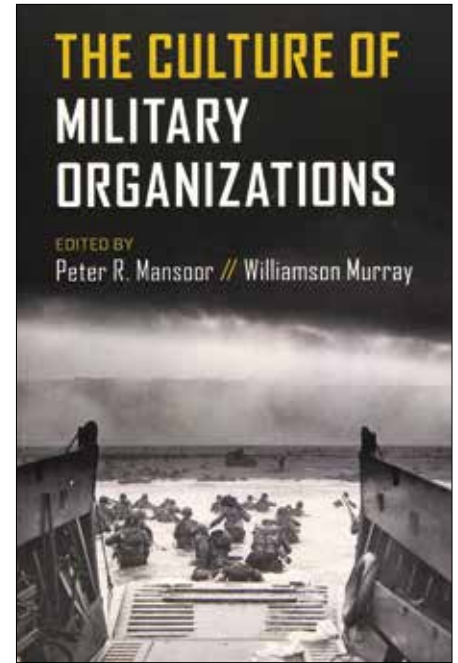
the putative “Gerasimov Doctrine” and how Moscow continues its long tradition of malign measures short of direct military confrontation. To augment this chapter, Oscar Jonsson’s *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Georgetown University Press, 2019) and Ofer Fridman’s *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicisation* (Hurst, 2019) provide supplemental depth.

Kilcullen offers three potential strategic solutions for American strategists in his last chapter, ominously titled “The Ebb Tide of the West.” The first, “doubling down,” is an expensive investment in current technologies to buy capability upgrades to allow the United States to sustain its military instrument for the near term. Accepting decline and managing its impact is captured in Kilcullen’s second approach, in essence rejecting competition and reducing costs. His preferred third option is a form of retrenchment based on offshore balancing. This option is more robust than what is advocated by most academics; it bolsters regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, prevents hostile powers from dominating key regions, and ceases efforts to actively promote democracy. Where U.S. interests require intervention against snakes, Kilcullen opts for low footprint operations such as El Salvador. However, offshore balancing undercuts regional stability by the absence of the United States and weakens the alliance architectures that are our strength against dragons. Moreover, with respect to snakes, as Stephen Biddle has argued, low footprint warfare is generally “low payoff.”

These books are written by authors with well-grounded experience in armed conflict, and both writers are engaging. Whether or not the reader agrees with their diagnoses or proposed cures, he or she will come away from reading these provocative texts with a deeper appreciation for the complexities of today’s disorder and what is at risk in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. JFQ

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### The Culture of Military Organizations

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Reviewed by Anthony King

It would be difficult to find scholars who are better qualified to edit this excellent new volume of military culture. Having retired from the U.S. Army following a distinguished career, culminating as one of General David Petraeus’s most trusted aides in Iraq in 2007, Peter Mansoor has published a number of books on military history and Iraq. Williamson Murray has been a major figure in military studies for over 30 years, producing, among many other works, the now classic three-volume study *Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) with his long-term collaborator Allan R. Millett.

At the beginning of their new book, Mansoor and Williams suggest that *The Culture of Military Organizations* is intended to address some of the shortcomings of *Military Effectiveness*: “In the three volumes of *Military Effectiveness*,