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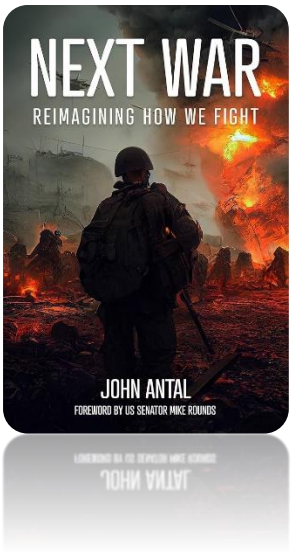

John Antal, *Next War: Reimagining How We Fight* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2023).

Reviewed by Shaheer Ahmad

'The only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old one out.' Captain Basil H. Liddell Hart's ageless maxim is relevant in the contemporary milieu where orthodox military minds are hitched to antiquated philosophies of war. *Next War: Reimagining How We Fight,* by veteran Colonel John Antal, dispels this notion by offering a cursory glance at the changing dynamics of warfare. Drawing on the analysis of contemporary conflicts—the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Israel-Hamas War, and the Russia-Ukraine War—Antal's argument pivots around the central theme of how to survive and prevail on the contemporary battlefield. He argues that Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) are key to influencing combat operations in these conflicts. It is therefore crucial to reimagine conventional warfighting patterns, rather than being infatuated with outdated operational ideas.

In his 16-chapter treatise, Antal sketches 13 tactical engagement accounts from the American Revolution to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. He identifies nine disrupters that are catalysing a shift in modern warfare. While discussing ongoing conflicts, Antal points out how advancements in modern sensor and network technologies have made the battlefield more transparent where nothing can go undetected (p.43). Based on these assumptions, he emphasises the role of robust network systems and precision strikes in future warfare.

The author highlights the exponential increase in the tempo of war due to rapid advancements in AI and quantum realms, which impedes the adversary's chance of exploiting battlefield advantages (pp. 113-115). For this, he has cited useful examples from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict where Azerbaijani forces swiftly defused Armenia's terrain advantage by employing the playbook of mobilising first, striking first, achieving air dominance, and subsequently deploying precision strikes and loitering munitions. Drawing on this illustration, Antal warns the US policymakers that China could follow this pattern while pursuing its mission to retake Taiwan (pp. 324-327).

Furthermore, Antal illustrates the use of drones in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Russia-Ukraine War. He describes how drones, particularly loitering munitions, are

tactically handicapping legacy battle systems. With breakneck speed and long endurance, drones are capable of moving with agility and staying airborne for extended periods. This provides the combatant a pivotal edge in situational awareness and hit multiple target vectors simultaneously. In the chapter *The Super Swarm,* Antal intermingles military fiction with a real-time fight between Russia and Ukraine. He documents the helplessness of Russia's Black Sea fleet, particularly sinking of the flagship vessel *Moskva* at the hands of miniature drone swarms (pp. 157-171).

In the book's second section, the author emphasises the transcendence of communication to execute joint operations and conduct cross-domain manoeuvres. Depriving the enemy's communication channels can diminish its capability to move and strike effectively. Antal cites Russia's Distributed Denial of Service (DDOS) attacks on Ukraine's Internet Service Provider Triolan, culminating in an effective takedown of broadband services. Even with this preliminary success, Ukraine's resilience remains intact. Here, the author cites the example of Elon Musk's next-generation satellite grid 'Starlink', which has enabled Kyiv to target Russia's high-value assets (pp. 222-224).

However, the most edifying part of the book is the discussion on the vulnerability of command posts in high-tech conflicts. Antal states that crippling command and control (C2) is the crux of modern warfare. This makes the battalion, brigade, and division level command posts a priority target on the enemy's 'to-do list.' To avoid being caught as a sitting duck, commanders must adopt new tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) to guard these posts from the enemy's high-end capabilities such as drones and loitering munitions. Here, Antal proposes 18 rules that he believes are critical to the survivability of command posts in contemporary and future conflicts (pp. 283-296).

Antal's ability to capture the nuances of complex concepts and operational frameworks augments the book's analytical tone. What makes the work stand out is its clarion impression, enabling a layman to grasp the key disrupters that could alter the risk calculus on the modern battlefield. Most importantly, the author proposes a shock and awe-style framework by merging all the key disrupters to inflict operational and organisational paralysis on adversary forces. In other words, Antal's playbook aims to achieve strategic surprise by rendering the adversary powerless through the scope and magnitude of one's actions.

On the other hand, there are a minefield of deficiencies that impact the overall narrative of the book. While presenting a blueprint for future warfare, there is no mention of competing arguments that reinforce the potency of traditional modes of war. The ongoing Ukraine war has reinforced the return of the war of attrition, requiring the deployment of superior resources by both sides. Prolonged campaigns, trench warfare, and mounted assaults on fortified defences have resulted in substantial human toll on both sides. This depicts the shortcomings of the role of technology in

minimising the risk to human lives. Moreover, since the book came out in 2023, it misses the fusion of human intelligence with high-tech solutions, as demonstrated in Ukraine's 2025 'Operation Spider Web' and the Iran-Israel conflict, in evaluating the impacts of cutting-edge technologies. These areas may be included in a new edition. While advocating swift and decisive victories through high-tech solutions like in 'Operation Desert Storm' (p.81), Antal also overlooks that the premature conclusion of this conflict contributed to the necessity for another campaign, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom,' in 2003. Moreover, he described the 11-day Israel-Hamas conflict as a triumph of AI systems, which helped minimise Israeli casualties. However, the ongoing human casualties, death, and destruction in Gaza temper this prognosis. Another notable gap in Antal's analysis is his instinctive reaction to rapid technological advancements. The overemphasis on AI, unmanned systems, and other technologies undermines the potency of legacy firepower systems. According to a *Forbes* commentary on the Russia-Ukraine War, artillery remained the main source of battle damage, with Russia firing 10,000 rounds per day, followed by Ukraine firing 2,000 rounds per day. This contradicts conventional wisdom, which presents AI, unmanned systems, and other technologies as alternatives to traditional firepower systems.

Overall, Antal's research provides a gripping account of how any military should fight future wars. By discussing the role of disrupters and key technologies, he provides a well-argued thesis for defence and security professionals, practitioners, and scholars of military strategy. However, overemphasis on technologies, lack of engagement with competing perspectives, and oversimplification of key concepts undermine Antal's analysis of the changing character of warfare. Addressing these shortcomings in a subsequent volume would render the study more holistic on the future of warfare.

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