

## The Future of the Future of War

I had been at the start of something: of a new era in which conflict surges, shifts, or fades but doesn't end, in which the most you can hope for is not peace, or the arrival of a better age, but only to remain safe as long as possible.

**MATTI FRIEDMAN**, *Pumpkinflowers*, 2016<sup>1</sup>

This book opened discussing a period when politicians and commentators had a shared idea about the nature of war, how it would be fought and also how it might be contained. According to the classical model of war, political struggles were decided by means of battle. In the great wars of the modern era this was the case. The belligerents threw everything into the fight, the end was marked by victory and defeat, and this was sufficient for the international system to be set on a new course with a hierarchy of powers confirmed. But these were long and arduous struggles, involving enormous sacrifices and terrible devastation. It was not what the strategists of the nineteenth century had in mind, which was to achieve their objectives as quickly as possible. This was why surprise attacks loomed so large in thinking about future war. The need for a quick victory put a premium on making the most of the very first blows directed against the enemy. Whatever the expectations about the war's likely course, it would be foolish to move only tentitively once it had begun or give an opponent a chance to prepare and defend by signalling an imminent offensive. Surprise would always gain some advantage. The aim would be

to leave the enemy floundering and helpless. If the first blow was indecisive that could mean a long, hard struggle with an uncertain outcome.

The importance of the opening moves in wars is why writing on their future was always full of imaginary first blows that caused the defeat of their victims. Far less was written on second and third blows, and less still about those later years when an impasse had been reached and the fighting ticked over, with casualties but no breakthroughs. After the First World War the strategists looked to tanks and aircraft to ensure that the next war was shorter. The writers who did dwell on the possibility of even longer and deadlier wars did so not to dream up clever campaign plans but to grasp how societies might cope and adapt to such a situation. The entry into the nuclear age provided another boost to dystopian imaginations while turning strategic design into a form of abstract reasoning. Now even more than before, any war plan would have to gamble everything on the first strike, because anything less than the complete elimination of the enemy's nuclear capabilities would mean that their own country must suffer a terrible revenge. Over time, as new forms of warfare emerged, including the use of cyber-attacks that barely involved armed force, surprise attacks still dominated the literature. This was the case even as military practice gravitated towards long, drawn-out struggles which lacked clear beginning and endings.

The prominence of knockout blows in writing about future war was the result not only of their potential strategic impact or their drama but also because they helped make a point. They warned of a country left vulnerable to cunning aggressors as a result of political negligence and popular complacency. The same theme appealed to those intending to take the military initiative with an irresistible offensive. Wars usually started with at least one side confident about the outcome. John Stoessinger argued that the origins of war lay in the persistent influence of misperceptions about adversaries and about what armed force could achieve. On the brink of war, 'each confidently expects victory after a brief and triumphant campaign'.<sup>2</sup> Even leaders aware of the pitfalls when making their decisions became more confident as war was seen to be virtually inevitable, reassuring themselves that victory was within reach.<sup>3</sup>

Both Operation Barbarossa and Pearl Harbor underlined the point. They were such shocks to those on the receiving end that they exercised remarkable holds over their strategic imaginations thereafter, although in both cases surprise was achieved but victory was not. They were not taken as warnings of the folly and futility of aggression but instead of how the unwary might get caught. And because surprise remained of the essence when starting a war, there have been a number of attempted knockout blows since 1945—North Korea’s attacks against the South in the summer of 1950, Argentina’s seizure of the Falkland Islands in 1982, and Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990—all of which failed to achieve their objective. Even when a first blow was successful, as in Israel’s demolition of the Egyptian air force on 5 June 1967, the aftermath could be frustrating, with the defeated parties refusing to accept the result and a conquered population putting up resistance.

One regular assumption was that the odds of success might be shifted decisively as a result of some new technology. Gunpowder to muskets, steam turbines to aircraft, missiles to digital networks, all changed the character of warfare, opening up new possibilities while closing off others. But the technology was rarely monopolised or else, even if one side enjoyed superiority, adversaries found ways to limit their effects. Even for modern Western forces, technology encouraged a fantasy of a war that was fast, easy, and decisive: yet they still found themselves facing ‘slow, bitter and indecisive war’.<sup>4</sup> The conviction that ‘future conflict will be fundamentally different from all historical experience’ led H. R. McMaster to identify a ‘vampire fallacy’, so called because it was impossible to kill. ‘New concepts with catchy titles’ promised ‘fast, cheap and efficient victories in future war’. Doubters were ‘dismissed as being wedded to old thinking’. As an example he cited how ‘information and communication technologies’ were said to lead to the ‘Quality of Firsts’, by which forces would ‘see first, decide first, act first and finish decisively’. The fallacy lay in neglecting ‘war’s political and human dimensions’ and equating ‘targeting to tactics, operations and strategy’. It failed to recognise the ‘uncertainty of war, the trajectory of which is constantly altered by varied interactions with determined and elusive enemies.’<sup>5</sup>

The vampire is unlikely to be killed off soon. It has become natural to explore new developments by pushing them to their most extreme potential impacts. Should another major war start to loom larger as a serious prospect then all forms of offensive scenarios, however improbable or difficult to execute, will demand careful attention. Colin Gray has warned against assuming that just because we have avoided a war between great powers for some time that this will continue indefinitely, and also of becoming so beguiled by new types of war that we forget to think about classical war.<sup>6</sup> When a Harvard group explored the parallels between the rise of Germany as a great power at the start of the twentieth century and the current rise of China, they considered poor diplomacy, unreasonable allies, insufficient economic interdependence, domestic upheavals, offensive doctrines, and the logic of the rise of one power inevitably coming at the expense of another. The main conclusion drawn from the comparison, however, as a guide to how to avoid a major war with China in the future, was to watch out for the ‘little things’, contingent features of the situation, chance factors and then specific decisions, that might have gone another way but together worked to turn a manageable crisis into a catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective any thinking about future war geared to prevention should look to innovation in diplomacy and international communications as much as to military strategy. Problems could emerge not out of the blue with some all-or-nothing attack but instead out of an assertion of rights in contested territory, a principled stand that embarrassed a rival, probing actions to explore weaknesses that came up against strength, military manoeuvres to ‘send a message’, or displays of resolve that turned into actual clashes and escalated quickly.

**THE INNOVATION THAT DID MOST TO TRANSFORM THINKING** about war, and why the risk factors at play during the first decades of the twenty-first century were so much more severe than those in the first decades of the twentieth, was the development of nuclear weapons. These weapons were first introduced at the end of a war that had seen the Holocaust, carpet-bombing, and attacks from long-range missiles. Atom bombs were a logical culmination of what had gone before, and also apparently brutally successful in bringing a total war to an end. The simplest if depressing

assumption was that war had become progressively more murderous, with ever more sophisticated means being found to slaughter people on a large scale, and that future wars would be even more intense and existential. This prospect encouraged great caution, even when it came to quite minor crises. The risks were just too great and reliable offensive strategies were out of reach. This caution has been internalised by successive generations of world leaders—expressed in a slogan shared by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev: ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought’.<sup>8</sup> But will this last?

In the past, credibility about any war ‘going nuclear’ depended on the likely passions raised by the preceding conventional campaigns, in which many would already have died. In 1945 nuclear war appeared as a natural extension of what had gone before but now there is much less of a connection between the two types of war. The trend in conventional war, at least in the West, has been increasingly to adopt strategies that sought to spare civilians, not always successfully. The United States and its allies have also been confident enough in their overall strength to see nuclear weapons as a reserve, deterring extreme actions by another nuclear power. But under the strain of war, attitudes could switch, as they have switched before, into a position where the old arguments about getting at governments through their miserable populations will appear credible again. Countries lacking comparable conventional strength to the US will also continue to see nuclear weapons as a vital leveller.<sup>9</sup> When President Putin wished to dissuade the United States from acting on behalf of Ukraine in 2014 he observed: ‘Thank God, I think no one is thinking of unleashing a large-scale conflict with Russia. I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers.’<sup>10</sup>

There are scenarios separate from a great-power conflict which could see nuclear use, for example involving India and Pakistan. In addition, a number of the big crises of this century had a nuclear dimension. The US and its allies went to war against Iraq in order to preclude a future nuclear programme, threatened war, imposed sanctions and eventually cut a deal with Iran to prevent them acquiring enough enriched uranium for their own nuclear weapons, and began 2017 seeking to stop North Korea taking its already advanced nuclear and missile programmes further, though

facing a risk of nuclear retaliation. If and when nuclear weapons are again used in anger this will affect all subsequent discussions on war, either because it was as bad as feared or alternatively because it helped one side come out on top.<sup>11</sup>

Chemical weapons might have been seen as a lesser form of nuclear weapon. Their human effects would undoubtedly be horrific, but their strategic effects still limited compared to what can be achieved by traditional forms of bombardment. Biological weapons are also potentially unwieldy and their use would carry an even greater stigma. Both give counter-terrorism forces cause for concern.

Another key question is whether and how much the United States will play a role in future conflicts. The literature at least as it applies to interstate wars, assumes that the United States is actively engaged in the generality of the world's problems. Americans have written the key works, not least because of the country's role as the guarantor of a certain sort of international order. It is hard to think of a single development that would transform security calculations around the world, including whether or not to build national nuclear arsenals, than a decision by the United States to disentangle itself from its alliance commitments. This is why allies spent so much time following Washington security debates and wondering how much they could continue to rely on US support in a crisis. Any discussion about the various maritime challenges posed by China to the Japanese, or by Russia to the Baltic States, takes on a completely different light should these challenges come to be seen as tests of the principle of alliance.

This in turn raises the question of whether the United States will continue to enjoy such a predominant military position. It remains the only power with a truly global reach in conventional forces, but it can no longer assume straightforward victory even in battles fought on its own terms. US forces have been blown up by hidden roadside bombs, but it is a long time since they have faced serious threats from the air (possibly Korea in 1953) or expected to lose ships in a confrontation at sea. Russia would pose a serious threat so long as it did not stray too far from home territory, but its economic weakness works against it becoming an even greater power. So long as it maintains internal stability China can expect to get stronger. This is why, when coupled with the complexity of its

regional politics, Asia provides a more likely setting for a future great-power war.

**WITH CIVIL WARS THE EXPERIENCE HAS BEEN EVEN MORE** salutary. The category has never been clear-cut because internal conflict often prompts external intervention—by like-minded militants supporting a religious or ideological cause, neighbours with local interests, and major powers acting out of humanitarian or security concerns. At times external forces have sought to hold the ring or monitor a fragile ceasefire in the guise of a peacekeeping force. Sometimes there was no peace to keep, and external intervention effectively took sides, either by preventing one side from winning by unacceptable means—starving or massacring civilians, for instance—or ensuring that the most ideologically sympathetic party came out on top, as was attempted in both Iraq and Afghanistan. On the ground, instead of being fought by disciplined regular forces serving the purposes of either the state or its challenger, civil wars often pitted relatively disorganised militias against each other. In these cases, the conflicts tended to be driven by ground-level considerations of individual and group security, and the violence was often more personal. They broke up communities that had previously been apparently harmonious, and left legacies of bitterness, division, and impoverishment.

Whatever the higher cause they were notionally supporting, individuals and groups could develop their own agendas, geared to criminal activities, such as smuggling and trafficking in drugs, natural resources, and people. These interests could keep a conflict bubbling along, despite the efforts of peace mediators or armed peacekeepers. If state structures remain immature or contested, the situation might never improve, leading to outside powers and international organisations accepting a quasi-permanent role in the politics of the host country and some continuing responsibility for pacifying hostile elements.

After the end of the Cold War, Western countries, out of a mixture of motives, found themselves getting involved in conflicts far from home. What might have started with enemies being rolled over by the sheer weight of firepower and sophisticated equipment turned into long, complex, and messy campaigns. Their troops entered a world of shadowy

militias, with accomplished bomb-makers, angry mobs, cynical warlords, and energised youngsters brandishing their AK-47s. Protest movements morphed into militias and then militias morphed into criminal gangs or into rival factions, fighting each other with the same ferocity that they once fought their shared enemy. The conflict zones were populated by altruistic volunteers for NGOs, private security contractors, offering protection for all those who were not in the military (and whose numbers often exceeded the military), conciliators and journalists, smugglers and traffickers. All had to navigate their way through broken social structures, corrupt economies, and unreliable political institutions. No one was truly safe. For those living in these countries this form of warfare could become something habitual, routine, to which it was necessary to adjust. Those intervening were able to walk away. They could decide that engagement was not such a good idea. Perhaps, they might conclude, the people were beyond help, or no longer deserved support, as they had done insufficient to help themselves. In this way they might accept outcomes that would have been characterised as defeat while the fighting was at its height but became tolerable when the alternative was persisting with what had become a futile endeavour.

This left another large political question—the answer to which will influence the future of war. The reputation of interventions suffered after Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, although Syria was a poor advert for holding back. What may make a difference in the future may not only be the extent of the human distress being caused by the conflict but also the desperation of fleeing refugees and the opportunities for terrorism. Humanitarian motives may not be sufficient to ensure engagement, but that may mean conflicts that do not spill out of their borders will be left alone until exhaustion sets in. Some influence could be exercised by relying largely on air power and on others to provide the land forces. That might see the major enemy pushed back or even defeated, but it would also empower those who were making the sacrifices. It would mean relinquishing control over events on the ground, and accepting the agenda of local allies, with their distinctive interests, so that the relationship between military action and political objectives became further attenuated. To side with a government could mean propping up those whose practices had created the conflict in the first place; to side with rebels was not only more



problematic in terms of international law but could mean promoting a radical political project that went well beyond resisting oppression.

Over this century approaches to intervention have moved from humanitarianism with nation-building to counter-terrorism with nation-building to counter-terrorism on its own. Islamist extremism is now seen as a global challenge—networked, ruthless, and capable—and one that requires a robust response. The form this response should take has been the subject of an intense debate since the opening of the ‘war on terror’, including the extent it can and should be fought in line with established Western values and respect for human rights. This debate has yet to be concluded.<sup>12</sup> There has also been a corresponding shift from a Cold War understanding of civil wars as largely anti-colonial and ideological struggles, to what might be expected with states with weak foundations and high poverty, to a phenomenon with many different strands, but showing the increasing influence of hard-line Islamist movements.

**A COMMON THEME OF THOSE REFLECTING ON THE STATE OF** the military art was of the blurring of boundaries—between peace and war, the military and the civilian, the conventional and unconventional, the regular and the irregular, the domestic and the international, and the state and the non-state, the legitimate and the criminal.<sup>13</sup> The talk was of ‘grey zone’ conflicts, found somewhere between peace and war, where the action chosen was deliberately kept below the threshold that would spark a major war.<sup>14</sup> Another term referring to the same phenomenon, but with a double meaning, was ‘Cool War’:

On the one hand, it is a little warmer than cold because it seems likely to involve almost constant offensive measures that, while falling short of actual warfare, regularly seek to damage or weaken rivals or gain an edge through violations of sovereignty and penetration of defenses. And on the other, it takes on the other definition of “cool,” in that it involves the latest cutting-edge technologies in ways that are changing the paradigm of conflict to a much greater degree than any of those employed during the Cold War—which was, after all, about old-fashioned geopolitical jockeying for advantage in anticipation of potential old-school total warfare.<sup>15</sup>

The risks attached to major war and the reluctance to commit substantial forces to lesser conflicts have led major powers to search for ways, whether subversion of the political process, economic coercion, cyber-attacks, or brazen disinformation campaigns, to influence events while keeping their liabilities limited and risks managed. Again there was the difficulty that these methods were unlikely to bring much to a conclusion but instead encouraged niggling, persistent conflicts until at some point a way was found to sort out the underlying issues or else some spark moved them out of the grey zone and back into open warfare.

War therefore has a future. It can make an appearance wherever there is a combination of an intensive dispute and available forms of violence. The international system has its known fault lines, between and within states, and there is always a possibility of some eruption. The violence may be connected with parochial or even private issues, will often be linked with criminality and connected with simmering social tensions. At first it may bear little resemblance to our common views of war, but any continuing violence has the potential to turn into something bigger, just as wars always leave their traces when they have notionally concluded. So long as forces are maintained, weapons developed, and the plans kept up to date, there is the risk of another clash of arms that will resemble the regular wars of the past.

It would be against the spirit of this book to predict the incidence and form of future wars. A number of factors make it hard to anticipate the future. One is that prediction is often purposive, closely bound up with advocacy, and so is about the present as much as the future. In principle by following the advocated course of action the direst outcomes will be avoided while the more optimistic realised. When it comes to urging war this can lead to an almost willful underestimation of the resourcefulness of adversaries, their capacity to find reserves or acquire allies. Those lamenting national complacency, decadence and spinelessness often underestimate the resilience of their own people at times of emergency. Such underestimates help explain why the biggest surprises in war often lie in what happens after the first engagements.

Similarly, lobbyists for one branch of the armed services, new weapons systems, or even peace proposals, paint alternative pictures of the future according to whether their arguments are accepted or ignored. Even

academics find it hard to look forward without offering some recommendations about how the future might be improved. The aim is to identify strategies, investments and actions to enable us to retain a degree of control over our destinies. In these ways security debates get framed and priorities set, with some issues deemed highly salient as others are pushed to the margins. When governments are caught by surprise, as with the collapse of the Soviet Union or mass-casualty terrorism, or engage in activities for which they were poorly prepared, such as the interventions of the 1990s and 2000s, this was often not because they were unthinkable but because there had been no prior reason to push them to the top of the security agenda. As other possibilities were being illuminated they had been left unexplored.

Another tendency is to assume that the recent past can be extrapolated into the future, that trend lines will continue, as with claims that war as an institution is in inevitable decline. Another and quite different tendency is to assert that we are on the verge of a great, transformational discontinuity. The possibility that much will carry on as before is far less interesting. Yet the continuities in warfare are striking, as can be seen in those countries that have long forgotten the experience of peace, and by observing how much modern killing is achieved by relatively old-fashioned weaponry that would have been recognised by earlier generations. As much guidance on the future is provided by the unending wars of sub-Saharan Africa as by the promise of artificial intelligence.

These tendencies so evident in the history of the future of war are therefore likely to persist in its future. As in the past there will be a stream of speculative scenarios and anxious warnings, along with sudden demands for new thinking in the face of an unexpected development. Whether couched in the language of earnest academic papers, military appreciations or fictional thrillers, these will all be works of imagination.<sup>16</sup> They cannot be anything else because the future is not preordained. This is the main reason why prediction is so difficult. There are decisions yet to be made, even about challenges that are well understood, along with chance events that will catch us unawares and developments already in train that have been inadequately appreciated. These works of imagination will often have value in helping to clarify the

choices that need to be faced and at times will even turn out to have been prescient. For that reason many will deserve to be taken seriously. They should all, however, be treated sceptically.