The Diffusion of Military Strategies

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This study shows the diffusion processes of innovations on military strategies. Since the notion of diffusion describes the systemic spread and systemic equilibrium in more powerful terms and demonstrates dynamism, I examined the military doctrinal diffusion patterns in terms of organizational, societal, and rational approach perspectives. These approaches are the pillars of the theoretical edifice in which I argue that it is easier to see the systemic diffusion of military strategies than the military innovations on weapons because of two factors: the characteristics of doctrinal innovations and the behaviors of innovators (gatekeepers) are different. I use the heuristic approach and examine many historical cases by focusing on military doctrines and the relationships between alliances. I use the Blitzkrieg doctrine and the member relationships between the members of NATO as case studies.

Keywords: diffusion, innovation, military strategies

Introduction

The notion of power varies across different areas. We can think of different variants of power such as economic power, cultural power, diplomatic power, military power, and the like. Although they are related with each other, military power is the most important aspect of power determinants in the international system. As a result, the issue of military innovation becomes significant for the international security environment.

Although with the changes in the international system, such as globalization and the information revolution, the understanding of the military power has been exposed to the function of many factors. However, still the importance of soldiers, in other words, the traditional military power understanding has its importance in addition to other factors. Mearsheimer (2001) argued that military power is the most important power variant and military troops hold the focal point in the military power. He argued that it is the troops that occupy the regions and keep the area under control.

Military power is correlated with the troops, the doctrinal, organizational (settings and arrangements) and cultural aspects (discipline and obedience), however, it is also related with the complexity of the military weapons systems, which provide efficiency to the military power structures. Today the battle theatre is different and it continues to change as it has ever been. The reason why this change happens is related with both the changes in the tangible and intangible goals of states. Tangible goals are the tactical level goals, in other words, they are the military targets, such as different military assets of the enemy. However, intangible goals are strategic level goals, such as gaining political or economic advantages against hostile or rival state. This also

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plays an important role on military innovations.

The military power innovation can be examined from different approaches, which are structural realist, organizational, and societal perspectives. Among these dimensions, the structural realist perspective addresses the diffusion phenomena when it comes to the military innovations better than others. It is also important to note that each of these approaches explains the factors of the theory of the diffusion of military innovations on military strategies differently, and their framework depends on the different levels of analysis.

**Literature Review**

Military innovations provide a relative advantage to the sides that can innovate or effectively adopt an innovation. This being said, military innovations hold key significance because states want to gain relative advantage especially within the military balances for systemic equilibriums. And, it is those countries that can adopt innovations significantly earlier than other adopters.

Today each new target can require a different weapon and each new defense means to protect these targets requires new counter-attack means. This is also called as action-reaction spiral of the diffusion of power by way of the military innovations. Moreover, examining the international security environment in terms of how states fall and rise contributed significantly to the understanding of the role of the state as it is still the main actor of the international system (Gilpin, 1981; Kugler & Lemke, 1996; Organski & Kugler, 1980; Waltz, 1979).

Diffusion of military power had been discussed by many authors. According to Modelski’s (1987) long cycle world leadership theory, there are four periodical cycles, which are global war, world power, deligitimization, and deconcentration. Each of these phases lasts roughly 25 years¹, and each cycle process determine the new world power which emerges after these series of cycles.

The salient aspect of the power diffusion according to Modelski happens at the last phase, because the aggregated military power at the world power diffuses, and this brings out a new global war. This cyclic relationship happens deterministically, and therefore, diffusion of power has dynamic characteristics according to him. Modelski’s (1987) remarks on international justice can be thought as putting him within liberalist camp; however, his arguments on the diffusion of power in the deconcentration phase is similar to that of the realism perspective.

According to Hoffman (1974), foreign policy should be different than before, because over years many dimensions have been added to the sole notion of power. Therefore, he defines power in broader terms, because in the new world order foreign policies should include economic and social aspects. This shows the diffusion and diversification of power, and this understanding of diffused power is economic power. The transformation of the notion of power has brought new hierarchies, and each hierarchy demonstrates a different dimension of power.

In this way, according to Hoffman (1974), we see the interaction of multiple systems. The new interdependent international system has two traditional models. First model is state of war, which means continuation of arms races, conflicts, hostilities, and the like. The second model is troubled peace, which means that the restrictions upon uses of force such as economic interdependence because of the diffusion and diversification of power and nuclear interconnection. These arguments on the new world order put Hoffman’s argument within the new institutionalist paradigm in which it is believed that there is a systemic anarchy.

¹ This is similar to the Kondratieff Long Price Waves theory.
This diffusion of power according to other liberalists, such as Joseph Nye (2002), regarded non-state actors to be important actors and to play new roles in the international system. Kegley and Raymond (1994) also considered the power concentration as it is moving toward power diffusion in a multipolar world order. Thus, all these insightful arguments indicate that there is a diffusion of power and military power is the most important aspect of power. Therefore it becomes important to consider the diffusion of military power.

The issue of military innovation is not only significant in the area of weapons per se, but also the noteworthy changes in the other areas, such as planning a military doctrine or organizing the military forces, can also be regarded as military innovations. For example, a doctrine on the fight against terrorism might be a military innovation or guerilla warfare might be another military innovation. The new or different doctrines are especially seen in the different configuration types of alliances. NATO doctrine is much more different than the USSR doctrine, and they are all military planning innovations.

When it comes to the states rather than firms, it is more difficult for gatekeepers to avoid the diffusion because states have tremendous means to achieve their goals for breaking the firewall of the gatekeepers. It is owing to the very reason that states seek security because international system is anarchic, and they follow each other very closely especially their relative military capabilities and this gets harsher if they experienced conflict between them. Waltz argues that “competition produces a tendency toward the sameness of the competitors… so the weapons of major contenders, and even their strategies, begin to look much the same all over the world” (Waltz, 1979).

However, the time for the systemic diffusion depends both on the “characteristics of the innovation” and “the influence of the innovation gatekeepers”. While sometimes states can be willing to share an innovation, sometimes they abstain from sharing technology with any other states. As an example of the first, this especially happens within the alliances as seen between the United States and Britain after the Second World War on the naval warfare technology.

As an example for the latter case, we can give weapons, such as nuclear weapons as an example for this situation, because rather than giving the technology to the friend countries, they prefer to cover others under their security umbrella. This is seen especially during the Cold War alliance configurations. This willingness is seen more on doctrinal aspects than weapons diffusion as will be seen from the cases held from the Blitzkrieg doctrine.

The factors of the diffusion of military innovations, i.e., organizational, economic, and dispute contiguity have different levels of analysis ranging from the state level to the systemic level and demonstrate different variation within them. The interaction of these factors specifies the necessary condition of diffusion of military innovations.

**Methodology**

Given the three approaches on innovativeness and the theory of the three pillars of the theory, I try to answer how does the military innovations diffuse? In order to analyze and answer the research question, I use an historical heuristic approach. The unit of analysis of the study is innovations within the military sectors. The dependent variable is the diffusion of military innovations and I boil it down to the innovation of military weapons and military strategies. In particular, I examine military doctrines. Independent variables are opportunity to acquire, military conflict contiguity, organizational rigidity, and characteristics of the military innovation per se. I use the method of qualitative heuristic approach which examines the cases in the context of
history and interaction between units of analyses—states.

**Military Innovations and Theory**

Considering military innovations, three distinct approaches can shed light on the possible spread of military innovations. These distinct perspectives are structural realist, organizational, and societal approaches. Since each perspective demonstrates different aspects of military innovations, they will be called as the dimension of the military innovations theory in this study.

From the societal point of view, militaries that are within harmonious societies are more innovative and better to be more adoptive of the innovation. Civilian-military coordination and good relations between them are also important part of this aspect. As it can be assumed that civilian influence can contribute mostly to the weapons because it requires the technological knowledge and which is highly conducive to engineering and scientific issues. However, planning part of military innovations mostly happen because of the officers within the organization, but this is very rare and as can be seen in the history, the military fighting doctrines do not change as frequent as military weapons change.

As civilian influence to military innovations most of the time demonstrates itself in the new weapons, which depend heavily on technological innovation, and the military organization side generally demonstrates itself on military planning and doctrines, it becomes crucial to distinguish military innovations from technological innovations. Some military innovation can include the application high technology, however, all military innovations do not require the use of high technology. Some states cannot afford to build military weapons but they can innovate by using the available resources efficiently. Therefore, poor states by obtaining high military effectiveness can prevail over those who use or have superior technology. This also explains why poor states can win the wars sometimes.

Moreover, this perspective can also be elucidated by looking at the cohesiveness of the different peoples within a country, and if there is minority or ethnicity discrimination, it can be assumed that it is less likely to see military organizations in which all different peoples are same, equal and in harmony. This also makes military organizations as well-functioning organizational structure and demonstrates some aspects of organizational pillar point of view.

Divided societies are more likely to avoid progress because instead of focusing on research, they try to eliminate the other party within the community from gaining influence, which, in the end, turns the game into a lose-to-lose. This eventually causes conflicts mainly stemming from the different gains from the rents within the societies. This indicates that civil societies, which have higher level of social capital, trust, and horizontal relationships rather than hierarchical relationships can help to bring about better functioning governments, and this will bring out positive effects on the military innovations.

As seen above, organizational and societal perspectives shed light on the factors needed for military innovations, however, structural realist perspective can explain better which actors (countries) might innovate and which will not. Since system structure is the key element and influences all of the policies of states, neorealism can demonstrate the possible innovation trends by considering the international system, rather than state characteristics and individual characteristics of rulers. According to neorealism, the biggest reason why states tend to military innovation is because of their external threat perception and because of the relative change within the balance of power and according to structural realism power parity means peace and power preponderance means war (Grieco, 1988; Layne, 1993; Walt, 1985; Waltz, 1959). These are all very important
contributions to show the pattern of the diffusion of military innovations.

From this point of view, if state A has more external threat or security concerns than state B, which does not have as many external threats as state A, then state A tends more toward military innovation. When we look at Germany before the First World War, we see many military innovations, and the biggest reason for this was their perception of threat, especially after the First World War. The level of external threat was so high in their perceptions; they made both many military weapons innovations and military planning innovations. For instance, Blitzkrieg was a striking development for both tactical and strategic level planning of armies. NATO has been the most powerful alliance organization in the history depending mostly on the fact that the perceived level of threat to the West was higher than ever been in the history.

Blitzkrieg is a military innovation which is a genuine new concept and combined arms warfare. As a recent example, Israel improved blitzkrieg substantially from its traditional fighting doctrine. Israel is an important example for military innovations because it exposed a very high level of external threat from the time of its foundation. The Israeli example is also very important because although militaries tend not to change within the military organization itself and unless there is a civilian contribution to the mainstream, Israeli military had the motivation to military innovations both from outside of the organization and within the organization.

Another point to note is that military innovations do not promise victory. There might be factors that cannot be controlled in the battle field, such as weather conditions, the structure of the terrain, and the like, can influence negatively the expected outcome from the military innovations. Those exogenous factors also most of the time play important roles in the outcomes of wars.

Although external threats to a state provide incentives for innovations in many areas, states, at first, tend to prioritize military innovations or the successful adoption of military innovations. The neorealist paradigm posits that international system is anarchical and that this creates a very competitive environment. Since there is no upper authority of rule-making, states put the survival and security concerns as their most important determinants of their foreign policy behaviors. Since all states tend to behave in this way under the self-help environment, they want to build power balances against each other, and alliances are the important agencies for these goals. Alliance configuration is determined according to the balance of power between states, and the most important determinant of power according to structural realism is military power. Therefore military innovations play a significant for in changing power balances.

**Case Studies: The Doctrine of Blitzkrieg and Alliance Configurations (NATO)**

Blitzkrieg is a military doctrinal innovation, and innovations similar to Blitzkrieg require a certain level of technology. For example, tanks, anti-tank weapons, sophisticated fire support units including dive-bombers and artillery are all integral parts of this strategy. These are also related with economic power in addition to organizational arrangements for successful diffusion of military doctrines.

Blitzkrieg describes a method of warfare in which the mobilization and maneuvers are very important because this strategy intends to encircle the enemy through swift maneuvers. Rather than seeing troops in a row, Blitzkrieg warfare uses spearheaded moving troops in order to penetrate the defending forces in a row of trenches. The importance of speed is seen with the penetration of the first front of the enemy line because the enemy will be unable to use its secondary mobile units against the penetrating units. Therefore, mobilized troops, tanks, panzers, effective and close fire support of artillery, and air forces are vital for the success. After
penetrating and reaching the back of the primary, main, and subsidiary fronts of defense forces, with swift maneuvers, the enemy gets encircled and trapped inside the circle by the cutting of its communication and support, such as the channels of logistics which provide maintenance of the enemy’s fighting.

However, the influence that Blitzkrieg wielded during the Second World War attracted interest from all over the world. Blitzkrieg began to be adopted with the latest technological changes and new defense tactics, such as mobile defense and avoiding concentration of power stationary in a specific area, over years. This was easier for states to adopt because when it comes to the doctrinal aspects, it is difficult to keep the know-how under the monopoly of its innovators. This has been in this way in the international system, traditionally; therefore, the emergence of each new doctrine has been effective over many years and became a paradigm.

One of the biggest difficulty of the diffusion of the military innovations on strategy and planning aspects is doctrinal innovations are difficult to see, and discerning the influence of the creativity becomes similarly problematic. However, it was explicit, on the outcome of the war. For example, when German troops invaded Poland in 1939, the collapse of the Polish troops was mainly viewed in such a manner as to suggest that the defeat was not attributable to the superiority of the doctrine, but instead due to the ineptitude of the Polish troops. Thus, France did not need to make changes to its defense plans and continued the First World War trench warfare defense doctrine. However, it became obvious after the fall of France that Germans applied a superior doctrine in its victories. But the result was different for Germans on Russian soil.

Even during the inter-war period, great powers began to adopt Blitzkrieg and started the diffusion process. States began to give importance to mobility and to use military decision weapons, such as tanks, and heavily use of air force fire support. However, it did not spread before Germany conquered most of the Europe, and allied powers could not imitate Germany before suffering enormous causalities and losses. For example, the Blitzkrieg diffused to Japan and the United States before they fought with each other during the Second World War. However, toward the end of the war, nearly all countries, having the technological means to build required military weapons for this doctrine, adopted the Blitzkrieg.

With the United States’ military innovation of nuclear weapons, the blitzkrieg doctrine began to be replaced with other doctrines over years, however, it remained important to shape the subsequent doctrines. However, updated doctrines have been adopted easily, again. For instance, the United States’ nuclear weapon monopoly did not last long because the Soviet Union acquired the technology after only four years. Nuclear weapons were intended to serve for strategic purposes of retaliation instead of using conventional weapons. However, when the Soviet Union became nuclear weapons capable, then the blitzkrieg doctrine changed into mutually assured destruction (MAD) and limited war doctrines.

One of the salient influences of nuclear weapons on the doctrinal military innovations is that nuclear weapons diffused before an appropriate doctrine for their use by the United States had been forged. After the emergence of other nuclear weapons countries in the international system, states began to adopt mutually assured destruction and limited war strategies similar to the US and Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the MAD and limited war doctrines still required mobile troops similar to the way as it was introduced by the Blitzkrieg doctrine beforehand; therefore, we see the vicious cycle of action-reaction pattern, again.

However, in the limited war doctrines, the use of large number of troops became outmoded between nuclear weapons states because of the massive retaliation possibility with nuclear weapons. The only one war between nuclear weapons states show that crises and wars between nuclear weapons states have not escalated to all-out wars, as seen in the Kargil War in 1999. Nevertheless, the number of proxy wars between the great
powers have increased, and the density of militarized international disputes over years have continued to increase up-to-date.

We can assume that the primary aspects of Blitzkrieg were shaped by the continued efforts during industrialism, especially with the combined help of the steam, rifle and telegraph to defeat the Austrian Empire by the Prussians in 1866. This is followed by the introduction and effective use of machine guns and artillery supports and applied during the trench warfare of the First World War. Then the stability of trenches turned into mobile trenches with the effective introduction of armored vehicles in the battlefield. This mobility reached its peak at the Second World War period. Battles became more decisive over the years of industrialization.

Blitzkrieg is a significant example of military innovation because it caused a huge impact on international politics and it provided a noteworthy relative advantage to its innovators before it began to diffuse. However, it also provided many strategic advantages to those who adopted this doctrinal innovation early periods of its innovation. Those who could not adopt or left in the laggard position could not gain as much advantage relative to earlier adopters.

One of the main reasons why Blitzkrieg spread so fast is particularly because of the existence of highly competitive environment of the Second World War created in the international system. As a result of this, major countries became much more alert to any changes among the relative capabilities of states. Although bilateral or multilateral information channels were closed between them, there was a considerable flow of information on the changes within the relative capabilities especially between the fighting states.

When the threat is eminent or inevitable and its early shocks are felt, states, as if, tend to open their receptors to gain more information and deduce their following course of action to the more goal oriented way. During the time of both the First World War and the Second World War, states spent enormous time and energy to provide relative advantages especially in terms of military aspects and the acquisition of information about the new use of weapons and doctrines. That is why the German Wars (WWI and WWII) increased the diffusion military innovations and especially the Blitzkrieg during the Second World War.

Germany could not avoid spreading its military innovation—Blitzkrieg—as a gatekeeper because it could not hide it from others over time. Moreover, after the successes of this strategy were witnessed by the other warring states, it became important for them to adopt this doctrine for their security and also for their survival in the anarchical international order. The environment of competitiveness made other states act in a similar way in the adoption of new advantages.

Not only did Japan adopt this doctrine successfully, but other states, such as the United States, Britain, and the USSR also adopted it. Although organizational changes are related with the societal aspects, when the need for security requires the changes, these happen very quickly, as seen with examples derived from between 1941 and 1945. Since doctrinal changes are also related with the organization and societal aspects, the incubation period should be higher when compared with the use of a new weapon or system of communication or change in the logistic systems. Therefore, it was more difficult for the adopters to get used to the mobile combined-arms warfare rather than the weapons innovation, such as nuclear weapons.

Considering the Blitzkrieg, we can assume that there is a payoff for making institutional arrangements due to many reasons but mainly because of the available time and instinct of survival. Long-term institutional changes are less costly and are adopted more efficiently than the abrupt and sudden ones. For example, because of their geographic locations, states can apply different fighting doctrines. We can think the Finnish-Russian War (also known as Winter War because of the harsh weather conditions during fighting) in 1939 and 1940 in
terms of this situation.

This war was started with the Soviet’s unsuccessful invasion of Finland, the Winter War, which lasted more than one year and caused the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the League of Nations. The interesting aspect of this war was the power differentials between the armies of the two states. Russia had almost ten times more troops than Finland and had more than 100 times number of tanks and armored vehicles than Finland. Soviet generals admired the Blitzkrieg but it was not a good idea to use a highly mobile army and change the formation and organization of the army according to it. Moreover, there were not pavements but many obstacles of rivers, lakes, ice, and the like. Therefore, advantages provided by the geography would provide tremendous benefits to any side. It was the Finnish army that obtained this advantage of cold weather, snow, long hours of night-time, and forest.

It is also important to note that, however, the main characteristics of the Blitzkrieg strategy was to bring out mobilized troops of various units together. Nevertheless, each country adopted the doctrine according to their conditions. As seen in the Winter War, the side that who could adapt according to their conditions better suffered less causality.

For example, at the beginning of the German Wars, the United States did not have much mechanized troops, Britain and France had very low numbers of motorized units, and Soviet Union was not that much different than the others. However, at the end of the war, all had their main combatant units motorized. The biggest change was seen in the United States because other states had to adopt Blitzkrieg when engaging in a war, and therefore, their observations could not provide them adequate time required. Therefore, they had difficulty in using the doctrine effectively at the beginning of their adoption.

When it comes to the United States, the situation was different because it could observe the battle theatre and adopt the doctrine more thoroughly than the others. However, United States could not have the opportunity to test its own doctrine and determine its deficiencies as effectively as other states who engaged actively for the duration of the War.

It was especially difficult for the Soviet army to reorganize its doctrine because they had a huge experience of fights not only in the Eastern side of the Second World War, but also against the Turkic minorities on the Central Asia steps, the Ottomans in the Balkans, and other minorities in the Caucasus regions. Moreover, historically, Russia engaged many wars with others such as, the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and with Asian states. This has posed some organizational rigidity on its military structure over years.

However, for the United States, the situation was completely different because it did not have much war experience; therefore, it has less organizational power to resist the doctrinal changes. In addition to this, it could easily build its own doctrine by modifying the Blitzkrieg more appropriately in a relatively shorter period of time. When the factors of more accurately observing the war theatre and less resistance to institutional change, and high degree of external threat came together, this brought about the best modification of the Blitzkrieg. But being away from the war theater and being unable to measure the possible outcomes of the doctrinal changes, nevertheless, the United States adopted the Blitzkrieg most effectively and efficiently than the others.

For example, units under General George S. Patton’s command in the northern Africa swept the Axis Power from the region successfully. He was later regarded as turned the general who turned the Blitzkrieg against its own originators (Mayer, 2009) and compared with the victories on the battlefield with German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel always. Patton’s Third Army introduced a new style of fighting doctrine based mainly on the Blitzkrieg. His doctrine mainly depended on the heavily use of armored vehicles together with
continuously pushing forward and moving so fast but abstaining from entranced infantry warfare.

It might be misleading if we were to rely solely on security concerns as being more successful for innovations or adoption of military innovations for the diffusion of military innovations because of the role of the gatekeepers also determine the future course of the diffusion. If there is little chance that gatekeeper has the power to impede the diffusion process, then the motion of the diffusion becomes slowed. However, alliances can serve to ease the diffusion process.

Since the security is priority, states can sometimes share their innovation and voluntarily if it helps their security. This is related with the security concerns because of the anarchical structure of the international system. For example, Britain shared the know-how required to build powerful naval forces. It is also striking to see that there had been no great power wars between the power transitions processes from Britain to the United States and Britain share its military innovations with the United States. Therefore, however possible to see gatekeepers voluntary share innovations, it is very rare in history.

The internal potentials of the United States can be assumed as a combination of many factors, such as education, economic development, urbanization, and industrialization, etc. All these factors are mutually reinforcing and helping the maintenance of global power position. The systemic influence, when combined with the internal potential of the United States, causes the international system to feel America’s influence in a more pronounced manner.

Therefore, it is also important to mention the Unites Stated in the diffusion of military planning and strategy. The experiences of the United States’ troops in the Second World War together with the Patton’s enhanced Blitzkrieg strategy also influenced the current military doctrine of the Western Armies. Today, NATO doctrine is the main fighting doctrine for the member states, and each member state has had to arrange its military organizations according to the rules of the alliance. The same was true for the Warsaw Pact countries.

The accurate information on the security concerns and military solutions are extremely important because it creates the pool of experiences of the member states and enable to select best course of action in the future confrontations. Therefore, what we see today is the remnants of the Blitzkrieg, but with constant development efforts of trials errors over years. This is especially important for the world’s superpower, the United States, in order to maintain its international superiority from the feedback.

In sum, it is important to consider the payoff because the experience might also be important. Since states most of the time have developed more efficient adoption of innovations by first observing and detect their problems with less participation at first and develop their adoption accordingly. As seen in the United States and Russia example. Russians could not use Blitzkrieg efficiently because of their traditional military doctrine, but they learned a lot from the shameful Winter War. Then the question becomes why the United States could easily learn from the Second World War theater and applied the Patton’s more innovative Blitzkrieg successfully lies under the reason that American military did not engage with wars with other states historically and this gave the United States and low level of organizational block for the new doctrinal arrangements.

Conclusion

Since the pillars of the theoretical edifice argued in this study reinforce and complement each other, each dimension has different, dynamically changing relations with each dimension (structural realist, organizational, and societal). Given this relationship between the theoretical pillars and the theoretical dimensions, the different
levels of analysis show the dynamic and, although interconnected, self-help environment of the international system for the diffusion mechanisms of military innovations. If they are put in an order of importance, system level (conflict contiguity) influence plays larger role than the others, and it is followed by the hybrid level (economic factor) and eventually followed by the state level (organizational factor).

Within its own dynamism, the international system is a system of rivalry and one of the most important aspect for relative advantage of one arty over the others is to halt one way or another process of diffusion. If it is not possible, then try to find new innovations in order to maintain the current advantageous position. Otherwise, states are doomed to fail and to lose their advantage relative to the other competing actors.

This brings us to the conclusion that states are still the key players in the relatively complex international system. As the theory argued in this paper shows, the only way to impede the diffusion of nuclear weapons is through the role of the gatekeepers, otherwise, diffusion is inevitable. Since the influence of gatekeepers on military strategies is not effective, it is easier to see the diffusion of doctrinal innovations than that of the spread of military weapon innovations.

References


