# The Future Is Urban: Chief of Staff Says Megacities Are the Future of Infantry Combat

*History of military conflicts:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_5V8We3hgg>

1. **Discuss these questions.**
2. Which possible changes will modern armies have to face in the new millennium?
3. How will their size and equipment change?
4. Which skills will be necessary for commanders and soldiers in future armed conflicts?
5. Will the human factor still necessarily be present in theatres of military operations?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFRvnNiB-Hg>

Much of the recent discourse regarding the future of infantry combat has centered around the long engagement distances encountered during the Afghan campaign, and the rise of designated marksmen as key elements in the infantry squad. However, arguably more important than the long-range ambushes of the Taliban were the urban engagements in both that campaign and the operations in Iraq. It seems the highest echelons of the US Army agree, as Chief of Staff General Mark Milley commented recently about the future urbanization of the battlefield [(via Military.com):](http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/03/21/chief-army-will-need-smaller-units-for-megacity-combat.html)

*If war is about politics, it is going to be fought where people live, and “it will be fought, in my opinion, in urban areas,” he said. “That has huge implications for the United States Army.”*

*“So what this means then — and I have discussed this with the Army leadership — we are going to have to … optimize the Army for urban warfare,” he said.*

*This has implications for equipment, from the “width, size and weight of tanks” to the “rotor-span of helicopters,” the general said.*

*Truly preparing for urban warfare will mean redesigning fighting units to better cope with the compartmenting nature of city streets, buildings, floors and rooms, he said.*

*“The Army will definitely have to organize differently, probably into smaller, more compartmented groups,” Milley said. “We will have to have, what I think, is a lot of relatively small formations that are networked and can leverage* [Air Force](http://www.military.com/air-force) *and naval-delivered joint fires.”*

*The service is still debating the size of these units, but “probably somewhere in the range of companies to battalions,” he said.*

*“If you think of how some of our special operations operate today, that may be a preview of how large your Army operates in the future,” Milley said. “That doesn’t mean you do away with battalions and brigades, but the fighting element will probably end up having to be a much smaller entity.”*

*Because of the proliferation of smartphones, which enable people to send pictures and videos very quickly, it will be increasingly difficult to avoid being observed, Milley said.*

*“Smaller units will have to disperse more widely; they will have to in order to survive,” he said, adding that units will have to be more mobile than they are today.*

*“If you stay stationary for any length of time, say more than a couple of hours, you are probably going to get killed.”*

*Training and leader development will also have to change to deal with the more complex and intense nature of fighting in megacities, Milley said, especially when it comes to avoiding civilian casualties.*

*“Our forces are going to have to be much more highly trained in discriminating fire — the application of direct and indirect fire with a high degree of discrimination,” he said. “We can’t go out there and just slaughter people. That’s not going to work.”*

The proliferation of smartphones alone presents a huge challenge, since one smartphone video can seriously negatively affect the legitimacy of a peacekeeping effort. Internet access gives immediate aid to insurgency groups on how to construct bombs and how best to fight allied forces. New media give radical voices a larger platform upon which to stand, potentially destabilizing at-risk regions beyond the tipping point. None of these technologies are, by themselves, bad. However, they do make the job of military forces operating in a war-torn urban region that much harder.

It is also not strictly accurate to say that urbanization will negate the lessons from Afghanistan, but if the predictions are true it certainly will color them a different shade. Instead of sharpshooters and machine guns engaging each other at extended ranges in open terrain, a heavily urbanized environment will produce highly situational combat. In a city, combat can range from up close and personal in a domicile to several hundred yards across a highway or between tall buildings. In urban warfare, smaller units may become separated from their parent units, and may therefore have to fight for long periods of time alone and without support. Adding to this problem, even minority insurgencies may be able to mount mass attacks that pose a substantial threat to smaller units, even if those units are much better trained and equipped. To counter these threads, not only will the individual weapons of the infantry need to be improved, but the precision, effectiveness, and integration of their support weapons – such as artillery and air-delivered ordnance – will need to be augmented as well.

Urbanization therefore poses as serious a problem for small arms and ammunition designers as it does army tacticians and organizers. Weapons must be short and maneuverable, but capable of medium/long range fire at the same time, without sacrificing ergonomics. Ammunition must be powerful enough to break through intermediate barriers, but light enough to allow small units to carry enough ammunition to fight independently for long periods of time if need be. Projectiles must be optimized for short-range destruction, but also capable of flying for long distances when needed.

It may be that the talk of “megacities” and other hyperbole in both the article and video make it difficult to take seriously the idea of a heavily urbanized future for infantry combat. However, there doesn’t seem to be a solid counter-argument to the fact that cities – especially in the third world – are expanding, and that urban combat and urban insurgencies have played key roles in recent conflicts. We don’t know what the future holds, of course, but it seems unlikely that current trends will reverse.