# Strategic underperformance: the west and three decades of war

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# The Conduct of War in the 21st Century

## Kinetic, Connected and Synthetic

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## Chapter 2

## Strategic underperformance

The West and three decades of war

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# 2 Strategic underperformance

## The West and three decades of war

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### Introduction

War is, alas, a constant in international affairs. A single look at the news reminds us daily of various conflicts and wars around the world, often persisting for decades. On average, there are 14 UN peacekeeping operations in progress annually involving 110,000 people and around 50 other peace operations carried out by regional security organizations. War is never far away. In fact, cloaked in euphemistic labels such as peacekeeping, humanitarian interventions or stabilization operations, the West has been engaged in three decades of war since the 'outbreak' of peace on 9 November 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall). While often stunningly successful operationally, the West has also been repeatedly surprised by the complex operational dynamics it encountered. Despite military superiority political strategic success has often eluded Western military efforts. It struggled to understand the character of contemporary wars.

This chapter aims to explain this paradox, starting with a sketch of the recent Western strategic history. It canvasses in Part II the variety of reasons explaining this strategic underperformance such as the denial of war resulting from a limited understanding of war and the prevailing European strategic culture. Unfounded optimism in the application of new untested concepts and institutional amnesia in the armed forces also played a significant role. In that, however, there is also a paradox as Part III shows; there has been no lack of scholarly interest in modern war often producing strategically relevant pointers that could have and perhaps should have informed strategy and operational planning at the time. Part IV resolves the paradox of this disconnect. Western militaries have been confronted with an expanding array of mission-types that governments could not have expected. Such defence policy fluidity and continued defence spending reductions, hamper organizational learning. Part V concludes with a retrospective mosaic of five images of contemporary war which serves as a warning for thinking about future war and defence policy. While many defence analysts harp on uncertainty, the past three decades actually contain sufficient information to offer a rather sound and prudent perspective on what, as a minimum,

Western militaries can expect and should be prepared for so as to avoid another three decades of strategic underperformance.

## Three decades of war: a brief strategic history in three parts

European and US armed forces have been deployed in roughly three dominant strategic contexts, which more or less coincide with three periods: 1990–2001, in which peacekeeping and peace enforcement were central, a period sometimes also referred to as the strategic pause; then 2001–2014, in which the reconstruction of Afghanistan dominated military activities and counter-terrorism became a regular military task; and 2014–2020 where the shock of the Islamic State (IS) and the new assertiveness of Russia forced a rethink.

### *1990–2001: peace operations in the Balkans*

Almost immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, civil war broke out in Yugoslavia. The West reluctantly commenced a peace operation to keep the warring parties apart and to force a truce according to the then current classic Blue Helmet model. This model assumed it concerned a conflict between two states, both with a functioning government, that accepted the presence of the peace force which would retain strict neutrality and was only allowed to use force for self-defence.[1] The Blue Helmets therefore had no heavy weapons and any escalation would depend on UN permission to call in air support from Operation Deny Flight. [2]

These turned out to be incorrect assumptions. It was a civil war and the warring parties, Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Bosnian Serbs, violated temporary truces when it suited them. There was no peace. So-called Safe Areas, a new and ad hoc concept introduced, proved to be extremely vulnerable and Western politicians were not committed to actually defend these. When air support was requested by Blue Helmets and the UN after a long time threatened to carry out symbolic air strikes, UN observers were frequently taken hostage as a counter-measure, immediately neutralizing the UN threat. Only after the horrors of Srebrenica did a willingness to move from peacekeeping to peace enforcement emerged.[3]

Similar vicious dynamics frustrated NATO in 1998–1999 when it became clear that Milosevic had no intent to end ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. After much diplomatic haggling, NATO countries reached consensus in March 1999 to move to a robust humanitarian intervention in the form of an air offensive, Operation Allied Force. At a tactical level, NATO's professionalism and military superiority were beyond dispute. But the credibility of NATO and the severity of the attacks were unimpressive. The operation hesitantly started at a low intensity. Strategy was marred by disagreement among NATO member states about the types of targets to be attacked and whether escalation was necessary, and by common concern for risks to aircrew and civilian casualties. The targets that were attacked had little actual

political weight with Milosevic. Only when the credibility of NATO itself came into question did political willingness coalesce to escalate, attack more strategically relevant targets, and sustain the operation until Milosevic showed willingness to withdraw his troops from Kosovo.[4]

### *2001–2014: reconstruction of Afghanistan and COIN*

In retrospect, the 1990s were just a strategic 'pause'.[5] The horrific attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 shattered the illusion of security in the West. Where the US proclaimed the global war on terror, Europe preferred statebuilding as a strategic military response, arguing fundamentalist groups found sanctuary in weak and failing states.[6] This liberal statebuilding model, based on Western societies, aspired to create a ring of 'well governed' countries around Europe through the implementation of the rule of law, an effective and representative democratic political system, and the restoration of the security and economy in war torn countries. It called for a joint or 'comprehensive approach': the contribution of and cooperation between military units and other governmental organizations and NGOs.

Statebuilding activities, however, got off to a slow start in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the Taliban was able to quickly fill the resulting security gap when it became clear that the international force was far too small to exert influence all over Afghanistan. Statebuilding requires security but the increasing threat of Improvised Explosive Devices and ambushes necessitated prioritizing protection of own troops and fighting an assortment of irregular fighters. While successful on a tactical level, these actions also slowed down the pace of reconstruction activities. From 2007 it had to be recognized that NATO faced an insurgency. The answer was a rediscovery of counterinsurgency (COIN), a combat mission, an unwelcome message for politicians in Germany and the Netherlands, for example, and a task Western armed forces were unprepared for: knowledge and expertise in irregular warfare were lacking. Fighting such adaptive opponents was also extremely complex due to the many restrictions imposed on Western units regarding the use of force.[7] The mission ended in 2014. Afghanistan is still not stable, witness the frequent bomb attacks there.

### *2014: Russia and the rediscovery of collective defence*

That year followed a geopolitical shock, the annexation of Crimea by Russia. It was a watershed moment.[8] In 2010, the NATO Strategic Concept considered interstate threats near the NATO treaty area very unlikely. Yet, from 2014, the new rivalry with an assertive Russia became the central strategic problem again presenting Europe with three strategic challenges: (1) hybrid warfare, (2) the rediscovery of conventional deterrence and (3) the rediscovery of nuclear strategy.

Hybrid warfare, the Western label for Russian actions during the annexation of Crimea, refers to the orchestrated deployment of subversive activities, psychological warfare, media manipulation, deception activities, cyberattacks and intimidation of politicians. It aims to exert influence without applying overt military force, remaining deliberately below the threshold of violence of the Western concept of war. It is the zone between peace and war. While a time-honoured stratagem, the West had lost sight of it and was also surprised by the impressive military modernization of fighters, tanks, anti-aircraft systems, and surface-to-surface missiles, cyber capabilities and electronic warfare assets coupled with demonstrations of large-scale exercises – 'snap exercises' – in which sometimes more than 100,000 troops moved quickly over strategic distances, presenting an intimidating threat to Eastern European NATO member states. The shock was reinforced by the recognition that the credibility of the conventional deterrence of the West, and thus the collective security concept of NATO, was in doubt as Europe had long lost capabilities and expertise for high intensity warfare. This also applied to the nuclear dimension.[9] While Russia is prepared for a (limited) nuclear war in Europe there has hardly been any discourse about nuclear deterrence since 1990. As more than one report concluded, NATO does not have an adequate response to a Russian escalation, a sobering observation for the Baltic States.[10]

If we accept that the three decades of war started with George Bush's call for striving towards a new and liberal world order in 1990, subsequent interventions, while motivated by laudable humanitarian concerns, can be considered wars for expansion and maintenance of the liberal world order. Undeniably, the three decades' war saw remarkable tactical military performances, innovative operational concepts, demonstrations of military superiority and an unprecedented ability to reduce the risk not only for Western military personnel but also that of civilian casualties and collateral damage. Moreover, peacekeeping operations generally did alleviate human suffering, after a while and for a while (many wars have flared up after initial peacekeeping success). However, while toppling authoritarian regimes was achieved at remarkable low costs, the aftermaths of such societal upheaval in Iraq and Libya has proven to be catastrophic for the people and the wider region. And interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have been very costly in financial terms and in lives lost, and have not produced the long-term stability and societal transformation so desired. At the dawn of the third decade of the 21st Century, one must conclude that the Western use of military force underperformed strategically.

## Explaining the strategic underperformance

Many explanations for these military-strategic problems have been advanced. First, the exceptional strategic culture that prevailed within Western European societies. The military instrument had lost its value and

legitimacy, and, as John Mueller argued, by 1989 major war had become sub-rationally unthinkable in the West. Soft power – the positive effect of globalization, liberalism, international treaties and organizations – was considered more important in the future than hard power. Europe was safe. Only humanitarian operations justified investment in defence.[11] Instead of war, these were labelled with terms such as peacekeeping operations, training missions, reconstruction missions, or humanitarian interventions, even though the actual operational dynamics no longer matched these euphemistic labels. War had 'disappeared' from the societal frame of reference.[12] 'Europe lives on Venus, America on Mars', argued Robert Kagan in his acclaimed book *Of Paradise and Power*, raising a warning finger towards Europe.[13]

This was an optimistic denial of history indeed and also removed understanding of the strategic logic of the vicious dynamics in which military units entered, and of what Western military units were actually concerned with. And that was waging war in the famous Clausewitzian sense: trying to impose the will on an opponent by military means. Europe's limited view became apparent in the Balkans and Rwanda, for instance, where ethnic cleansing, political massacres and rapes as a barbaric by-product were not recognized as integral parts of a targeted warfighting strategy of the warring parties. The limited legalistic Western perspective on what war is, when and how it can be waged, by whom and against whom, also blinded many in 2014 during the annexation of Crimea: there was no clash between two armies and hence did not resemble the paradigmatic image of war.

A second factor concerns risk aversion: a central feature of Western strategic culture is the almost obsessive concern about risks to military personnel, but especially for collateral damage and civilian casualties. This is partly because the use of precision weapons in various missions managed to limit these risks to a historically unprecedented low level which as a result became the political and ethical norm and expectation. This in itself is a valuable development. Christopher Coker called the Western way of war 'Humane Warfare', because it was accompanied by an unprecedented respect for the law of armed conflict and because the West only waged war over humanitarian interests, or at least could justify an intervention in that way. However, if civilian casualties were to be regretted, this could lead to critical media and political questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the operation. Such sensitivity to risks translated into stringent restrictions on the use of force during missions and often an unrealistic emphasis on protecting both forces and civilians.[14] Opponents of all kinds, such as Karadzic, Saddam Hussein, Mullah Omar, and Gaddafi, have exploited this sensitivity to the full.

A third factor might be termed strategic fuzziness, namely the denial of war has also been accompanied by neglect of the associated strategic frame of reference, resulting in virtual strategic illiteracy and a decline of strategy.[15] Basic principles of military strategic thinking have frequently been

ignored or, in any case, have been less prevalent over other considerations. For example, during Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force, not strategy dictated the plan of attack, but a list of targets that NATO member states could agree on after a consensus seeking political process regardless whether these actually represented politically relevant coercive value.[16] In Afghanistan there was no strategy.[17] Fighting the Taliban, itself a necessary tactical activity, filled the gap, Hew Strachan concluded.[18] This also applied to the concept of the Comprehensive Approach, the 3D approach which took the place of strategy, but was merely an inward-looking organizational concept that had never really proven itself and faltered in implementation because the participating non-military organizations did not necessarily have the same objectives or level of commitment, nor sufficient capabilities, nor the willingness to align their activities with military units.[19] As during the various Balkan crises, lack of unity among Western states also affected Operation Unified Protector in 2011 and mounted a serious coherent response towards Russia in 2014.

Fourth, missions often featured ill-defined objectives and mission creep; the mission increased in size, aims and complexity. In the Balkans, Blue Helmets had to initially observe truces, escort convoys, then contain violence, and guard (but not protect) safe areas and, eventually, to force the leaders of the warring parties to the negotiating table. Exactly what success entailed was not always evident or measurable with common military criteria. The utility of force, Rupert Smith argued, is no longer about winning a victory but creating a condition in which a political solution can be sought.[20] While true, that offers little guidance to military personnel. In Afghanistan and Iraq, ISAF pursued 'maximalist' objectives: the complete redesign and reconstruction of a neo-patrimonial conservative and politically corrupt society that was not Western-oriented and had no tradition of effective state administration according to Western democratic model. Diligent efforts were made to find criteria that could provide insight into the stability of a country, improving the legal system or setting up an accountable governmental structure but how do you measure success if the objective is to rebuild an entire society or a province?[21] Moreover, the objectives could differ between contributing member states.[22] Merely participating in the mission was the primary political goal for many countries. Finally, the resources made available were often not in line with the objective, size and complexity of a mission. In the Balkans, the UN never got the 36,000 blue helmets needed in the first few years. In Afghanistan it proved difficult to generate sufficient international contributions. COIN and statebuilding missions require a large force and a long breath. Even when ISAF was finally 130,000 strong, this proved insufficient for such a large area against a tenacious and tough Taliban.[23] 'Unwinnable' as Theo Farrell titled his study on the British deployment in Afghanistan.[24]

Finally, misperceptions, knowledge gaps and institutional amnesia have been important strategic problems. First, the planning of the initial peace

operations in the Balkans erroneously assumed that the civil wars there had strong similarities to previous conflicts in which classical peace operations were conducted. Second, the armed forces and academic institutions had little knowledge of the nature of these civil wars, their motives, their origins and the logic of violence employed by warring parties. Third, there was hardly any knowledge about the dynamics of coercive diplomacy: the question of how, with limited resources, one can credibly impose one's will on an opponent and force it to make concessions or stop its actions. Fourth, an unfounded optimism about the success of sometimes still untested strategic concepts. The mission in Afghanistan was undertaken without empirical evidence to support the idea that the liberal statebuilding model could be successfully implemented in a fragmented non-Western country.[25] Finally, institutional amnesia: knowledge and expertise had been lost on counterinsurgency, and, as became evident in 2014 in many European states, also on high intensity interstate warfare, including nuclear deterrence.

## The paradox: a vibrant study of war

The paradox is that there was no shortage of growing insights into strategic issues. Indeed, the study of war flourished, precisely because of the strategic and operational problems that Western armed forces encountered, as a brief and selective sketch of the intellectual landscape will show. Desert Storm inspired a heated debate about the significance of it for the future of Western warfare.[26] One camp argued a Revolution in Military Affairs was taking shape. New precision weapons, stealth fighters, cruise missiles, electronic warfare systems, new sensor platforms, all connected by data links, yielded an unprecedentedly effective force capable of defeating Iraq (the world's fourth army at the time) without incurring major losses. These new technologies led to new operational concepts such as Network Centric Warfare and, what has come to be called, the New American Way of War: the use of precision weapons, optimal use of air superiority and, if possible, avoiding ground troops in direct combat with the opponent.

In academic circles, these new technologies and the Balkan challenges led to a rediscovery of the theory of coercive diplomacy and deterrence.[27] How can a leader like Milosevic be forced to accept the demands of the West with only limited use of military force? What political preconditions should be kept in mind? Which target complexes should be threatened or attacked, and how intensively, to exert effective political pressure? What new strategic opportunities did precision weapons offer? And above all, what explained the failures of Western conventional deterrence?[28]

European analysts doubted Desert Storm's relevance because such a war no longer seemed likely. Studies instead focused on the role of violence in peace operations and the limits of the classic Blue Helmets model, leading to suggestions for 'wider peacekeeping' and 'robust peacekeeping' and, after the horrors of Srebrenica and Rwanda, to the development of the peace

enforcement concept.[29] Critical studies examined to what extent humanitarian interventions could actually end civil wars arguing that controlling violence often seems feasible, provided that UN troops remain in a conflict region for a long time. Tackling the root causes hardly appeared possible. Others advocated intensifying humanitarian interventions. Sovereignty should no longer be an obstacle to intervene when a regime oppresses its own population.[30]

Other studies focused on the nature of the civil wars, arguing these were 'New Wars' that could not be understood from the Western instrumental strategic perspective. New types of warlords were not seeking peace; they exist in a mutual parasitic-symbiotic relationship to continue the local war in order for each to maintain their position of power. War is an end in itself and peace is not desirable. Others discussed whether 'old hatreds' were the causes, or economic deprivation. A third category pointed to the instrumental role that ethnicity, religion and nationalism play in civil wars demonstrating how leaders can mobilize religion, ethnicity, myths and symbols to create enemy images and gradually legitimize extreme violence against 'the other'. For those who participated, the war gave meaning to their existence, turning war into an existential experience and not an instrumental one.[31]

The horrific attacks of 9/11 inspired a wealth of studies on the apparent new form of catastrophic terrorism, on radicalization processes, the logic of suicide bombings and the role of religion.[32] Here, too, studies on Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Hezbollah and more recently IS show that the Western instrumental perspective on war may partly explain the behaviour of such groups, but also that it is a limited and culturally determined one. The 9/11 attacks, Jurgensmeyer concluded, were the manifestation of an everlasting 'cosmic' metaphysical and existential religious battle, or so the perpetrators of the attacks experienced it.[33]

The Second Lebanon War of 2006, a rude awakening for Israel, also showed the limitations of the traditional categorization of types of wars used by Western academics and military personnel. Hezbollah, a terrorist movement, now featured an arsenal of medium to long range missiles, weapons traditionally not associated with terrorist organizations, and applied tactics of different types of warfare: standard guerrilla tactics but also positional defence of villages, whereby Hezbollah managed to take out Israeli tanks. This mix of terrorist tactics, guerrilla type actions and regular army operations, combined with a sophisticated media organization, inspired Frank Hoffman to call it Hybrid Conflict, drawing attention to this category-breaking aspect.[34]

Strategic narratives and so-called 'Virtual War' – the use of internet and social media – had now become an obvious key front. Hezbollah claimed victory over Israel, not because of military success, but through a targeted media campaign. Elsewhere groups such as the Al-Qaeda, Taliban and IS also boosted the perception of their power through showing social media images of suicide bombers, horrific killings and ambushes on Western troop

patrols, all of which were carried out, not because of their immediate tactical military effects, but rather to produce propaganda material.[35] By promoting sensational media images, terrorist groups capitalized on the 'power of failure': even if attacks missed their primary target they proved they still existed and the government was failing in its counter-terrorist strategy. In response, a flurry of studies and new doctrines suggested counters to such narratives or ways to employ them proactively.[36]

Right from the start of the mission in Afghanistan there was an intense discussion about the validity of the liberal statebuilding model and its strategic value, with most analysts agreeing that its core assumptions were flawed and building local institutions and bodies that have local legitimacy should take priority, even if they are based on norms and values that are diametrically opposed to those of the West.[37] Meanwhile, in response to the strategic and operational problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, classical works on counterinsurgencies were reviewed for their current relevance. Traditional concepts such as hearts and minds campaigns, and clear-hold-build were rediscovered, but also criticized as contemporary insurgencies differed greatly from the groups on which the classical COIN theorists based their work. Insurgents are no longer necessarily intent on taking over the state and no longer was there a dichotomy of a state against one insurgent. Instead, insurgent and terrorist movements are not monolithic organizations and within such movements several groups may compete with one another.[38]

The problems with counterinsurgency inspired studies into alternatives that could offer a 'low footprint-low risk' solution. Counterinsurgency, like statebuilding, is personnel-intensive, requires long-term commitment and is highly dependent on the quality and legitimacy of the host nation's government. Moreover, it potentially leads to a significant number of casualties among Western military personnel and they are rarely successful.[39] The success of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 in which the Taliban was ousted by the combination of special forces, air power and local rebels, or proxies, brought proxy warfare into the spotlight. This model has since also been used successfully applied against Gaddafi in 2011 and IS in Iraq yet also critically reviewed as it leaves the fight to the proxy and success depends on to what extent and for how long the interests, objectives, stamina and risk assessments of the Western coalition match those of the proxy forces.[40]

A second alternative was presented by armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Drones allow prolonged surveillance of members of terror movements and insurgents and engage them in so-called targeted killing actions. Beyond the immediate destructive effects, this may also serve as a deterrent. However, fierce critique argued this practice constituted illegitimate 'extra-judicial killing' and would lead to the casual use of force because it entailed few risks politically. Moreover, a PlayStation mentality was expected: a drone attack might look like a video game for young drone pilots. War then becomes surreal and moral disengagement and dehumanization

occur, explaining, according to critics, the apparently large number of civilian casualties. Subsequent empirical studies demonstrated that many of the initial concerns and criticisms were unjustified. The Red Cross even concluded that carefully deployed drones made it possible in principle to better follow the rules of humanitarian war law than with manned aircraft.[41]

Finally, Cyberwarfare. This became a dominant topic after the Russian cyberattack on Estonia in 2007, the increasing Chinese cyber activity and the Stuxnet attack on Iran in 2012. Early studies contrasted cyberattack characteristics with those of traditional kinetic attacks with high tech weapons, suggesting cyber weapons are available to all kinds of non-state actors; they are most likely 'one-shot' weapons (once used, a defence will be developed quickly) and that effects of cyberattacks are transient. Whether cyberattacks can have strategic effects and whether they can play a role as a deterrent are an ongoing debate. At the same time, cyber warfare will lead to a substantial power shift and a potential threat to the international legal order (see also Chapters 13 and 14).[42] Another strand of inquiry questioned to what extent the existing framework of international and humanitarian law of war is sufficient for cyber warfare, while Thomas Rid challenged whether cyberattacks can be considered war in the Clausewitzian sense at all.

## Understanding the paradox of strategic underperformance

There is a remarkable paradox: on the one hand problems that can partly be traced back to lacunae in the strategic frame of reference, while on the other hand a parallel blossoming of the study of war producing strategically relevant insights that could and perhaps should have been a source of influence during policy and strategy developments at the time. This paradox has an almost trivial explanation. Thorough academic work takes time and is therefore inevitably reactive. It took several years to rediscover and update knowledge about coercive diplomacy. Revision of peacekeeping doctrines also took years, including the trauma of Srebrenica and Rwanda and the subsequent crisis in UN peacekeeping operations, in which the West was reluctant to set up or participate in UN operations. It also takes a long time for these kinds of new insights to be incorporated into military doctrines, UN manuals, new curricula in university education programs and military courses. It then remains to be seen whether such knowledge can also influence a strategic decision-making process in time.

Studies on institutionalization processes, learning processes and military innovation also suggest that the dissemination and embedding of new insights, doctrines and practices does not always proceed quickly in armed forces, with their strong identity and organizational culture, and their inherent conservative nature regarding ideas that may not yet have demonstrated their merits in practice.[43] Moreover, narrow organizational interests and inter-service rivalry, service-specific ongoing investment programs and national political priorities can all act as a filter, downplaying analyses and

lessons learned that are perhaps not irrelevant but not in the interest from a specific service's perspective which is in the middle of a fight for shrinking budgets. Moreover, it can be argued that the most recent war is a unique and one-off case (the fallacy of the significant exception), or that a particular case will not often reoccur for a particular country. Analyses are thus politicized.[44]

Furthermore, during operations deployed units were forced to engage in continuous and rapid adaptation processes to respond to the tactical situation on the ground which invariably proved different from the initial military and political assessments. This could result in new tactics, rapid introduction of new equipment or requests to adjust Rules of Engagement.[45] Units passed on painful experiences, often through informal learning and communication processes. In a force with institutional lessons learned processes and associated organizations such as in the United States (and to some extent also in the United Kingdom), this resulted, with some delay, in excellent new doctrines.[46] However, understandably, in the context of ongoing tensions among defence organizations, the institutionalization – internalization – of lessons learned in units has often been problematic, or has been neglected, certainly if no formalized learning processes existed, which was the case in most European armed forces.[47]

An additional factor has been the fluidity of defence policy and the subsequent rapid pace of change that the armed forces have had to respond to since 1990. The geopolitical scope of their efforts and the variety of mission types only increased. From fully educated in, trained and equipped for Air-Land Battle, Follow-on-Forces-Attack and joint warfare in which infantry, armour, artillery and fighter aircraft would coordinate to combat the Red Enemy, to the unarmed Blue Helmet UN missions to keep peace that was not there. From the German plains to African zones of turmoil to alleviate humanitarian needs, from the Atlantic to intercept Russian submarines to combat piracy in the Indian Ocean, to Afghanistan to rebuild the country and suppress a vicious insurgency. And, having just returned from Afghanistan and the skies over Libya and Iraq, it turned out that units had to prepare again for large-scale warfare, including nuclear deterrence. This is just a sampling of the high tempo and scope of strategic and operational changes that Western armed forces have faced, amid ongoing austerity, force reductions, the closure of barracks, headquarters and air bases. After one type of mission or conflict a different type of mission demanded the attention of the same units, with the other type requiring substantially different expertise. That happened in 1990, in 2001 and reoccurred in 2014: now the demand for expertise, training and exercise for COIN missions with a focus on a comprehensive and population centric approach, and non-kinetic influence methods, is less pressing for most European armed forces than regaining expertise in waging large-scale enemy-centric combat.

This has a direct influence on the question which knowledge and expertise will be institutionalized and updated. Moreover, many European member

states do not have a national operational headquarter where military strategy is developed; that theme has de facto mostly been delegated to NATO. In various countries there is also no intensive contact between the theoretical academic world, the ministries of defence and foreign affairs and the 'operators' within the armed forces. And sometimes, Elliott noticed, those communities talk in different languages; they are separate epistemological communities.[48] While these differences are to be expected, the danger lurks of institutional isolationism and institutional amnesia is then to be expected: every organization views the strategic problems from its own limited perspective and from its own organization-specific rationality.

## The shadow of the past

While in light of these factors criticism of Western politicians and military commanders must be nuanced, the costly insights and traumas of the three decades of war should not go unheeded as they aided our understanding of contemporary war. Whereas up to 2014, it could be argued that real security risks were far away, Europe, and the West is once again confronted with and surprised by tragic security policy developments nearby: strategic competition, an assertive Russia, the rise of nationalist, right-wing extremist groups and authoritarian governments, all of which risk undermining cohesion within the EU and NATO. At the same time, there is little to suggest that the situation in the Arc of Instability will change substantially and positively in the coming years.[49] In that sense the three decades of war offer sufficient information to provide a plausible image of the future Westerns governments and their militaries should be prepared for.[50] The future is less uncertain than generally believed to be, or, as Nicholas Taleb stated provocatively, the future is here, the most important parts of it were made long ago.[51] It suggests that the variety of types of war and modes of warfare encountered during the past 30 years and captured in the following five images will probably offer a minimum baseline for thinking about the conduct of war in the next decade.

One dominant school of thought sees continuity with wars revolving around vicious actions of violent non-state actors such as IS and criminal organizations, while the distinction between the type of actor is actually meaningless. Sometimes ethnicity or religion is a driver for the struggle, but often it goes hand in hand with the pursuit of economic profit. Their battlefield is increasingly the city, an environment in which it is difficult for Western soldiers to operate.[52] There will be 'durable disorder'. This harps back to van Creveld's 1989 book *The Transformation of War,* Kaldor's New Wars thesis from the 1990s and Hoffman's Hybrid Conflict concept from 2007. According to McFate, these groups will increasingly be able to inflict damage upon Western countries via cyberattacks, corruption and the use of drones.[53] They can easily organize themselves into 'smart mobs' via social media. With their barbaric tactics, they will be able to intimidate

populations, echoing past visions of the future that warn of expanding anarchism in much of the world.[54]

Mary Kaldor argued, in light of the above, that Western states must be prepared for intra-state wars, humanitarian crises and corresponding humanitarian operations. Indeed, most analysts expect humanitarian crises to increase in number. Coining this image the 'liberal peace security culture', she associates it with effective international organizations such as the OSCE, the EU and the UN. Continuing on the laudable ideals of the 1990s and the concept of Human Security, this cosmopolitan vision sees a future in which wars in failing and fragile states must be resolved and violence curtailed through peacekeeping operations to alleviate humanitarian suffering. To this end, Western armed forces must act *de facto* as cosmopolitan police units that provide security and stability in villages in order to create space in which to start a peaceful political process.

The third image disagrees with Kaldor, arguing that the future, like the past, is irregular, and militaries will deploy predominantly in a counter-insurgency role, in a multitude of protracted conflicts in unstable regions, using mainly special forces, training of proxy forces, sophisticated surveillance systems capable of long-term observation of areas and armed drones if necessary to perform a precision strike on a few individuals.[55] The ambition is not so much to defeat the insurgents or terrorist movements as to curb the risks these groups can present for increasing regional destabilization and/or as a direct threat to Western societies. In that it continues on the Global War on Terror, the so-called Long War, and US operations ongoing in several African countries as well as against IS.[56] 'Surrogate Warfare', according to Krieg and Rickli: the West tries to exert influence with high technology and minimal physical presence and therefore political risk in conflict areas.[57] War as risk management indeed, and certainly immaculate.

The fourth image concerns the renewed geopolitical rivalry between the United States (with Europe at hand), Russia and China. The concept of hybrid threats has recently been supplemented with terms such as 'new total warfare', 'political warfare' and 'gray zone warfare'.[58] All of these suggest that strategic competition should be viewed as war, in the sense that, just as during the Cold War, strategy concerns a wide range of instruments and activities in various military and especially non-military domains, and second, that in the application of those instruments it can affect various sections of Western societies. Defence requires a so-called whole of society approach to guard against continuous use of non-kinetic actions intent to exert influence such as economic espionage through cyberattacks, economic sanctions and financial warfare, bribery and intimidation of politicians (and liquidation through poisoning if necessary), and financing of militant anti-European political groups in democratic states and even providing these groups with weapons.[59] But it is also about gaining influence through 'cool' social media, including the distribution of fake news.[60] Hackers, troll armies, tech companies, media organizations, banks, research centres, academic

institutions and energy suppliers all are actors in this strategic competition. War and peace, concepts categorically distinguished in the West, overlap.[61]

Finally, contradicting John Mueller, echoing the events since 2014, various authors see a return of large-scale conflict in addition to the 'Cool War' just outlined. War in the classical sense, like an armed conflict between two large countries, is no longer considered impossible and less improbable than, for example, in 1999. The damping effect of international institutions is steadily diminishing and the need for authoritarian regimes to pursue aggressive foreign policies for national purposes is increasing, as is their capacity for offensive actions. Small-scale 'probes' are expected which will not justify a collective armed response from the West, yet slowly aim to change the status quo and undermine the power position of the West (especially the United States) and test the willingness to commit to serious reprisals. New technologies will be used such as hypersonic missiles, swarms of drones and killer robots. AI will analyse large amounts of data from large numbers of networked commercial and military sensors and satellites.[62] All enhance the risk of escalation.[63] This vision reflects the ongoing shift in the balance of power, something the COVID-19 crisis is expected to accelerate, with a declining influence of the United States, and thus of the West. The liberal world order is subject to erosion and liberal Western ideas are under discussion, in both non-Western and various Western countries.[64] This is not a return to the Cold War, because unlike that period, actors are now actively seeking to disrupt stability. We will enter an interregnum in which ideology will once again play an important role. Fukuyama has been discredited: there is in fact a competitor for Western liberalism: authoritarianism. The question is which international order will win this competition.[65]

## Conclusion: strategic history and the multiple faces of war

Like the past, the future of war is plural and defence policy based on just one particular future scenario is irresponsible.[66] As Clausewitz famously argued, war is a many-headed and changeable phenomenon, like a chameleon. In retrospect the West has, arguably, not taken this to heart sufficiently. Not all futures are equally relevant for all countries of course. The future of war looks partly different for the Europeans than for the United States. Yet, if strategic surveys combined with what we know of the past three decades may serve as guidepost, for many Western states the strategic panorama holds a future in which they will continue to be forced to act in a context of sophisticated barbarism, launching peacekeeping operations to resolve humanitarian emergencies, and do so while limiting political risk as much as possible by relying partly on proxies. At the same time, it will have to be alert and proactive in the context of the Cool War, which is part of a strategic competition that also takes place on European territory which also demands taking seriously again the risk of major war and to enhance conventional and nuclear deterrence credibility.

War must regrettably be put back into the Western societal discourse, not to casually consider it as a normal feature of international affairs and wage it with a degree of indifference, but to regain the frame of reference so that we can understand this tragic phenomenon in all its facets and deploy the military instrument strategically, if necessary. Perhaps the intellectual father of War Studies, Sir Michael Howard, was right when he wrote in 2000 that war is the norm while peace is a recent fragile invention and a historical exception.[67] War, alas, like in the past, has a bright future.

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