The tech missile

BYTES AND BULLETS: GLOBAL RIVALRIES, PRIVATE TECH, AND THE FUTURE OF MODERN WARFARE
By Steve Feldstein,
Monoray, ₹699

The disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region shows why the technological upper hand matters today. The enclave has seen several clashes between Armenian-backed forces and those of Azerbaijan, including a brutal 1988-94 war that Armenia won. The 2020 war, however, changed everything: Azerbaijani forces decimated Armenia's military using Israeli and Turkish drones, with Turkey's Bayraktar TB2, an unmanned combat vehicle, offering a template for the wars to come.

In *Bytes and Bullets*, Steve Feldstein charts how military technology is reshaping warfare, a shift that began around Donald Trump's first presidential term. He cites the US's move from Cold War-era primes; such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman and General Dynamics, towards newer entities like Palantir, Anduril, Epirus, Hermeus, Shield AI, Skydio and so on as an example.

With the Cold War over, Pentagon budget cuts made it "nearly impossible for military startups to access meaningful pools of money". In 2013, Edward Snowden's leaks exposed the National Security Agency's vast surveillance programme and its infiltration of tech firms' data. Four years later came Project Maven, a 2017 Department of Defense drive to accelerate machine learning across military intelligence. Google's involvement sparked outcry, and internal protests forced it to step back.

Others saw an opportunity in the Pentagon's courtship of Silicon Valley. Palantir Technologies, co-founded by Peter Thiel, Alex Karp and three others in 2003, was backed by nearly $2 million from the Central Intelligence Agency's venture arm, In-Q-Tel. By 2026, Palantir had a reported market capitalisation of about $401 billion, rivalling blue-chips such as Bank of America, Chevron and Procter & Gamble.

The US was caught off guard in May 2023, when two 'Ukrainian' drones (Ukraine did not take responsibility) struck Russian airspace, targeting the Kremlin. The blasts caused a brief fire, but the strike was "so brazen that some experts initially doubted Ukraine had pulled it off". The Pentagon had long spent heavily on costly weapons that could strike anywhere; cheap, mass-produced drones now offered a lower-tech alternative for both surveillance and attack. This pushed the Pentagon toward firms such as Anduril, founded by Palmer Luckey after he sold his VR firm, Oculus, to Meta for $2 billion.

China's fortunes, in the meantime, have risen. The 2008 global financial crisis, which felled Wall Street banks and crashed the housing market, let Chinese leaders gauge Western weaknesses. Feldstein recalls a 2010 Southeast Asian summit where China's then foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, rounded on delegates favouring collective maritime arrangements: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact." Beijing has since invested heavily in quantum computing, hypersonic weapons and low-earth-orbit satellites. In 2022, China's GDP was $17.96 trillion against America's $25.44 trillion; BRICS, including China and India, now represents over 35% of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms.

America's waning global sway, compounded by Trump's anti-globalisation policy, marks a stark contrast with the Cold War's "closed military innovation", as Carnegie Mellon's Audrey Kurth Cronin puts it. Today, the private sector drives an "open innovation model". The real question is no longer how far the US leads China in AI, but how close either is to AGI systems rivalling "millions of brilliant minds working tirelessly... at machine speed".



Innovation no longer flows from great powers alone; smaller states are now "developing disruptive technologies, from cutting-edge microchips and air defence systems to autonomous weapons". Feldstein's book is timely: AI, largely controlled by giant tech firms, is now central to national security.

Mathures Paul

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