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Out of the Shadows: Ukraine and the Shock of Non-Hybrid War

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Abstract

For two decades, a large body of security practitioners and scholars axiomatically expected “future war” to be ambiguous and hybrid, based on recent cases. The scale and overt form of the Russia–Ukraine war, which begun on February 22, 2022, demonstrates the limits of this orthodoxy. This article asks why informed opinion fell prey to such false expectations. It argues that as well as the pathologies of fashion in military-academic circles, there was an intellectual failure. Those who confidently expected war to remain in the shadows did not take seriously enough war’s political nature, and the possibility that it will intensify as political stakes rise. Either they assumed apolitically that war’s form was determined by the tools of globalization, or that the politics would be of the status quo, whereby the stability of the unipolar era would endure. Paying lip service to Carl von Clausewitz, in fact, they were unwittingly channeling Francis Fukuyama. To demonstrate this failure, I examine three representative texts of the genre and unpack their assumptions, by David Richards, Antoine Bousquet, and Sean McFate.

Resumen

Durante dos décadas, un gran número de profesionales en el campo de la seguridad, así como muchos académicos, esperaban axiomáticamente, teniendo en cuenta casos recientes, que la «guerra futura» fuera ambigua e híbrida. La escala y la forma abierta que ha adoptado la guerra entre Rusia y Ucrania, que comenzó el 22 de febrero de 2022, demuestra los límites de esta ortodoxia. Este artículo pregunta por qué la opinión informada cayó víctima de tales falsas expectativas. El artículo también argumenta que, además de las patologías que están de moda dentro de los círculos académico-militares, existió también un fracaso de índole intelectual. Aquellos que esperaban de manera confiada que la guerra permaneciera en las sombras no se tomaron lo suficientemente en serio la naturaleza política de la guerra, y la posibilidad de que se intensificara a medida que fuesen aumentando los intereses políticos en juego. Estos, o bien asumían de manera apolítica que la forma de la guerra estaba determinada por las herramientas de la globalización, o bien que la política formaba parte del statu quo, por lo cual perduraría la estabilidad de la era unipolar. Aunque de pasada mencionaban a Carl von Clausewitz, estaban, de hecho, canalizando involuntariamente a Francis Fukuyama. Con el fin de demostrar este fracaso, examinamos tres textos representativos del género y desmontamos sus suposiciones. Estos textos son de David Richards, Antoine Bousquet y Sean McFate.

Résumé

Ces vingt dernières années, nombre de professionnels de la sécurité et de chercheurs anticipaient, de façon axiomatique, que toutes les « guerres futures » seraient ambiguës et hybrides, en se fondant sur des exemples récents. L’échelle de la guerre déclarée entre la Russie et l’Ukraine, depuis le 22

février 2022, démontre les limites de cette orthodoxie. Cet article cherche à savoir pourquoi l'opinion renseignée s'est à ce point fourvoyée. Il affirme qu'outre les pathologies des modes dans les cercles militaires et académiques, il s'agit d'un échec intellectuel. Ceux qui étaient persuadés que la guerre resterait dans l'ombre ne prenaient pas assez au sérieux la nature politique de la guerre, ainsi que la possibilité qu'elle s'intensifie quand les enjeux politiques grandissent. Soit ils pensaient, de façon apolitique, que la forme de la guerre était déterminée par les outils de la mondialisation, soit que la politique serait celle du statu quo, et donc que la stabilité de l'ère unipolaire perdurerait. Manifestant un intérêt de pure forme pour Carl von Clausewitz, ils rejoignaient plutôt sans le savoir Francis Fukuyama. Pour mettre en lumière cet échec, j'analyse trois textes représentatifs du genre écrits par David Richards, Antoine Bousquet et Sean McFate, avant de décortiquer leurs suppositions.

Keywords: Ukraine, war, hybridity, Clausewitz, Fukuyama, military power

Palabras clave: Ucrania, Guerra, hibridación, Clausewitz, Fukuyama, poder militar

Mots clés: Ukraine, Guerre, hybridité, Clausewitz, Fukuyama, puissance militaire

when Gaal saw the people, he said to Zebul, behold, there come people down from the top of the mountains and Zebul said unto him, thou seest the shadow of the mountains as if they were men. Judges 9:36

Introduction

For much of the twenty-first century, global security practitioners and scholars have portrayed one assumption about the changing character of conflict as axiomatic. Future war, they averred, would be ambiguous. Fighting would happen in the shadows. Another term for war's new qualities, used often interchangeably with "ambiguous," was "hybrid," though with a strong de-emphasis on the massed, overt, and large-scale use of force. In this picture, battlefields would be depopulated and become quaintly obsolete. Tomorrow's conflicts, like today's, would be nuanced, putting a premium on innovation and agility over *matériel* and mass. Large-scale violence and the materiality of war—supply, ammunition, and troop numbers—would figure less than the intangibles of "narratives" and information, economic pressure, and the sponsorship of political protest. As adversaries turned more to disinformation to subvert audiences, "hacks, leaks and fake news are taking the place of planes, bombs and missiles" (Galeotti 2016a).¹ Mass military violence against Western interests would yield to non-military, clandestine measures (Kilcullen 2020). New tools, proxy forces, and media would increase space for competition below the threshold of overt hostility, eroding distinctions between "war" and "peace" (Leimbach and Levine 2021). Aggressors would surely seek the fruits of aggression without tipping over into hot conflict, tar-

geting not so much a country's population or cities as its internal cohesion and sense of self (Reisinger and Golts 2014; Mäklsoo 2018). "Greyiness" above all would be the defining feature of struggles with minor and major adversaries alike (Mumford and Carlucci 2022). Confidence levels in these judgments varied, but the shift in emphasis and direction of travel seemed clear.² Versions of this futurology entered popular entertainment. In the 2012 Bond film *Skyfall*, "M" declares "Our enemies are no longer known to us. They do not exist on a map. They're not nations, they're individuals. . . Can you see a face, a uniform, a flag? No! Our world is not more transparent now, it's more opaque! It's in the shadows. That's where we must do battle."

Bluntly, these visions of transformation did not anticipate anything like the Russia-Ukraine conflict from February 2022. President Vladimir Putin's operation was preceded by a large military build-up on Ukraine's borders. It commenced with the bombing of major cities and proceeded on the ground with nine groupings of one hundred thousand personnel, articulated in Battalion Tactical Groups, units incorporating armor, artillery, and reconnaissance. It was Russia's largest deployed order of battle in post-war history. Against unexpected resistance, Russia moved the "Special Military Opera-

1 In fairness, Galeotti is elsewhere skeptical of claims to hybridity and novelty: Galeotti (2016b).

2 For instance, the UK Ministry of Defence stated "Whilst the risk of a war between states is likely to remain low, but not implausible, sub-threshold conflict is likely to become increasingly common. . . The boundary between war and peace will become blurred and actors will, increasingly, use a hybrid approach to warfare, going beyond military and economic activities and opening-up new arenas of conflict, including in cyberspace, augmented and virtual reality." UK Ministry of Defence (2018).

tion” to a war footing, calling up 300,000 men, its first partial mobilization since 1941. The battlefield has devoured money, munitions, men, fuel, food, vehicles, and equipment at such a rate that stocks are running down rapidly. With Ukraine firing 5–6,000 artillery shells per day, and Russia letting loose 20–30,000, both NATO as Ukraine’s armorer and Russia are struggling to sustain their war efforts and scrambling to strengthen their industrial base (Vershinin 2022; Judson 2023; Lipton 2023). High-intensity, combined arms combat has taken place in both the hinterland and cities. Russia imposed a naval blockade in the Black Sea. Cities are in ruins. Ukraine’s economy is cratered. Fatal casualties run into the hundreds of thousands, as a grinding stalemate drives both sides into attritional strategies (Gady and Kofman 2023). “Old” forms of combat, fighting to defend or recapture territory, return with a vengeance and are recast through contemporary conditions. From one perspective, the attritional front line is reminiscent of aspects of early twentieth-century positional combat. “Trench warfare, relentless artillery, gains measured in mere meters, and heavy casualties on both sides,” in rural areas with large open fields, according to one Marine Corps colonel, makes Ukraine “World War I with 21st Century ISR” (Haltiwanger 2023). From another, clashes for control of strategic chokepoints—bridges and fortress cities as critical supply “hubs”—remind observers of early modern struggles (King 2022).³

While we do not know the war’s destination, we know enough to judge that this case is a large, fatal anomaly for a family of theories about “future war.”⁴ If ambiguity holds any meaning, then this war should be classified as very much *not* ambiguous, *not* “in the grey zone,” *not* primarily occurring at the “sub-threshold” level, *not* as a “hybrid” in the shadows without large-scale battlespaces, *not* primarily as a contest over information, messaging or narrative, and *not* governed by cyber duels. Russia’s atrocities are on an order of severity greater than “malign activity.” The extent of the disconnect between earlier predictions and the reality of war in Ukraine is underlined by the shock felt by observers, not just at the invader’s brutality, but also the scale and overtness the conflict has taken (Banco et al. 2023). If one were to design a conventional conflict that was the opposite of recent predictions that involved in part a reversion to things supposed outmoded, then it would look something like the war in Ukraine.

Thus, theories of hybrid, ambiguous, or otherwise “new” war have a problem. Those who assessed the direction of war were not wrong to identify ways adversaries might pursue political goals with measures short of war. Rather, they were demonstrably wrong to assume war was bound to stay in the shadows, or at least to treat the outbreak of interstate war—especially if on a large and protracted scale—as a fringe concern.

Proponents of the “ambiguous wars” paradigm might reply by trying to re-code the case of Russia–Ukraine as supporting evidence, arguing that it confirms what they were saying all along, that launching all-out wars and relying on mass and heavy capabilities is futile. The military historian Phillips O’Brien tried this strained argument in May 2022, pronouncing that Russia’s offensive demonstrated the increasing obsolescence of “bulky” capabilities such as tanks and artillery (O’Brien 2022). Russia’s offensive did not stall automatically, however. To resist it, it took a large-scale military, industrial, and economic effort on Ukraine’s part with NATO’s support, involving equipment, fighting styles, and mobilization once pronounced obsolete, and a vast act of political will. Ukraine did not just fight back effectively with nimble, lighter, cheaper systems like drones, but with artillery, tanks, and mass mobilization. In an intense, overt combat, it takes defenders to resort to unambiguous war, too. And declarations that land capabilities are obsolete have proven premature, once again, indicating rather that tanks, like infantry, depend on skillful deployment in a combined-arms system (Lee 2022). Neither will it suffice to write off the Russia–Ukraine war as an anomaly, a mere minority case in a world still tilting war below the threshold. There is an “apart from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the show?” quality to that argument. Even if most future conflicts still prove shadowy, the orthodoxy of hybrid/ambiguous war failed to account for the largest, most defining conflict in a generation. No amount of nuance about the different meanings of “hybridity” will get around the problem that in whatever permutation, these futurologies profoundly failed.

That being so, this article addresses one simple question. Why did lively minds and informed observers fall prey to visions of ambiguous war defining the future? There have already been a number of critiques of these hybrid/ambiguous war concepts (Kofman and Rojansky 2015; Kofman 2016; Renz 2016; Cormac and Aldrich 2018; Johnson 2018). As skeptics warned, these prophecies were overblown, based on misleading case selection and ignoring other cases and trends. Russia, after all, had also been engaged in heavy fighting nearby in Eastern Ukraine, with two major battles at Illovaïsk and Debaltseve, that led to the “Minsk II” accords

3 As Anthony King remarked to the author, building upon King (2022).

4 For an overview of the conflict as at February 2023, see Congressional Research Service (2023).

of February 2015. Why, then, were such ideas so appealing? Why over two decades did defense intellectuals and International Relations scholars, military officers, academics, and government officials—a penumbra of Euro-Atlantic security minds—confidently presume that that “wars of iron” were dead or dying, and that conflict was transforming beyond all recognition, becoming post-industrial, downsized, and with battlefields disappearing?

Here, I follow the powerful analysis of Chiara Libisella, who demonstrates that the notion of hybrid war became institutionalized, and thus impervious to critique, via a process of fashionable groupthink (Libiseller 2023). To add to Libisella’s argument, I suggest that the flawed assumption of ambiguous war replacing head-on clashes was also driven by an under-examined attitude toward war and politics. Put simply, futurologists assumed intense, overt, or major war was becoming obsolete because they held an implicitly optimistic worldview, that even a more competitive, multipolar world would somehow retain the relative stability of the unipolar era and be shaped by the constraining force of globalization. They paid lip service to Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian general and theorist of war, who treated war as a political act that is prone to intensification. But in fact, they were channeling Francis Fukuyama, treating historical struggle as finished.

This article proceeds as follows. In Part I, I define the concepts, context, and argument. In Part II, to explain why analysts made these claims, I return to three representative texts of the “ambiguous wars” genre. All three were produced by eminent security thinkers, in two cases, thinkers–practitioners. All three, in similar but not identical ways, advanced the orthodoxy. All three declared the death or terminus of an “old” form of war and its being remade anew. They are UK Chief of Defence Staff General David Richards in his address to Chatham House in 2009 as Britain debated its defense policy while at a crossroads in Afghanistan; Antoine Bousquet’s essay “The Battlefield is Dead” written in 2017, in the wake of Russia’s adventurism and the ongoing Global War on Terror (GWOT); and Sean McFate’s book *Beating Goliath* in 2019, the most categorical and celebrated statement of the argument. I unpack the assumptions underpinning each text to illustrate a common worldview. In Part III, I demonstrate the damaging consequences of the orthodoxy. It left the US-led West both materially and intellectually unprepared for war’s eruption from out of the shadows.

This is by no means an exhaustive study. Nor is it to deny that the debate takes place beyond the Anglo-American world. Following earlier voices of caution, it is part of the first post-February 2022 wave of critique to

sound the alarm about a way of thinking that is consequential, and has not gone away.

Part I: Concepts, Context, and Argument

Amongst informed experts and in public discussion, the idea that future war would remain a shadowy affair took on added salience with Russia’s swift, low-casualty annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014, achieved against little resistance with disguised forces under the cloak of official denial, while Russia covertly supplied and armed secessionists in eastern Ukraine. For some minds, this became a template for the wars to come (Apps 2014; Jones 2014; Franke 2015; Thornton 2015; see also much of the content of the edited volume of Lasconjarias and Larsen 2015). This expectation—of a signpost war that signaled profound change—had a prehistory, stretching back at least from the time of Israel’s raid into Lebanon in the summer of 2006. In that clash, observers perceived rigid state forces being outflanked by guerrillas of the information age, and treated it as a signpost of war’s evolution, challenging “military forces structured and prepared for industrial-age warfare between global superpowers” (Bet-El 2006; Kreps 2007; UK Ministry of Defence 2015, 34). An orthodoxy grew that a transformation was under way, generalizable across conflicts, across time, and space, making conventional battlespaces matter far less and the mediascape far more.

After Crimea, as anyone in the armed forces or security studies frequently heard, the paramount concern was “‘new-generation warfare,’ ‘non-linear war,’ ‘ambiguous war,’ or ‘Grey-zone conflict,’ best illustrated by the Russian government’s efforts to undermine the government of Ukraine” (Mecklin 2017, 298). A presentism took hold: The future would resemble or accentuate current patterns, only getting more “hybrid.”⁵ In challenging the West, Russia would rely increasingly on non-military means (Lanoszka 2016; Thornton 2017; Chin 2019).⁶ The alleged, now-infamous “Gerasimov Doc-

5 See, e.g., U.S. National Intelligence Council: “States are likely to increasingly compete in the ‘Grey zone’ using among other things non-official or plausibly deniable proxies, including private military companies (PMCs).” U.S. National Intelligence Council (2021).

6 Rod Thornton took the case especially far. Instead of emphasizing hybridity, he argued from a reading of Russian military doctrine and literature that Russia was turning to a form of competition in which it would impose its will with military forces, but with “no active involvement operationally of military forces or of military violence, a shift so strong that it required militaries to adopt ‘radical new approaches.’” His explanation of this shift

trine,” in particular, an analysis that Russia’s then Chief of Staff had directed at the methods of the United States, attracted large claims about Russia’s tilt toward indirect methods (as [Monaghan 2015](#) demonstrates). And complimenting the Russia/Crimea case, it seemed, were China’s territorial grabs in the South China Sea, signaling an era of hybrid war in the maritime domain ([Stavridis 2016](#)). These visions were often striking for their near-certainty, as observers invoked the newness and hybridity of contemporary conflict as an orthodoxy. Grey-zone aggression appealed because it was low-cost, hard to attribute, made punishment unlikely, and, besides, it was “the new thing,” as conventional war had “fallen out of fashion” ([Braw 2021](#)). So went a verdict in November 2021, inauspiciously timed.

As Libiseller demonstrates, the concept of “hybrid war” spread as an intellectual fashion after 2014. Its inventor, Frank Hoffmann, did not intend for it to become shorthand for the dismissal of intense forms of conflict ([Hoffman 2007](#)). But released into the world, that is what it became. Advanced in particular by the US Marine Corps, it proliferated after Russia seized Crimea in 2014 with little fighting, as a fait accompli. At a superficial level, this offered an image of “newness.” To identify significant change in military affairs holds out career incentives and the reward of status as a prophetic thinker. Ironically, observers denounced a beloved target, the rigid, backward-looking security establishment, even while the establishment embraced the same ideas. Hybridity supplied a heuristic for NATO doctrine and defense planning. It promised academics an on-trend conceptual language through which to become policy-relevant, a feat universities increasingly reward and governments demand. The concept appealed also because it was recent and sounded sophisticated. People disagreed and debated about the answers, how best to understand and adapt to hybrid war. But it was a common premise. As the idea hardened, to say conflict would be “hybrid” was to draw a sharp distinction between future war and “old,” “industrial,” and “traditional” war, concepts more invoked than explored. As an ideal-typical dichotomy, it emphasized the covert and the unattributable over the blatant, ambiguity over clarity, non-military means over military means, along with the orchestration of other less

typifies the literature: that the coming of new technologies, information-dependency, and general social trends would determine the decisions states made about using military force, making it imperative to use “more refined means.” It also implicitly infers future state intent and policy from military literature and doctrine, whereas historically, the relationship between the two is more unstable.

conspicuous methods, and the constraining force of post-war global norms. The idea became a fad, and the fad became an industry.

Complimenting Libiseller’s critique of the pathologies of military-academic fashion, I suggest an additional cause of both the “hybrid war” contagion and an overlapping set of overstated concepts of transformation. Put simply, these took root because of an intellectual failure. Declarations of war’s inherently ambiguous future underestimated war’s primarily political nature. Those who overstated change effectively conceived war as autonomous from the realm of politics. Alternatively, they assumed politics was tame, and therefore war would be.

While most visionaries of “future war” would agree *prima facie* with Clausewitz’s axiom that war is an expression of politics by other means (Clausewitz, trans. [Howard and Paret 1976](#), 1984edn.),⁷ they departed from it in their formulations about how armed conflict will evolve. Why was war bound to be hybrid, below the threshold, and in the shadows? It was because, they assumed, armed conflict had become a more predictable process with its own attributes, existing almost independently of the political aims, stakes, and choices of those who waged it. War was predictable because, implicitly, it was insulated even from the high stakes of militarized, multipolar competition. It had a logic that was driven primarily by constraining material conditions, generated by technology and economics. Little surprise that, as Libiseller observed, hybrid war in the literature turned into an actor in itself, a driving force that outweighed actors’ intentions, as “warfare” subsumed the political act that is “war.” Either it was a technical matter, whereby novel forms of fighting would dictate choices about fighting; or, if politics intruded, it would be largely the politics of the status quo, managing violent competition below a threshold. In such a picture of linear change, while activity below the threshold took center stage, the application of overt, concentrated violence at scale as a deliberate, advertent act was de-emphasized, as was the possibility that states with major war capabilities might apply them unobtrusively, even recklessly, and directly attack one another ([Carter 2018](#); [Käihkö 2021](#)).

Rather than Clausewitz, the cosmology of political scientist Francis Fukuyama lurked beneath the surface. As Fukuyama argued at the Cold War’s end, the triumph of the United States, and of an Atlantic order of market-democracy, meant that the great political struggles were over ([Fukuyama 1992](#); [Anderson 2015](#); [Morefield 2022](#)). It then fell to the Western-led global order to manage the

7 The statement is in book 8:6, Clausewitz, [Howard, and Paret trans. \(1976, 1984 edn, 605\)](#).

fallout from a historical process that was more or less complete. Applied decades later, even as Fukuyama's outlook in an age of revolt, competition, and remilitarization looked a less safe bet and prompted his defending and updating of the thesis, those who assumed war would stay in the shadows had taken up Fukuyama's "endism." They effectively assumed that the stable conditions of unipolarity would somehow endure, even after unipolarity passed. A unipolar world is one in which the dominant state faces no peer or near-peer adversaries, with a margin of power advantage so great that it can be expected to last decades, and so great that it attracts bolder claims about a more permanent transformation. Without fully realizing it, those most confident that the future of war was "grey" imagined intense interstate war to be dead because they assumed history as a coherent evolutionary process had ended. This was not usually a conscious assumption. But it was an assumption that such visions rested on.

Part II: Those Days Are Gone: War and "Newness"

In September 2009, as Britain's armed forces struggled in Afghanistan and underwent a strategic review, Britain's new Chief of Defence Staff, General David Richards, addressed Chatham House, on "Twenty-First Century Armed Forces—Agile, Relevant, Useable" (Richards 2009). Partly channeling the popular work by General Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force* (Smith 2005) and echoing a wider and popular set of presumptions about the future (Campbell and Jones 2009; IPPR Commission 2009; Mallinson 2009; all critiqued by Blagden 2009), Richards claimed a "horse and tank" moment had arrived. In this moment of rupture, new tools were transforming war to the point where armed forces had to adapt quickly or become useless. "Globalization," regarded a priori to be an irresistible force governing the planet, would shape armed conflict. Not only did it promise a future of continuous conflict against "asymmetric" opponents—terrorists, insurgents, or warlords—it would also make state-on-state collisions rarer and more minor in their scale and conduct. In his words, they would become more "asymmetrical, complex and mosaic" [*sic*]. To undermine their rivals, states would more likely reach for shadowy subversive methods—cyber strikes, information, or economic "effects." While major powers would still possibly clash, they would very likely not resort to major war capabilities. Explaining this, he revealed his assumptions (Richards 2009, 8):

...if I am right and non-state opponents should be our principal defence and security focus, inconveniently we cannot dismiss the possibility of state-on-state warfare either.

But what would such warfare actually look like? Would it really be a hot version of what people like me spent much of our lives training for? I wonder; why would China or Russia, for example, risk everything they have achieved to confront us conventionally? The social and economic costs of creating the scale of military capability required plausibly to succeed, even assuming we do not start to respond in like manner, are enormous. The presence of nuclear weapons reinforces a likely caution.

If such countries really want to cause us major problems, then surely they will first seek to employ other levers of state power: economic and information effects, for example. They have seen the Holy Grail. Attacks are likely to be delivered semi-anonymously through cyberspace or through the use of guerrillas and Hezbollah-style proxies. After all, it was Sun Tzu, who famously reminds us that "supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting".

In other words, what I am suggesting is that there is a good case for believing that even state-on-state warfare will be similar to that we will be conducting against non-state groupings.

Note here the picture of a future, peer, or near-peer state adversary. China and Russia would surely not "confront us" conventionally because to do so would risk retaliation, possibly nuclear retaliation. This does not recognize that Moscow or Beijing might believe they have something vital at stake that is threatened. It is an odd suggestion, given that historically, both states *did* confront the nuclear-armed West conventionally and beyond. China attacked US and British forces in Korea in 1950, and the Soviet Union engaged in the dangerous standoff over Cuba in 1962. As for the point that building up capabilities would be expensive, historically the West's rivals have, nonetheless, willingly borne those expenses, valuing their own ability to deter or counter "us." Already when Richards spoke, both Russia and China were underway in their own military build-ups. China now undertakes large, accelerating naval and nuclear armament programs (U.S. DoD 2022; Kristensen, Korda, and Reynolds 2023). Yet in Richards' picture, these historical realities are absent. Russia and China emerge here not as historically recognizable countries, but as risk-averse economies.

At this point, the picture gets downright convenient for Richards. If and when state adversaries do challenge the West, they will be content to rely on the “holy grail” of shadowy, asymmetrical, and lighter methods. And he claims this regardless of context, regardless of war aims or political goals. To ask a simple question, what if they enter circumstances, as Russia did in February 2022, when they believe such methods are too light and peripheral to address what’s at stake? What if China calculates that, physically, to take Taiwan, it will need to deploy more than various pinprick economic or informational “effects,” or guerrilla proxies, none of which offer much in the way of amphibious capability?

Lurking throughout Richards’ lecture is an underdeveloped idea, more pervasive at the time but still at large, that there is an irresistible process of “globalization.” This process, it was assumed, converted former great powers primarily into economic consumers and reduced the value of territory in particular, and therefore the likelihood that other states would be willing to fight directly for it. Nations would define their interests primarily, even exclusively, through economics. Yet, as I write this, despite international sanctions, Russia is fighting on several axes in Ukraine with conscripts to recapture lost cities.

Richards grudgingly entertained the prospect of a confrontation with China and/or Russia in the future, even if he bent those scenarios to fit his preference for forces optimized for minor war over major war. By contrast, Antoine Bousquet’s futurology, in his essay “The Battlefield is Dead,” is locked more exclusively in the defining clash of the recent past, the GWOT (Bousquet 2017, drawing also from his wider body of work on the inter-relation of warfare and technology, Bousquet 2009). The battlefield, he explains, as an archetype, is still in our minds. Yet changing conditions, from the lethality and range of modern weapons to the reach of airpower and universal scope of targeting, make it a thing of the past, losing its salience over time and leading it to the brink of obsolescence:

The image of the battlefield is one that exerts a powerful hold on our collective imagination. It immediately evokes in our minds the sight of massed troops clashing furiously with each other, culminating in a decisive outcome that determines the fate of a wider conflict. However, such military confrontations have largely vanished from the contemporary landscape of war. Infantry troops typically engage each other today at ranges of several hundred metres. Sporadic skirmishes far outweigh large-scale engagements. The projection of uncontested air power is much the favoured use of

force for risk-averse Western militaries. Conflicts simmer on or peter out without any grand clash of arms deciding their outcome.

True to the genre, there is much ahistorical conflation and conceptual confusion here. To think of large-scale military confrontations is not necessarily to presume that such confrontations are decisive. Battles like Verdun were protracted, attritional affairs, but did not prevent states fighting similarly large-scale battles again afterward. Nor is recognizing that battles might reappear tantamount to endorsing set-piece clashes as the optimal way to break a deadlock. Nor is it to suppose that the fighting must take the form of close quarters, intimate combat (the battlefields of both world wars, like Ukraine now, occupied hundreds or thousands of miles). And even if Western militaries prefer “uncontested air power,” that choice is not always offered by adversaries (see Ukraine).

Bousquet’s presentism is so strong as to make the article a period piece. After his general historical survey about the stretching and breaking of delineated battlefields, his focal case is western targeting and bombing of terrorists or insurgents. The GWOT eclipses all else. For Bousquet, the prime mover throughout is the West, as adversaries’ wills are largely missing in action. At the very time he was writing, in October 2017, Russia and Ukraine were already engaged in their long duel in the Donbas region, but this goes unmentioned. In Bousquet’s account, the GWOT is the predominant, signpost war, and on this war—the tendencies of one side in a lopsided clash between a superpower and irregular forces—he hangs a sweeping judgment about the battlefield’s disappearance. That the future might look different, that different actors, with different interests, and higher risk appetites might feel the necessity of bleeding one another in non-urban spaces is a possibility barely entertained.

And then there is this revealing statement: “In an age of intense global connectivity, no place on Earth can insulate itself from the fitful flare-ups of transnational conflict networks.” Like Richards, for Bousquet, the primary conditioning force in international politics is globalization and its means of connection, in a futurology where physical tools are the main drivers of history. War in this technologist picture of an interlinked globe has a more-or-less steady, uniform shape, “fitful” and of limited intensity. This does not make the author cheerful. He fears the consequences of a “continuum” of violence. But there is an implicit, unrealized optimism that war will stay within bounds, as a universal pattern. Ironically, though a vision of Western-centric globalization is the rubric, or because it is, the argument is ultimately parochial.

Sean McFate offers the boldest, baldest articulation of the old simple industrial war yielding to the new, post-industrial complex war, claiming that “conventional war is dead” (McFate 2019, 2022). It garnered him the acclaim of military aristocracy. Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral James Stavridis anointed him “the new Sun Tzu.” In McFate’s hands, states beholden to major war capabilities, mass, and firepower are pitiful Goliaths, lumbering dim-witted giants. Legacy platforms like aircraft carriers or F-35s are useless and little more than symptoms of gigantism. Nuclear stockpiles are irrelevant in a world where nuclear threats are likely to emanate from anonymous non-state actors. Great power competition there may be, but enemies will use conventional weapons unconventionally, with China’s piecemeal land-grabs in the South China Sea and Crimea as the obvious signposts. As he told an audience in Washington, “we live in a global information age where plausible deniability is more powerful than firepower. The Kremlin gets that. We do not” (McGrath 2019). Overarching this is a certainty that conflict has a clear trajectory. “War is going underground and will be fought in the complicated shadows. Militaries can no longer kill their way out of problems” (McFate 2019, 198).

Note the assumption that war’s evolution is determined by some gravity-like force, independent of the wills, ambitions, and fears of major powers. Enemies of the future will resort to asymmetric, indirect methods, it is assumed, because that is the inherent way of things. That they might use such methods where they are deterred by the very major war capabilities and nuclear arsenals he lampoons, and that it might not be a linear matter of one form of warfare simply replacing another, he hardly considers (Gannon et al. 2023). Typical of the genre, McFate emphasizes the greater complexity of our times to our forbears (warning against being “stuck in the past” and “glory days”) and confidently demarcates war into stark, separate, linear periods, separating the contemporary “post-conventional” from the conventional and the passé: big-ticket aircraft carriers and fighter planes are “obsolete war junk.” The militaries of our forbears allegedly just tried to kill their way out of problems. This is a harsh verdict on astute historical commanders, from Alan Brooke to Vo Nguyen Giap to Georgy Zhukov, who worked hard to align policy goals with military exertion. At least McFate recognizes Clausewitz is a target, not an authority for his argument, even if his reading of Clausewitz as just a Prussian militarist hellbent on decisive battles shows slight regard for what Clausewitz explicitly says as early as Book One,

Chapter Two of *On War* (Clausewitz, Howard and Paret trans. 1976, 1984 edn.),⁸ or for Clausewitz’s later emphasis on the primary of policy and the need to give violence direction.

Russia having struck into Ukraine, McFate then tried to reconcile this development with his argument, making the new facts fit the theory (McFate 2022). No longer was Russia a case study in an adversary exploiting information war, as he had claimed earlier. Now it was an example of a foolish Goliath that wrongly valued size and conventional military power. But has not Ukraine’s use of conventional military power played a major part in frustrating Russia’s invasion? Ukraine’s own firepower, such as its artillery and air defense goes unmentioned, as does its own mass mobilization. Instead, the author emphasizes its courage and adroit use of social media: “While Russia is rolling armour, Ukraine is mobilizing memes and social media to win the world’s support,” as though skilled application of firepower was not essential to giving the defenders something to broadcast. What would Ukrainian defenders prefer to have, if forced to choose? Extra artillery and armor or extra internet memes?

With his categorizations, McFate defines and measures “antiquated” “conventional war” by the measure of World War II, the “supreme example.” He then dismisses it: “No one fights ‘conventionally’ anymore.” But why must fighting take place on the scale of Kursk or Normandy to count as conventional war? And against the obvious objection that conventional fighting, featuring intensive, and sustained firepower, as well as maneuver, are underway in Ukraine, McFate codes it as “unconventional strategies and guerrilla tactics.” But measured in terms of directness, firepower, numbers or protraction, the battlespace around Bakhmut seems far from flying columns in County Cork. Ukraine’s “humble” Javelin anti-tank missiles McFate even codes as asymmetric light technology, even though they too are a legacy weapons system from last century, ironically introduced in World War II.

McFate offers a particular version of the “globalization” story, arguing that the future belongs increasingly to private contractors. Why? Because of generic trends, including rising costs, legal constraints, and media scrutiny. Freebooting soldiers of fortune will supersede citizen-soldiers or conscripts, because “Patriotism is unimportant, and sometimes a liability.” To put it

8 “Destruction of the force is only a means to an end, a secondary matter. . . . entire campaigns can be conducted with great energy even though actual fighting plays an unimportant part in them.” Clausewitz, 1.2, 96.

mildly, the dismissal of patriotism as a force for combat motivation overstates the case. McFate's sweeping statements came 3 years before Ukrainian patriots in the first months of their war, out-numbered by a ratio of 12:1 north of Kyiv, kept Russia at bay until aid poured in (Zabrodskyi et al. 2022). It came 2 years before the Taliban, its ranks filled with those committed to restoring a local Emirate, stormed Afghanistan after taking heavy casualties over two decades of fighting against an occupying force that included private military companies. His insistence that markets, and market forces (literally) would trump patriotism came a year after US troops—old-fashioned types of military units employed by outmoded, backward-looking states—annihilated one hundred Wagner mercenaries at Khasham in Syria. Indeed, it is not clear historically that the private market is bound to supplant state forces to the extent McFate claims. How far to replace state with mercenary forces is an ancient dilemma, discussed at length by premodern minds such as Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince* (Erwin 2022).

The main question here is not whether McFate's thesis was off base, but where he derived his confidence from. While he paid lip service to the primacy of politics, it is the primacy of markets that underpins his manifesto. China and Russia (even as they assembled the kinds of heavy platforms McFate derides) in his account effectively have little independent say in reshaping war, any more than major powers might have a say in making and unmaking forces like globalization (Rosenberg 2005). Rather, we are all globalization's subjects, and must adapt to its logic or perish. Not without a struggle, it turns out.

In all three accounts, by Richards, Bousquet, and McFate, there is an underlying assumption that globalization would inhibit large states from taking greater risks by stepping above the "sub threshold" level. If this is politics, it is the politics of a largely fixed and settled order, with large-scale, higher-risk confrontation all but ruled out, and a rough state of stasis assumed, undisturbed by sudden regressions. A world regarded in such a linear way naturally will appear clear and predictable, making it eminently reasonable to pronounce things like battlefields or conventional war to be "dead." In that worldview, globalization is just a fact, not a choice, even for the countries that set the agenda. All that is required is advice on how to assimilate to the new order of things.

Part of the "globalization" discourse was the suggestion that "global norms" would constrain or punish international aggression, thereby incentivizing sub-threshold subversion. Outside the orbit of the United States and its treaty allies, the responses of states to Russia's invasion of Ukraine suggest otherwise. The "rest" has bucked the general, Whiggish expectation that globalization spread

a "norm against conquest" as part of a "sustained march toward peace" (Hathaway and Shapiro 2018), constraining aggressors with both reputational and material penalties. Had there been such a powerful norm, strong enough to motivate states to enforce it even at cost to themselves, we would have expected countries across the world willingly to pay costs for it, cutting trade and diplomatic ties with Moscow. While votes in the United Nations went against Russia (UN General Assembly 2022, 2023), it maintained or increased trade in Asia, Africa, and South America (Argus 2022; Insurance Marine News 2023; Lawler 2023; Wilson 2023). Particularly telling is the fact that in terms of trade, the largest or most influential non-Western democracies outside the US alliance system "hedged," such as South Africa, Brazil, India, Israel, and Singapore.

The "future war" family of hypotheses is not just retrospectively deficient, its flaws exposed by a current war. There was also counterevidence, and counterexamples, available at the time, even as enthusiasts for hybridity seized on the cases that seemed to prove them right. As Biddle and Friedman (2008) demonstrated, the mixed fighting style of Hezbollah against Israel in the summer of 2006 threw doubt on the then-widespread claim that the future "is one of nonstate actors waging an information age version of classical guerrilla warfare." Ironically, Hezbollah's true hybridity lay in its blend of guerrilla and conventional warfighting methods, catching the invader off guard. If even irregular opponents could mix combat position preparation, combined arms, maneuver, cover, and concealment, then so too might future state militaries.

Other cases also suggested that, at times, both state and non-state actors would use force openly and unambiguously. Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, rebels took Tripoli in August 2011, and the Islamic State seized Mosul in June 2014, doing so principally by using massed conventional forces to attack openly. More recently, from 2020 Ethiopia and Eritrea were at war with the Tigray People's Liberation Front. The intensity and methods varied, but it included coordinated, combined arms attacks and mass mobilization, and fighting for control of infrastructure (Eritrea Hub 2021). Of course, in each case (as in almost every war ever fought), there were layers of activities, including propagandist efforts to shape the battlespace. But the pronounced role of unambiguous warfare should be noted. The offence did not tweet its way into controlling cities or destroying bases.

As well as the cases that did not fit the model, the wider behavior of major state rivals as they developed their power ought also to have given pause to the "future war" visionaries. Globalization, more closely studied via

doctrine and interviews, was not fundamentally altering the great power security policies of Russia or China. The West's adversaries were not generally reducing but increasing defense budgets, nuclear arsenals, and, in particular, investment in heavy conventional capabilities. States were not behaving as loose accounts of globalization expected them to (Ripsman and Paul 2010). Russia, so often the focus of "hybrid war" literature, in its military doctrine prized "the fire destruction of the enemy" as central, even in an age when non-military measures were becoming more prominent, emphasizing the "massive fire strikes" it brought to bear in Syria (Monaghan 2020). Despite insistence that "Grey is the new Black" (Bothwell 2021), realities refused to be assimilated.

Yet theories of hybrid/ambiguous/non-linear/shadow war continually returned to two cases that more resembled the theory, as their primal scene: Crimea in 2014 and China's militarization of the South China Sea. The emphasis on "closest fit" cases, and the neglect of others, suggests a confirmation bias at work, less curious about the multiple possibilities of war's evolution, and more interested in pursuing an idea that some "future war" thinkers were already invested in.

Part III: A Double Failure

The orthodoxy propagated by distinguished minds, such as the three figures above, had two interlinked consequences. It reinforced the material unpreparedness of the US-led West, both NATO countries and beyond, for an age of unambiguous war. And it helped impoverish the collective imagination. Encouraging excessive certainty about war's direction, the "ambiguous wars" mindset left Ukraine and the West intellectually ill-prepared for the emergency of a full-scale war in Ukraine's case and a demanding proxy war in the West's. To be clear, the "shadow wars" futurology was not the sole cause of Western ill-preparedness. But it helped give a false confidence to a military-strategic posture.

The assumption that the future would predominantly be a future of small, peripheral, and hybrid wars diverted intellectual and material resources. Assumptions drawn from the behavior of adversaries in select cases, from Crimea to the South China Sea, dovetailed with assumptions drawn from Western experience. The "Global War on Terror" campaigns, in particular, channeled intellectual energy toward irregular war and armed nation-building and away from intensive clashes by air, sea, or land, just as precious capabilities and stocks needed for such conflicts atrophied (Economist 2021). As the UK Assistant Chief of the General Staff noted, "decades-long focus on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency came at the expense of training and equipping ourselves for com-

peting in high intensity combat" (Collins 2023). Western states should sharpen their tools for minor war under a permanent unipolar sun.

Even as those campaigns ended and American unipolarity frayed, Britain's Ministry of Defence picked up and ran with the general idea that war had transformed, and that therefore Britain must reorganize its armed forces around it. Accordingly, in 2021, Britain increased investment in digital technology, artificial intelligence, and cyber, while reducing investment in traditional hardware and troop numbers. Smaller, leaner, more tech-oriented forces would both suit constrained budgets yet at the same time, be optimal for the future. The defense component of Britain's Integrated Review of 2021 foresaw the shift from a large-footprint force to one on the cutting edge of "information-age speed, readiness and relevance." Power would be constituted differently. Or in the words of the Defence Command Paper in March 2021, "Capability will be less defined by numbers of people and platforms than by information-centric technologies, automation and a culture of innovation and experimentation" (UK Ministry of Defence 2021). Note that this was less than 1 year before a war erupted in which numbers of people and platforms would be at the center of the struggle.

Where the idea could lead, the attitude it encouraged, and its costs were illustrated by an exchange in November 2021 between then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chair of the Defence Select Committee, Tobias Ellwood MP, during a hearing of the Liaison Committee, as Russia's build-up on Ukraine's border was underway (House of Commons Liaison Committee 2021). Ellwood suggested that "The current budget is being stretched to cover the cyber and space domains at the expense of the traditional services. So tanks, ships, planes and troop numbers are all now being cut." This made the integrated review "out of date," the budget a "peacetime budget," needing revision since "growing threats are coming over the horizon." The whole exchange is worth reading, given the assumptions it reveals:

The Prime Minister: If you are saying, Mr Ellwood, that you think we should go back and prepare for tank battles in—

Mr Ellwood: No, you are putting words into my mouth.

The Prime Minister: Well, you mentioned threats on European—

Mr Ellwood: You mentioned tanks. We are cutting back on our tanks. What is advancing on the Ukrainian border? It is tanks, arguably enough, but that is besides the point. I am saying step back, look at the wider security picture, look at our defence posture, and see what needs to be done.

The Prime Minister: If you think that UK tanks are the answer—if you are saying that we should commit UK tanks to the defence of Ukraine—

Mr Ellwood: I am really sorry that you are taking us down this rabbit hole, because you know perfectly well that it is not about tanks.

The Prime Minister: I am not taking you down a rabbit hole.

Mr Ellwood: Tanks are one element of a wide spectrum of our defence capability.

The Prime Minister: You brought up tanks, Mr Ellwood.

Mr Ellwood: Tanks, aircraft—48 aircraft, F-35s. You promised 138; you have cut back to 48. You have not just cut back on tanks: Warriors have been removed completely, Hercules aircraft have been removed completely, and then 10,000 troops have been removed. We can talk about tanks, or we can talk about the wider spectrum of capabilities that have been reduced, at the very time—I am trying to make this clear—that there are bigger threats coming over the horizon.

Chair: Prime Minister

The Prime Minister: Yes, and what I am trying to make clear is that I think it is now or never for the UK armed forces.

Mr Ellwood: Now or never?

The Prime Minister: We have to recognise that the old concepts of fighting big tank battles on the European landmass, which I think is what you are driving at, are over, and there are other, better things that we should be investing in: in the FCAS—the future combat air system—and in cyber. This is how warfare in the future is going to be fought. We should be investing in our advanced early warning systems; that is where we need to be. I think that the investments we are making in new technology—

Mr Ellwood: You cannot hold ground with cyber.

Chair: Order.

The Prime Minister—are absolutely indispensable to our ability to fight the wars of the 21st century.

Mr Ellwood: I do not doubt that. I do not disagree with that.

The Prime Minister: And I do not think that going back to a 1940s-style approach will serve us well.

Ironically, the same Johnson as ex-premier in January 2023 would implore NATO that “the Ukrainians need hundreds of tanks” ([Chantler-Hicks 2023](#)).

Striking here is the determinist reductionism. As Johnson framed it, to suggest that it is dangerous, in a time

of growing threats, to reduce traditional services, platforms, and personnel geared to high-end warfighting is to go back to the 1940s and assume “big tank battles on the European landmass.” This is a false choice. Conventional wars demonstrably can still occur at a smaller scale than the vast one of World War II, as witnessed in Korea in 1950, Israel/Egypt in 1973, and the Gulf in 1990. And beneath this binary view lies a view of future war as already fixed and settled, history’s script already written. Johnson twice drew upon images of future war that derive directly from the received orthodoxy about “warfare in the future” and “the wars of the 21st century” that had taken root in the defense establishment. He assumed a clear divide between a distant past of simplicity and mass and a future of complexity and hi-tech sophistication. War and history, in other words, had a clear direction that would force agents into a limited scale of violence, with little choice in the matter.

Johnson’s attitude cannot be written off as a quirk of his own cavalier personality. Like Johnson, in the sub-genre of “hybrid war” literature, claims about “future war” are often strikingly confident, at times categorical. They are built on a foundation of “history lite,” an ahistorical, oversimplified, and idealized conception of an earlier history of conflict, against which today’s conflicts are bound to look complex. Thus, certain phenomena are pronounced “dead” or “past.” Delineated battlefields are no more or “gone,” shedding their remnants, as violence in the “grey zone” “almost entirely” substitutes conventional war, as it becomes “impossible to define any ongoing war” ([Bresnan and Sulg 2020](#)). From this, dismissals abound. Tanks or aircraft carriers are obsolete, certainly as forces deployed en masse. Historical epochs are clearly demarcated and obvious (hence “post-industrial” versus “industrial”), with war necessarily obeying wider macrotrends. Notions of radically altered war, and a new security environment, became not just one scenario among many, but (in the words of one MP) the “whole lens through which influence and counterinfluence must be focused, organized and fought” ([Rauta and Monaghan 2021](#)).

The exaggerated confidence and absoluteness of these claims are no accident. It reflects a particular worldview, that war’s evolution is stable because it is an outgrowth of an identifiable, irreversible, and clear historical trajectory, so that the future will look roughly like the present. As a direct result, the dismissal of the possibility of more intense, more direct, more unambiguous, and more industrial clashes left Ukraine’s leading Western backers, the United States and NATO, ill-prepared and struggling to sustain the supply of munitions and the industrial capacity it would require.

Conclusion

Like the architects of Jurassic Park, who confidently kept dinosaurs confined by electric wire and genetic programming, those who expected war to remain in the shadows expected their subject to retain its destructive violent power, but to be ultimately constrained by a narrowly techno-rationality. But if war occurs within the realm of politics, and is primarily an outgrowth and expression of it, then it is not so easily bound. It can intensify radically as the stakes of politics rise and as determined forces meet resistance.

Flawed visions of future war leave little room in the imagination for another, possibly more violent scenario. Namely, the possibility that one of the world's largest states, believing first-order interests are at stake and that a gamble is worth it, might invade a smaller neighbor to annex territory and dominate it, out in the open and blatantly, risking confrontation with the West and in a conflict where mass and quantity will weigh heavily, but this time at a faster tempo where escalation to major war is likelier. Beijing, like Moscow, is busy acquiring major war capabilities at an accelerating clip, and overtly prepares for the contingency of a Taiwan Strait crisis. And yet, confronted by China's visible preparations, assertive rhetoric, and the stakes it invests in Taiwan, optimists fall back on the assumption that war and calculations about war are bound to be tame. Ukraine's experience should caution against such assumptions. Though the literature time and again insisted that the war/peace divide was a crude binary ill-suited to the complexity of conflict in the present and future, Ukrainians could credibly reply that although a state of competition and intrigue had existed, before March 2014 their country was not at war, and afterward it was. Preoccupied with the globalized, complex, novel qualities of the world around them, striving for nuance, futurologists overlooked the prospect that sometimes, major events in world politics are not nuanced. They are in your face. It is a pattern of illusion and shock that could happen again.

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