

The “Six Waves” of RMA Theory, Process, and Debate

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Abstract:

Over the past two decades, there has been an intense debate in international strategic studies concerning the pace, direction, character, magnitude, and impact of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Driven largely by the quantum leaps in information and communications technologies and amplified by the changing character of conflicts of the 21st century, RMA proponents have argued that modern military organizations are on the verge of a profound discontinuous, disruptive, and a “revolutionary” paradigm shift in the means, modes, and methods of warfare. In this context, this paper reflects on the trajectory of the RMA debate and projects the intellectual history of its six stages or “RMA waves”: (1) the initial intellectual discovery by the Soviet military thinkers in the early 1980s, (2) the conceptual adaptation, modification, and integration by in the Western strategic thought during the early 1990s, (3) the climax of the RMA debate during the mid-to-late 1990s, (4) a shift to the broader “defense transformation” and its partial empirical investigation in the early 2000s, (5) second and third thoughts questioning the RMA paradigm from 2005 onwards, and (6) its re-emergence in military innovation studies from mid 2010s onwards. In doing so, it argues that notwithstanding the varying RMA visions of “discontinuous” or “disruptive” warfare that have not been implemented in practice, its rather less disruptive character has not mitigated the conceptual significance or utility of the process of military innovation.