

# From Clausewitz to Putin: War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Reflections on Conflicts  
in the Contemporary World

edited by  
Matteo Bressan  
Giorgio Cuzzelli



Matteo Bressan and Giorgio Cuzzelli (eds)

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Ledizioni - LediPublishing

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Via Boselli 10, 20136 Milan, Italy  
[www.ledipublishing.com](http://www.ledipublishing.com)  
e-mail: [info@ledizioni.it](mailto:info@ledizioni.it)

M. Bressan and G. Cuzzelli (eds), *From Clausewitz to Putin: War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Reflections on Conflicts in the Contemporary World*

First edition: April 2024  
PDF ISBN 9791256001361

Catalogue and reprints information: [www.ledipublishing.com](http://www.ledipublishing.com)

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# Introduction

BY MATTEO BRESSAN AND GIORGIO CUZZELLI

The growing disorder of the international system caused by the end of the bipolar confrontation, the subsequent attempt to impose a state-led liberal order, and the crisis of the latter has caused both the consolidation of long-standing conflicts and the emergence of new conflicts, characterised by unconventional forms of struggle, to emerge.

Unlike a brief period at the end of the Cold War, the traditional confrontation between powers has been continuous. This confrontation is still ongoing today, albeit in an evolved form, from the gates of Europe to the shores of the Pacific.

At the same time, 20 years of the global war against terrorism have been accompanied by the emergence of bloody civil wars and particularly virulent non-state actors. These circumstances have highlighted the rise of increasingly complex and articulated types of irregular conflict in eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

In essence, wartime warfare—be it traditional or irregular—which was intended to be consigned to oblivion by the *end of history*, has never died. In fact, it seems to be more alive and well than ever. However, a tendency to reject organised violence, not only as a means of resolving disputes—which would be perfectly reasonable—but also as a social phenomenon *tout court*, has long since taken hold in European public opinion, particularly in the Italian one. This rejection of violence has been conveyed both by a long period of peace and by a reasoning that is different in its postulates but similar in its conclusions. A pacifism with *no ifs and buts*, a multilateralism that is not always unhinged, and a fideistic recourse to technology have led to the belief that war as it currently exists is no longer of any use, that it is better for war not to be waged, and that if it has to be waged, it is better for someone else to do it. A sort of *there's no alternative thought* that has as its direct consequence a singular inability—primarily psychological—to cope with conflict situations and which begins with an inability to understand them. This is also true for governments who wage war without any particular concern, because they feel compelled to do so or are used to doing so. Others may wage war creatively because they act in conditions where they are inferior.

There are different schools of thought on this topic in both the West and the East, giving rise to a lively ideological debate. Some groups imagine fourth-generation wars, others speak of new wars; hybrid wars are often discussed, and the limitless war postulated a few years ago by the Chinese military is evoked. Some say that technology and artificial intelligence will make all types of warfare obsolete. The purpose of this book is to help different schools of thought understand each other.

Let us begin by highlighting one point. War has always been part of human affairs, and there is no point in hiding this. In the classical view, since Heraclitus in the 6th century B.C., the clash of ideas has been considered the engine of change in a society, and conflict—even bitter and violent conflict—that it produces between citizens and states—i.e., war—is considered the *origin of all things*. War is therefore a necessity of nature. This was a disruptive affirmation that led successive generations of philosophers to discuss its validity through modern times, moving from the *outright* rejection of such a notion to the acceptance of its inevitability. This acceptance even entails the certainty of the destruction of the species in the event of a nuclear conflict. On the other hand, in the modern view,—from Clausewitz to Schmitt via Marxist thought—war is a *social activity* and, in some cases, an extreme but necessary manifestation of politics that has, as its ultimate goal, the imposition of one's will on their adversary. War is therefore no longer a natural necessity; it is a choice<sup>1</sup>.

This does not detract from the fact that, since the 19th century, the West has repeatedly changed its attitude towards the phenomenon of war. Until 1914, war was considered a heroic and necessary step in the history of nations, peoples, and individuals, the *purifying bloodbath* of Marinetti's memory. Even the *useless* slaughter in the trenches then prevented another, even more appalling massacre in 1939. After 1945, however, the situation changed. The horror of the conflict that had just taken place, the suffering that it had caused and the realisation that, with the advent of the nuclear weapon, another total clash would also be the last one, making it an implausible prospect caused war to be removed from the collective imagination of the European continent. This led to the neutralist tendencies and periodic waves of pacifism that occurred throughout the Cold War. The end of war did not occur elsewhere, however; in the Middle and Far East, as well as in Africa, the friction between the two superpowers (USA and USSR) led to bloody conflict, decolonisation, and ongoing warfare<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this topic, see Curi U. (1999), *Pensare la guerra. L'Europa e il destino della politica*, Bari: Edizioni Dedalo or Bonanate L. (1994), *Guerra e pace. Due secoli di storia del pensiero politico*, Milan: FrancoAngeli.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this topic, see Howard M. (20092), *War in European History*, New York: Oxford University Press; tr. ita by Calvani F. (1978), *La guerra e le armi nella storia*



The situation changed again with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The end of the bipolar confrontation initially seemed to definitively remove the possibility of a global clash, but it opened the way for a series of internal conflicts of a particularly violent and bloody nature that dramatically altered public opinion. Civil wars led to massacres that were only stopped after direct intervention by the international community. This intervention was welcome in the eyes of the West because it was morally unexceptionable, as opposed to traditional warfare; its goal was to protect people and right wrongs and therefore appeared *just*. This modern concept of the *just war*, as opposed to a hypothetical *unjust war* of the past, became widespread in Western Europe after sixty years of peace on the continent, and then became the justification for unprecedented international activism. This activism was primarily inspired by the United States after the 1991 liberation of Kuwait and continues to the present day in a succession of situations that are more or less legitimate under international law.

These modern concepts of war also include humanitarian *war*, which has often been waged for purposes that are not entirely humanitarian, as well as *endless war*, which has not ceased to accompany us for the past thirty years<sup>3</sup> In parallel, even though post-Cold War peace is an illusion and the level of global conflict is much higher than it was in the past, the massive use of advanced technologies has made wars much more aseptic and *surgical* in the eyes of the unwitting spectators. This has induced a progressive habituation in the public, facilitating the acceptance of war, and accompanied it by a detachment from reality.

For those nations that did not have sufficient means to openly fight the more advanced countries, necessity sharpened their wits. This has led nations to make increasingly intense use of unconventional forms of struggle. Asymmetrical procedures have both severely tested the capacities of those who had to face them and caused a further barbarianisation of conflicts<sup>4</sup>.

The gradual exhaustion of the Western initiative— first caused by US fatigue—has also been counterbalanced by the growing assertiveness of certain state actors, who do not intend to resign themselves to American hegemony and the liberal order imposed by it. These actors include revisionist powers that, due to

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*d'Europa*, Bari: Laterza, as well as Sheehan J. (2009), *Where have all the Soldiers gone? The transformation of Modern Europe*, Boston: Mariner Books or Galli della Loggia E. (2016), *La coscienza europea e le guerre del Novecento*, in Cacciari et al., *Senza la guerra*, Bologna: il Mulino.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, see Asor Rosa A. (2002), *La guerra. Sulle Forme Attuali della convivenza umana*, Turin: Einaudi, as well as Jean C. and Dottori G. (2007), *Guerre umanitarie. La militarizzazione dei diritti umani*, Milan: Dalai Editore.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, see Colombo A. (2015), *La grande trasformazione della guerra contemporanea*, Milan: Fondazione Feltrinelli.

the disparity of forces, have confronted the West in nontraditional contexts with the goal of undermining the West's superiority and asserting their own reasons. At the same time, while the reaction capacity of the advanced countries is limited, they have also launched a challenge in the conventional sphere that seems to turn back history to types of confrontation that are now considered outdated by public opinion and many governments, but remain credible threats and dangerous. Putin's caterpillars, Xi Jinping's ships, Kim Jong-un's missiles, and Soleimani's drones<sup>5</sup> are examples of this.

This is the complex and constantly evolving picture that our book aims to describe. We will analyse this image from a holistic and evolutionary perspective to answer three fundamental questions: Has war changed? Or has it only changed the way we fight it? Or has our attitude towards it only changed? We will not venture to answer these questions for the reader and instead limit ourselves to presenting the facts.

To this end, in the first part of this book, Giorgio Cuzzelli presents a general description of conventional and insurgent warfare in the West and the East. The initial focus is on the 20th century, but then moves to an analysis of the technological transformation that has taken place since the beginning of the 21st century. Finally, he recounts how war has evolved since the conclusion of the bipolar confrontation, both in domestic clashes and in international contexts, examining the different forms of conflict that have gradually emerged and the responses of the West. The focus of this section is therefore on the land, sea, and air dimensions of the confrontation.

In the second part of the book, attention extends to other dimensions, both physical and virtual. Flavia Giacobbe examines the initiatives of states outside of the earth's atmosphere, Emanuele Gentili considers cyber warfare with a focus on attacking the critical infrastructures of a nation's critical infrastructures, and Emanuele Rossi assesses the impact of information warfare on government decision-making processes and public opinion.

The third part considers the relationship between war, society, and law from an evolutionary perspective. Fiammetta Borgia first assesses the impact of the more recent forms of conflictuality described in the first and second parts of the book on the theory and practice of both the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*; at the same time, the changes that have taken place in the respective spheres are described. Germano Dottori then picks up the thread of the discourse, which has barely been mentioned here, of the rejection of war on the part of Western socie-

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see Allen J. *et al.* (2021), *Future war and the defence of Europe*, New York: Oxford University Press and Gaub, F. (ed.) (2020), *Conflicts to come. 15 scenarios for 2030*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS).

ties—in particular our own—and the difficulty of certain politico-military choices. Lastly, Virgilio Ilari addresses the thorny issue of the perverse relationship that has arisen in the West between stabilisation interventions and hegemonic ambitions, and the political–military consequences of this attitude.

In the last part, some of the most qualified Italian area specialists take a close look at the specific situations that fall within the evolving case history of conflict forms introduced in the first part of this book. Stefano Felician Beccari looks at the Pacific and the challenges, somewhere between conventional and hybrid, of China and North Korea. Matteo Bressan focusses on the *modus operandi*—simultaneously asymmetrical and hybrid—of two of the main nonstate actors in contemporary conflicts, namely *Hezbollah* and *Wagner*. Nicol Petrelli, in examining the asymmetric conflict between *Hamas* and the Israeli army, demonstrates that the new challenges, although complex to face, are not impossible to overcome. Lastly, Claudio Bertolotti draws on the recent Western experience in Afghanistan to explain how we should not fight a modern counterinsurgency war.

Happy reading.



PART I. THE FACE OF WAR  
*by Giorgio Cuzzelli*



# 1. From Canes to the Golan: Conventional Conflicts

Humanity has been talking about war for millennia. However, in the West, few have addressed the essence of the phenomenon, particularly the relationship between war and politics.

In the fifth century B.C., while describing the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, Thucydides wrote unforgettable texts on the balance of power, the blackmail of fear, the nature of confrontation between states, and the perverse morality of the actors.

More than a thousand years later, in the midst of the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli was inspired by the Republic of Roman times and defined war as a necessary evil to ensure the survival of the state. He outlined the supportive relationship that should exist between citizens and political power in the midst of conflict.

Outside of these two, most commentators have told us how war should be waged, not what it is<sup>1</sup>.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, a Prussian officer who was a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, Karl von Clausewitz, described to us—finally, one might say—how war is made, what it is for, who fights it, and what principles govern it. While his work does have some detractors, which we will discuss in greater detail later in the book, his lecture was summarised in a posthumous and unfinished work titled *Vom Kriege*. This work appeared in 1832 and remains the most famous and most followed to this day. Therefore, we shall discuss it briefly.

According to von Clausewitz, war is first and foremost a social phenomenon. It is nothing more than a conflict of interests between opposing wills that we decide to settle violently. There is no need to emphasise the disruptive effect of this statement. It means that as a species we will never be rid of it.

Secondly, he wrote that war is an instrument of politics, and is subordinate

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of war as a historical-political, philosophical, and cultural phenomenon from antiquity to the present day, see Bonanate L. (2011), *La guerra*, Bari: Laterza. For a concise examination of military thought from antiquity to the present day, see: Breccia G. (2009), *Cultura e tecnica militare in Oriente e Occidente dalle origini al XIX secolo*, in *L'arte della guerra. Da Sun Tzu a Clausewitz*, Torino: Einaudi; van Creveld M. (2002), *The Art of War. War and Military Thought*, London: Cassell. For a phenomenology of modern warfare, see Freedman, L. (2017), *The Future of War. A History*, New York: Public affairs.

to and aimed at the latter. Its purpose is to bend the will of an adversary when all other means fail. Consequently, war is not a foregone conclusion. Other instruments exist and must be used in parallel with war; war is only the *last resort*. The objectives of war may be limited or extended, but the purposes and means used must be linked. This statement is also disruptive. War is not inevitable, it is a rational choice, and if it is a choice, it must be carried out to the end.

Third, war is fought using three interdependent components: the people, the military instrument, and political power, which make up the so-called Clausewitzian *trinity* and contribute to the conflict in different capacities. People contribute through a natural impulse to violence, the military instrument through the ethics and professionalism that distinguish it, and power through the use of reason to pursue its own ends. In the final analysis, according to the Prussian officer, war is the violence of the people, a free activity of the spirit, and a political instrument. But the interdependence of these three forces is actually a product. If only one of the factors is zero, the result is zero, and the war is lost. In light of history, this statement is an incontrovertible statement.

But this is not enough. According to Clausewitz, war is also subject to two fundamental conditions, *chance* and *friction*, which constrain its development and outcome. However, these can be remedied, albeit partially.

According to Saragat's famous 1953 definition, chance is nothing other than fate, *cynical, and baroque*. Fate is unpredictable and is likely to determine victory or defeat regardless of the efforts of the contenders. The chance cannot be beaten. The worst-case scenario, however, can be contemplated in our calculations with a probabilistic approach that can reduce its effects should it arise. At the same time, rational and determined command action, assisted by good organisation, can counterbalance its consequences.

Friction derives from four interconnected elements: the opposing will of the adversary, who will generally be careful not to do what we want; the capacity of our forces, which will actually determine what we can or cannot do in opposition to the adversary; the environment in which we operate, be it physical or human, from the sea to the mountains to religion, which will condition the outcome of our and others' initiatives, and; the availability of information on the adversary's intentions, forces, and activities of the adversary, otherwise known as the *fog of war*, which has always defined operations; today, we aspire to disperse the fog of war with the power of new technologies. While the four components of friction cannot be mastered, they can be countered with rational and determined commando actions and the adoption of appropriate organisational measures.

Having established the nature of the phenomenon and identified the factors that determine success or defeat, Clausewitz also gives us a rough indication of how to beat the opponent. He only tells us what to do, not how to do it. Any



opponent will necessarily have a key point in its disposition that is at the same time its greatest vulnerability. It cannot be strong everywhere.

To hit it decisively, this weakness must be identified, and all forces must be concentrated at that spot. Whether the weakness is a forgotten valley floor in the middle of the mountains, key figures of a murderous regime, or oil rigs makes little difference. That is the *centre of gravity* where we must strike, where we must exert our main effort to land a blow to adversaries where they are most vulnerable.

But how do we exert this effort? By combining the mass, swift action, and surprise intervention of our forces to deal a mortal blow, thereby *manoeuvring* for a *decisive clash*. This is, in an unassuming but necessary summary, the lesson of the Prussian officer Clausewitz. It should be remembered, however, that this lesson has had fierce detractors and bad interpreters from the outset.

One of the main opponents to this concept was Antoine-Henry de Jomini, a Swiss officer who was also a veteran of the Napoleonic campaigns and who may have had even more luck with his 1836 work *Précis de l'art de la guerre* than Clausewitz. Jomini first argues that war and politics have nothing to do with each other and that war—paraphrasing Clemenceau—is too serious a matter to be left to politicians who should not meddle in its conduct. He then states that war is governed not by the Clausewitzian trinity, by chance, and even less by friction; instead, its principles are of an absolute nature, first and foremost attack. The result is a mechanistic view of confrontation, where forces move geometrically across the terrain like pawns on a chessboard. A direct consequence of Jomini's thinking will be the bloody frontal attacks of the First World War, the perverse mechanisms of adversary attrition, as well as the impatient attitude of military hierarchies toward the primacy of politics that characterised European armies between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century. But if Sparta cries, Messene does not laugh. While in Europe Jomini was all the rage, in Germany, Clausewitz's thought was interpreted in an extremely narrow way between the nineteenth and twentieth century; readers forgot the relationship between war and politics, ignored the connection between the ends and means employed, and underestimated the effects of friction and chance. As a matter of fact, from Schlieffen to Hitler via Hindenburg and Ludendorff, only the mechanisms were adopted between the First and Second World Wars, not the philosophy. We know the consequences.

However, the debate between those who support, detract and misinterpret Clausewitz's statements, however, has not been limited to the last two centuries; it has continued into the present day. Before continuing it, however, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

If, as we said at the outset, the debate in the West focused less on the nature of war and more on its methods, at least until Clausewitz in other parts of the

world—particularly in the East—the debates have been different.

Between the ninth and third centuries BC, in China, more than two thousand years before Clausewitz's writing, a group of scholars and generals in the service of the emperors compiled a series of compilations on the principles governing warfare, which were called the *Seven Classics*. The most famous of these works is Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, but the others are not less important<sup>2</sup>.

While there is harmony between the *Seven Classics* and Clausewitzian thought regarding the principles behind war, there is opposition on the best way to win a war.

For the Chinese, war is also an instrument of state policy and is aimed at imposing one's will on their adversary. However, explicit mention is made in the *Seven Classics* of the fact that the use of force should be a last resort and, ideally, avoided. The innovative element in these works is the addition of the idea that the success of a war depends not only on victory on the battlefield, but also on the proper management of the subsequent peace, if one wants to guarantee lasting success for one's initiatives. Shadows of Versailles and the Fall of the Wall. At the same time, if the aim is to avoid frontal confrontation as much as possible, success can be achieved more easily by weakening the adversary's will to fight than by crushing their military instrument. However, this entails a careful assessment of the nature of the rival in order to strike at their mind, preferably using an indirect approach, based on surprise, speed and, where possible, deception. In the final analysis, this is a much more ductile way of thinking about war than the Western one, which is more inclined to adapt to the antagonist in order to bend their will without necessarily going so far as to the decisive confrontation so dear to the West.

Later, we will discuss the important consequences that this Eastern way of thinking had on the course of wars. Now, we wish to emphasise that, in analogy to the classical Western view, the centre of gravity of confrontation and action is directed towards the political and military level of the opposing trinity,

i.e., the central power and the instrument of war. So far, nothing has changed. The radical change, however, is in the approach, i.e., the method of waging war. Kinetic and violent methods are used in the West, and cognitive and manipulative methods are used in the East<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise analysis of classical Chinese military thought, see Mini F. (1998), *L'Altra Strategia. I classici del pensiero militare cinese dalla guerra al marketing*, Milan: Franco Angeli.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparative examination of the thought of Clausewitz, Jomini, and Sun Tzu, see Handel M. (2020<sup>3</sup>), *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, London: Frank Cass; tr. it. by S. Presta (2000), *I maestri della guerra: Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and Jomini*, Rome: Edizioni Forum di Relazioni Internazionali.

## 2. From Trafalgar to Tripoli: different environments, unchanging principles

War is not only waged on land. War has also been waged on the sea throughout time, and for the last century or so, war has been waged on the air. Over recent years, war has also been waged in the cosmos and in cybernetic space. Against the backdrop of essentially *terrestrial* thinkers, such as those we have mentioned so far in this book, the question arises as to whether the rules we have discussed apply in every environment. Can Clausewitz be applied *per mare* and *per terram*, as the motto of the British Royal Marines states, as well as everywhere and whenever possible? In this chapter, we will limit ourselves to considering the maritime and air aspects of war, leaving it to the other authors in this collection to address the newest challenges.

Although thalassocracy is an ancient concept—Athens was an example of this type of state—modern naval thought developed *first and foremost* in the British Isles, beginning in the Renaissance, and was perfected by the island continent, with later excellence visible in the United States. An American naval officer in the second half of the nineteenth century, Alfred Thayer Mahan, provided a comprehensive assessment of the importance of ocean dominance in the destiny of nations and world history through a detailed analysis of the reasons for the advancement of British supremacy over the sea in the modern era<sup>1</sup>.

In his most famous work, *The Influence of Seapower upon History, 1660–1783*, published in 1890, Mahan discusses the performance of the Royal Navy in its confrontation with Holland and France, and identifies the exercise of maritime power and the consequent control of lines of communication as key to English success, the hegemony that was to follow, and, ultimately, the survival of maritime nations. This lesson would lead Wilhelminian Germany to confrontation in World War I, and the United States—as England’s successor in naval power—to dominate the seas to this day.

In Mahan’s view, maritime *power—sea power*—is exercised in two ways: through the control of communication lines, maritime trade and coastlines—*sea control*—and their interdiction to the adversary—*sea denial*, naval blockade and strait control.

His statements, however, do not escape the logic of the Clausewitzian-inspi-

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<sup>1</sup> For an examination of the essentials of naval warfare in the modern era, see Black J. (2017), *Naval warfare. A Global History since 1860*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

red war as we have outlined it so far.

Indeed, it is clear that the key to success, that is, to the exercise of oceanic power, lies *first and foremost* in the elimination of the opposing naval instrument. As long as it remains alive, we control nothing. Therefore, it represents the military component of the opposing trinity from a maritime point of view and at the same time a *centre of gravity*, on which the survival of the antagonist ultimately depends.

However, this centre of gravity is hidden in the vastness of the oceans or in the safety of ports. What makes the prize, as on land, is therefore *manoeuvre*, that is, the ability to concentrate forces at the desired time and place in order to deliver a *decisive blow* by surprise. The best examples of this are Nelson's victory at Abukir in 1798 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. The concept of *decisive blow* was to be developed even further when maritime power became air power during the Second World War, thus dramatically amplifying the scope and power of the war effort. interventions, from Taranto in 1940 to Leyte in 1944.

In Mahan's wake lies, at least in part, his British contemporary Corbett. Corbett's emphasis on the exercise of *sea control* and the importance he attaches to manoeuvring to gain an advantage over the opponent represent the foundations of modern naval tactics. For Corbett, however, success is not achieved through a decisive clash, especially when inferior, but through an assiduous presence on the main trade routes that weakens the adversary's forces and excludes maritime traffic. This is the rationale behind the use of the German submarines during the First and Second World Wars in the Atlantic, and of the Iranian boats in the waters of the Persian Gulf today.

If the logic of dominating the oceans prevailed throughout the modern era and until the Cold War—as witnessed by the Soviet Union's extraordinary run-up of the Soviet Union in the 1970s—from the end of the bipolar confrontation and for a long period thereafter, naval power in its most classic sense has been affected—like every other component of the military instrument—by the profound transformations that have taken place in international affairs and, in particular, the multiplication of local and regional crises due to the decomposition of states and the rise of hostile nonstate actors. These crises, in turn, have required the projection of expeditionary forces that are predominantly land-based, albeit in an interforce context in which the naval component has assumed an important but conceptually ancillary role. However, due to its extraordinary autonomy, sustainability, and resilience, the maritime force has been able to project formidable air and *sea* capabilities in support of the land effort. The best examples of this are the aircraft that embarked on aircraft carriers that supported the land effort in Afghanistan for years or the naval infantrymen who liberated Kuwait. However, there is nothing new under the sun when one considers the operations of the US

Navy—and its infantry—in the Pacific Ocean during World War II.

The world had changed significantly in the meantime. Demographic growth, the production drive, and the development of international trade encouraged by globalisation had led to the gradual displacement of an important part of humanity towards the coasts, particularly in Asia and Africa, and its simultaneous concentration in immense urban agglomerations, resulting in a massive anthropisation of coastal areas and littoral zones that geographically coincide with the main anchorages, obligatory passages, straits, peripheral or closed seas, and major archipelagos. The control of these areas was already in Mahan's thinking. Today, however, control of these areas is even more important because the bulk of world trade is concentrated in these areas and the risk of great political, social, and religious upheavals due to human concentration is greater. In contemporary maritime thinking, therefore, operations *from the sea* have progressively been joined by a form of warfare expressly dedicated to coastal environments, that is, *littoral warfare*.

Littoral warfare sees the naval instrument as the protagonist rather than a supporting actor, both through the traditional control of adjacent spaces and through a joint aeronaval and amphibious effort on the ground, each of which is aimed at neutralising potential adversaries and guaranteeing freedom of manoeuvre<sup>2</sup>.

However, in an era of ever decreasing naval instruments and ever more expensive construction programmes, such a concentration of effort on the cohorts would have necessarily entailed an overhaul of the instrument and painful renunciations. A heated debate on this topic has been ongoing in the United States since the 1990s. Some have argued for the need to maintain a *blue-water navy*, i.e., an instrument with oceanic ambitions capable of continuously exercising all the traditional functions of maritime power. Others have suggested that only a *brown or green-water navy*, mainly dedicated to the coasts, would be required, and whose preferential control would guarantee success.

However, the evolution of world affairs in the recent period will put at least a temporary end to the debate. China's assertiveness on the international stage, in opposition to the international order sought by the West after the end of the Cold War, appears likely to challenge the naval hegemony of the United States, at least in certain quadrants between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This has forced the United States to review its plans, clearly combining Mahan's classical thinking with more modern *littoral warfare*. Thus, we see aircraft carriers cruising in Taiwanese waters and Marines armed with anti-ship missiles—instead of tan-

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of *littoral warfare*, see Vego M. (2015), 'On Littoral Warfare', in *Naval War College Review*, vol. 68, no. 2, Article 4 [<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol68/iss2/4>] (Accessed: 27 December 2021).

ks—deployed on the coasts adjacent to the China Sea.

Although the concept of maritime power has been part of history since antiquity, air power is a more recent development. Giulio Douhet, a general of the Royal Italian Army, baptised the form of power by publishing a visionary book titled *Il Dominio dell'Aria*<sup>3</sup> immediately after the First World War.

Douhet takes note of what took place during the First World War, namely the mobilisation of every component of society to face an unparalleled war effort aimed at the survival of nations and the conditioning exercised by the home front on the conduct of the war. Two considerations follow from this. The first is that the wars of the future will no longer be fought between armies but between peoples, whose ability to resist depends on the outcome of the clash. The second is that the clash will be total and limitless. Consequently, civilian populations will become legitimate targets of confrontation, and conflicts will be won by targeting the will of civilians to resist through massive and indiscriminate aerial bombardment. In essence, in Douhet's view, *air power* alone can determine war success. As in the case of sea power, the task of an air force is firstly to achieve air dominance, and to do this, it must destroy the opposing air force. In the framework of a total clash, it is also necessary to strike at the core of the opposing power, i.e. its industrial capacity. Finally, the adversary's will to fight must be destroyed by targeting the population so that the nation's will to resist will be broken. Thus, the Clausewitzian inspiration—derived from both the trinity principle and the concept of gravitation—of targeting the population, as well as the military instrument and industrial power is evident in this vision. However, at the same time, the emphasis on offending the population appears to be irrespective of any humanitarian considerations.

Douhet's thinking also made its way into the interwar period, heavily influencing the conduct of air warfare during and after the Second World War, up to the present day. This thought was shared by the American Mitchell and Seversky, pioneers of overseas strategic aviation. The Italian Mecozzi pioneered assault aviation, that is, close air support to ground forces; although his thoughts were often parallel to Douhet's, there was not always total agreement. Air operations will always be inspired by the simultaneously Clausewitzian and Douhettian search for a centre of gravity aimed at the decisive abatement of the adversary's potential, identified from time to time in political power, industrial capacity, military power, or resilience of the population. This was the case with the Battle of Britain in 1940, the bombing of Germany in 1944, and the attacks on Hanoi in 1972, Belgrade in 1999, and Tripoli in 2011.

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<sup>3</sup> For an examination of the essential aspects of air warfare, see van Creveld M. (2011), *The Age of Air Power*, New York, Public affairs.

At the same time, air strikes will assume decisive fame, particularly after the end of the bipolar confrontation; however, this fame does not entirely correspond to reality, as will be shown later in the discussion of the modern relationship between war and technology.

This is, moreover, a fundamental difference between air power and maritime power, which became evident in the aftermath of the Cold War. While maritime power found it objectively difficult to maintain its relevance in a context of predominant air–land interventions for pacification or the imposition of the new international order—and would need to wait for the Chinese challenge of our time to raise its head—air power, as a powerful, flexible, and cheap instrument, became increasingly important. At the same time, in the temporary absence of a credible opposition, the same air power found it difficult to justify the need to maintain a costly technological advantage in the eyes of political power and public opinion. Again, it was the assertiveness of the revisionist powers—first, Russia and China—that would reintroduce the need to maintain a margin of qualitative, rather than quantitative, supremacy over the main competitors.





### 3. From Saigon to Falluja: wars of people and insurgent wars

Military history as a whole seems to suggest that wars have been decided—or at least their outcomes have been significantly affected—by great cataclysmic clashes of Clausewitzian memory, which were aimed at the destruction of opposing armies.

From Cannae in 216 BC to the Golan in 1973 via Waterloo in 1815, Tannenberg in 1914, and Kursk in 1943, it would seem these conflicts represent the way war was fought on land. The same types of conflict occurred on sea and in the sky, from Trafalgar in 1812 to Belgrade in 1999.

In reality, this was not always true. If we consider the Vietnam War in the twentieth century or the clash with the Islamic State in the early twentieth century, we can see a different turn of events. There were two reasons for this: first, because the contenders were not alike and second (which may be a consequence of the first), because they did not think about war in the same way.

In essence, in this book, we have so far been discussing traditional warfare, i.e., *lyrical* warfare, as they say, between adversaries that are, in principle, equivalent in terms of objectives, force, doctrines, and means of warfare. But what if the adversaries are different or if they think differently? Let us therefore enter the obscure world of *nonlinear* conflicts, of *irregular* wars, of *asymmetrical* clashes, which will be our focus from now until the end of our discussion<sup>1</sup>.

To avoid dangerous misunderstandings, it should be emphasised that, even in the context of irregular wars and asymmetrical clashes, the basic aim remains the same: to impose one's will on the adversary. The protagonists remain the same in irregular wars and asymmetrical clashes; they remain a people, a military instrument, and a political *leader* on both sides. We will return to these aspects when we revisit the debate between supporters and opponents of Clausewitz's thought.

Let us begin by saying that asymmetric warfare has always existed. Thucydides addressed this when describing the 5th century BC clash between Athens—a maritime power with a colonial vocation—and Sparta, a land power with an eastern vocation. The Greek historian was the first to realise that different adversaries cannot do so.

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of irregular conflicts in history, see Boot M. (2013), *Invisible Armies. An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*, New York: Liveright Publishing; tr. ita. by Foglia G., Montemaggi E. (2013), *L'armata invisibile: Soldati e guerriglieri che hanno cambiato la storia*, Rome: Newton Compton.

Rather than confronting each other in a different way, that is, indirectly. They understood, however, that an indirect approach generates prolonged attrition instead of the decisive battle necessary to produce victory. This represents the strategic dilemma of asymmetrical wars. What should be done with an adversary that one cannot corner? It is not for nothing that, in order to break the stalemate and force Sparta out of its shell, Alcibiades needed to drag the Athenians into the campaign in Sicily, a power projection so risky that it cost his city the war.

Therefore, is there a natural opposition between an indirect approach and decisive confrontation? Is a synthesis impossible? The answer was only revealed many years later and from far from Ancient Greece, in the form of the communist revolutionary war that was invented in the 1930s by a Chinese politician, Mao Zedong.

In his attempt to start revolution while also surviving the combined offensive of the Japanese and the Nationalist armies, which were initially much stronger than his forces, Mao realised an extremely effective synthesis between Chinese traditional military thought, as we described at the beginning, and the military-political doctrine defined by Russian writer Vladimir Lenin in his 1902 book *What to Do?*

In essence, Mao's approach combined the indirect approach aimed at avoiding frontal confrontation and weakening the will of the adversary, which was characteristic of the *Seven Classics*, with political agitation and armed insurrection postulated by revolutionary communist thoughts of Lenin.

In the words of Mahnken, a modern commentator, Mao's ideas

represent a project through which a weaker force defeats a stronger power by means of a sophisticated politico-military strategy that envisages progressive political control of the countryside, the almost total mobilisation of the peasantry, and the deliberate prolongation of the conflict<sup>2</sup>.

From a practical point of view, from the mid-1930s until their final victory in 1949 with the establishment of the People's Republic, the Chinese revolutionary armies would face adversaries more powerful than themselves, avoiding decisive confrontations wherever possible and instead preferring prolonged attrition to exhaust their adversaries. They systematically resorted to deception and surprise and gradually gained control of the countryside to secure popular support, isolate their opponents, and sustain their long-term effort. They survived and won the war thanks to a broad strategy that was articulated in three successive phases. First in the defensive; in order to survive and consolidate, i.e., the Long March to esca-

<sup>2</sup> Mahnken T. (2016<sup>5</sup>), *Strategic Theory*, in Baylis et al., *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 63, translation by the author.

pe annihilation; then in a very long, attrition-driven stalemate, built on guerrilla warfare; and finally, in the counter-offensive, where the adversary was beaten on the ground in a way considered conventional for what had turned from a revolutionary movement into a full-fledged army, supported both internally and by the decisive external aid of the Soviet Union.

All these steps were made possible first and foremost by the support the army enjoyed from the population, which in turn was the result of a careful study of the social environment and political penetration. These steps show us unequivocally that in Maoist thought, the focus had shifted away from tradition. According to the Clausewitzian trinity, neither political power nor the military instrument of the antagonist mattered; what mattered was the population. The main effort needed to be made on the population for the war to be won. This was an epochal turning point that characterised most conflicts going forward.

For this reason, Mao's doctrine, combined with the demands of decolonisation and the ideological confrontation unleashed by the Cold War, was to be increasingly successful from the end of the Second World War until the 1970s, whenever it was compared with traditional military thinking and the instruments supporting it. This concept was further refined by study of Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Carlos Marighella, and it established itself not only in China, but throughout Indochina, Cuba, and southern Africa, among others. The doctrine will fail when the government is able to break the unity of the movement before it manages to consolidate internally or exploit external help, such as in Latin America or Malaysia.

However, after the end of the Cold War, however, Mao's People's War changed its appearance. As the ideological glue of the revolutionary drive gradually broke down, the world had to address both inherited conflicts and conflicts generated by the attempts to manage the fallout from the fall of the Soviet Union. These interventions were not always successful, either in terms of their premise or their results. Maoist thought would become the founding architecture of a phenomenon of resistance to constituted authority called insurrectional warfare or *insurgency*, defined as internal conflicts begun under the pretext of getting rid of the invader, seeing one's ethnic or religious side triumph, or simply of conquering power. This is an old phenomenon because there has always been resistance to the occupier, from the Zealots of the 1st century A.D. to the Algerians of the 1960s, passing through the Spanish and *Basques* of the early 19th century; it is also a new phenomenon, because it combines the afflatus of insurrection for the most varied reasons with the scientific nature of communist military doctrine, dropping it into completely different contexts. This is a contemporary phenomenon, as it has been ongoing for several decades. Four examples include Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and the former Soviet Caucasus.

Insurrectionary warfare can be summarised as the action of an organised movement with the aim of overthrowing an established government, or opposing an internal enemy or occupying power, using subversion, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and armed conflict. This form of struggle fully espouses Maoist thinking in the three phases in which action develops—defensive, stalemate, counter-offensive—as well as in the quest to wear down the adversary over the long term and in the concentration of efforts on the people. The consent of the people is, in fact, the key to success and their support is indispensable for survival<sup>3</sup>. Conceptually, insurgent warfare is therefore based on four pillars: time, space, support, and legitimacy.

Time is the most important element for guaranteeing success. In fact, the duration of the effort determines the wear and tear on the adversary, allows the instrument to be built up, and progressively compensates for its weaknesses. The Chinese civil war lasted 15 years. The conflict in Indochina lasted up to 25 years. Physical space—be it mountains, forests, or cities—gives the freedom to decide where and when to engage in combat, allows local inferiority to be compensated for by shifting effort, and provides shelter from the adversary's offence. Mao's Long March, the Vietnamese jungle, and Falluja are excellent examples. Internal and external support is crucial for the survival and affirmation of the insurgent movement, but it is subordinate to the creation of a favourable local and international environment. The Vietnamese insurgency would not have survived without external Soviet and Chinese support. The Afghan *mujaheddin* fighting against the Soviet intervention were supported by the West. On the contrary, Guevara died because Bolivian peasants denounced him to the government. This raises the question of legitimacy; legitimation that takes the form of the population perceiving the moral superiority of the insurgents' cause of insurgents over that of the power they are fighting. Legitimacy is built both by responding to the needs of the population and restoring co-existence in the liberated areas, as well as by breaking off and repressing all forms of collaboration with the government. This last aspect is certainly not painless for those who suffer it, and it also raises many moral and legal questions, especially when terrorism is used as a means of persuasion. This goes beyond any ideological considerations, or the inevitable aura of romanticism that naturally surrounds those who appear to be fighting for the freedom of their people.

If this is the disease, so to speak, what is the medicine? Production on the subject is extensive. Prestigious scholars—Britain's Callwell at the end of the

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth description of the characteristics of contemporary insurgent warfare, see Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2021), *Joint Publications 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, Washington, DC: The Joint Staff [[https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_24.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf)] (Accessed: 20 December 2021).

19th century, France's Galula in the 1960s, and Britain's Kitson, Australia's Kilcullen, the America's Nagl and Petraeus in the contemporary period, to name but a few—and the world's leading states have examined the problem in all its aspects, devising strategies that were articulated strategies but yet still did not seem likely to guarantee a successful response, essentially due to the peculiarities of the situations, the multiplicity of triggering factors, and the variability of contenders<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, just as we have defined four cornerstones for insurgency—time, space, support, and legitimisation—we can also generally identify four pillars for *counterinsurgency* warfare, or *counterinsurgency*: legitimisation, discovery, isolation, and elimination. We shall see that these pillars stand in direct opposition to the pillars described so far regarding the threat.

If the cornerstone of success in an insurrection is the control of the population, the same is true for those who oppose it. The legitimacy of the response – referred to in English as *winning the hearts and minds of the people*—lies first and foremost in the state's ability to link military operations and the inevitable risks and inconveniences they entail for those living in the territory, to a credible political purpose, i.e. the expectation of a better future. Indeed, it is a foregone conclusion that an excessive response will drive the inhabitants into the arms of the insurgents. At the same time, the construction of a viable alternative in the eyes of the population will allow the government to maintain a political and moral edge over its adversary, neutralising its narrative. We also mentioned that time plays a role in favour of insurgents. Insurgents have a long-term strategy of attrition. Therefore, it is necessary to detect them at an early stage, to prevent the infection from taking root. Therefore, the threat must be identified in the early stages through extensive information gathering and a careful assessment of the phenomenon. In addition, the insurgency will only take hold and consolidate if it enjoys the support of the population. Just as it is essential to detect infection in good time, it is equally necessary to prevent its spread. In other words, it is necessary to separate the insurgents from the population, both politically and physically, i.e., to isolate them. Obviously, to do this, they must first be identified and delegitimised. However, success can only be achieved through the physical destruction of the insurgent forces, i.e., their elimination.

As history has shown us, this is easy to say, but much harder to do.

Since 1945, in fact, civil wars—mostly on an insurrectionary basis, often due to sudden external intrusions—have accounted for the vast majority of conflicts

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive examination of counterinsurgency efforts from the Boer War to the present, see Fremont-Barnes G. (ed.) (2015), *A History of Counterinsurgency*, Santa Barbara: Praeger.

afflicting humanity. These conflicts, especially since the end of the Cold War, have progressively decomposed the international order. The consequences of this decomposition on the nature of war will be the subject of the following chapters.

## 4. From Pavia to Belgrade: Real and Sought Military Revolutions

With the end of the Cold War and the establishment of US military-political hegemony—at least in the decade immediately following the collapse of the Berlin Wall—the opinion that wars can be won by weapons alone has been consolidated in the West. Humans have been relegated to a secondary role in war, and the assumption has been that war can be waged without doing or being done too much harm<sup>1</sup>.

This is due to several concomitant elements. The first element is the maturation and deployment in conventional operations of advanced materials resulting from the massive American military investments of the 1980s, which came to fruition after the end of the bipolar confrontation and marked an absolute technological supremacy. The second element is a series of undeniable—though not lasting—military successes, namely the Gulf War in 1991, the interventions in Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and the operations against Libya in 2011.

The final element is an increasingly radiant intolerance in the West for its own losses on the ground, flanked by an aspiration—probably sincere, but no less hypocritical for that—to be able to pursue its own politico-military aims while reducing the so-called *collateral damage* to the populations involved by the use hypothetical *surgical attacks*. This attitude was generated between the early 1990s and the early 2000s in the United States and based on three concomitant approaches to war: the exploitation of technological progress, the possibility of overcoming Clausewitzian friction, and loss aversion. The first focused on the primacy of air power and precision weapons. The second relied on information superiority and was called *network-centric warfare* (NCW). The third, built on chaining the effects of operations—not necessarily kinetic—was developed in different environments and called *effects-based operations* (EBO). These are concurrent approaches that seem to concretise a *system of systems* capable of winning any war and are approaches known under the catchy collective name of revolution in *military affairs* or *revolution in military affairs* (RMA). We shall briefly return to the concept of a military revolution. First, let us first illustrate the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth reflection on the relationship between humans, war, and technological evolution, see the classic van Creveld M. (1991), *Technology and War. From 2000 B.C. to the Present*, New York: Free Press, or the more recent Roland A. (2016), *War and Technology. A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

military affairs in this case.

It is almost superfluous to explain why, especially from a political and media perspective, there is a tendency to favour air power. The purposes are obvious. Air power is hypothetically *surgical*, due to the extraordinary power and concomitant precision achieved by drop and missile weaponry. Air power limits the presence and invasiveness on the ground, allows losses—especially one's own—and costs to be contained, and theoretically reduces the duration of interventions, allowing criticism to be curbed<sup>2</sup>.

However, at the same time, conventional operations in air or land continue to suffer from Clausewitzian *friction*, starting with what we defined at the beginning of this book as the *fog of war*, that is, the lack of information about the adversary, which in turn affects the ability of one's own forces to beat them effectively. Nonetheless, the extraordinary progress achieved by modern technologies now makes it possible to systemise—i.e., integrate into a network—different sensors, structures for the collection and dissemination of information, and weapon systems, in order to, with the greatest speed possible, identify the antagonist, understand their intentions, and strike them from the greatest distance and with the greatest effectiveness, when and where it is least expected. In short, this is a war built on the networked integration of different elements, where the network is the backbone architecture of the operations; it can mask that combination of mass, speed, and surprise that constitutes classical warfare. This is also known as *network-centric warfare* or the digitisation of forces<sup>3</sup>.

Chaining of effects, on the other hand, is an old story. It is the child of a scientific–econometric view of warfare that dates back to McNamara and the early stages of the Vietnam War, when an attempt was made to measure the effectiveness of operations according to the number of adversaries killed and bombs per kilometre dropped. Therefore, it is an essentially conceptual approach, which pursues the objective of replacing the traditional achievement of objectives by the military instrument—conquest of terrain, destruction of the potential adversary—with the achievement of indirect *effects*—political, economic, demographic, or industrial—in order to determine success in the conflict<sup>4</sup>.

Each of the approaches highlighted so far has advantages and disadvantages. Let us try to identify them.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the most recent developments in warfare from the sky, see Ledwidge F. (2018), *Aerial warfare. The Battle for the Skies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the NCW, see Nones M., Marrone A. (2011), *La trasformazione delle Forze Armate: Il Programma Forza NEC*, Rome: Edizioni Nuova Cultura.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of EBOs see Vego M. (2006), 'Effects-based Operations: A Critique', in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 2, pp. 51-57.



Let us start with the power of the air. In theory, air power is insufficient on its own. Success in operations is guaranteed by the synergy of several competing actions aimed at striking the adversary's centre of gravity in multiple dimensions. Consequently, the Clausewitzian logic is true that one action will be the killing blow, that blow will not necessarily be from the sky; it is more likely to be the result of multiple efforts from different directions. This does not consider, of course, the use of nuclear weapons, which are decisive regardless of the vector.

From a practical point of view, while *air power* can be an effective tool in the framework of preventive or coercive diplomacy, it is certainly not decisive when the adversary is determined to resist, nor can it make a momentary local success lasting when an irrepressible show of force can induce a softening of advice, such as was the case of the surrender of Japan in 1945 or the 1999 air campaign over Serbia. However, this comes with a series of *caveats*. In the practice of warfare, the adversary's centre of gravity is very unlikely to be neutralised without direct action on the ground or at sea; the foot of the infantryman or the ship is necessary. It was not the bombings that bent the will of Hitler's Germany, it was D-Day and the Red Army that destroyed the *Wehrmacht*. The threat of a land invasion induced Milosevich to leave Kosovo. Land forces liberated Kuwait. Militias eliminated Gaddafi, and the subsequent civil war was the direct consequence of the West's failure to intervene on the ground. The *peshmerga* defeated the Islamic State. The bombing of Tora Bora did not eliminate Bin Laden or Al Qaeda, the Navy Seals did. It was the aircraft carriers that materialised the presence, deterrence, and projection of forces, even though the embarked aircraft—thanks to the aforementioned synergy of efforts—enormously amplified the power and intervention arms, in *political* and *psychological* terms, even more than in military terms. The frigates protect merchant ships from pirates in the Indian Ocean and keep the Strait of Hormuz open. At the same time, however, the inevitability of a presence on the ground has clashed with the lack of attractiveness of direct intervention in the eyes of Western politics and public opinion, as we have already pointed out. This led to the *proxy wars* and *remote wars* that we will discuss further on.

Instead, the digitisation of forces—i.e., the *network-enabled capability* (NEC).

with which land, naval, and airborne instruments will be equipped—serves to ensure that, where action is taken, the application of force—manoeuvre—is absolutely decisive. Paradoxically, however, even this solution will prove to be nothing more than painless. Indeed, *net-centric* operations require a profound conceptual, organisational, and technological transformation of the instrument and, consequently, very significant investments. Investments that not everyone can afford. Many Western armies will thus be forced to lag behind the United States, while other actors—state and non-state—who cannot afford such luxuries will respond asymmetrically, thereby largely cancelling out the benefits of digiti-

sation. At the same time, the use of increasingly sophisticated equipment necessarily places an organisational and logistical burden on the forces, which reduces their deployment flexibility and increases their complexity, cost, and footprint on the ground. Finally, the exaggerated recourse to technology, behind which we often hide, has important moral consequences. First, it tends to make war remote—and, consequently, *a priori* acceptable—by hiding it behind a screen and making it aseptic while ignoring its real consequences. Second, it tends to overshadow the indispensable characteristics of a fighter: the absolute will to prevail over the adversary thanks to one's superior physical and mental fitness combined with the adherence to a precise code of ethical and moral behaviour. In conclusion, reflection on the digitisation of forces leads us to very similar conclusions to those referring to air power. It is certainly a formidable multiplier of power where it can be used synergistically with the other capabilities of the instrument, but it is not the absolute recipe for victory, nor should it become a hindrance, a vulnerability, or worse, an alibi.

We will also verify the effectiveness of a third element of the *revolution in military affairs* in the early twentieth century: so-called *effects-based operations* (EBO). The idea, which is of corporatist derivation, that suitable secondary-order effects can be achieved in war by exploiting the result induced by direct combat is undoubtedly fascinating. But implementing it in practice has proven to be almost impossible for various reasons. The effect is not a centre of gravity. It is something intangible and difficult to measure. How does one measure political, social, or psychological success? The cause–effect relationship itself is not obvious. The bombs dropped on Germany and Japan did not induce the two nations to surrender, but paradoxically radicalised their decision to resist to the last. It is, after all, quite simple to line successive targets of increasing importance, the progressive elimination of which represents the demolition of the adversary's centre of gravity. It to correlate, not necessarily backward, between quite another thing is the correlation—necessarily backwards—between physical targets to be hit and the second- and third-order effects to be achieved. Measuring or anticipating the cause–effect relationship in controlled settings is very difficult because it is based on countless variables, not least *chance* and Clausewitzian *friction*, as well as the absolute unpredictability of human reactions. In essence, the EBO concept, which, as mentioned at the outset, has long characterised the thinking of part of the military-political and industrial *establishment* in the United States, is a very difficult concept.

United States have recently come up against reality again and therefore seems to have been abandoned. For now at least.

The reasoning so far therefore leads us to cautiously evaluate the use of the term *revolution* to refer to the most recent adaptations of military instruments to

the progress of technology. Etymologically, *revolution* suggests that the way of waging war has changed. Are we really sure about this? This is actually a debate that has fascinated scholars from the mid-19th century to the present. But how many revolutions in military affairs have occurred? And were they really revolutions? Let us briefly look at them.

From the Bronze Age to the 16th century, mankind waged war through the same means: the sword, the spear, the bow and arrow, the horse, the catapult. People went to sea in flat-bottomed boats propelled by the strength of their arms, then fought on the boats with swords. The first epochal turning point occurred between the 15th and 16th centuries. In Pavia in 1525, the Spanish arquebuses of Charles V summarily executed the pikes of the Swiss in the service of Francis I, who had been the absolute masters of the Renaissance battlefields up to that point. Seventy years earlier, however, Muhammad II's primordial cannons, which could no longer fire five shots a day, had already demolished the walls of Constantinople. This is a clear sign that evolution should be a topic of interest, rather than revolution, at least in terms of chemistry and metallurgy. In the same way, constant progress in shipbuilding and navigation techniques enabled the great European kingdoms to become trans-oceanic empires, starting with Columbus' voyage in 1492. The flat bottom, the oar propelled by the arms, and the sword were replaced by strong hulls that were capable of withstanding the sea, driven by the inexhaustible force of the wind and armed with cannons, guided by the compass and the sextant. But this is again a process of becoming, not a flash of genius. That is, progress is the result of a slow but steady technological evolution that began at least in the early Middle Ages and came to fruition two centuries later. However, the use of firearms in combat and ships in power projection will not change the postulates of war. It will always be necessary to bend the will of the adversary. To do this, it will be necessary to hit them where they are the weakest. It will always be necessary to manoeuvre, combining mass, speed, and surprise. What will change is the quality of the ingredients and the way they are measured, not their nature, to adapt to ever more powerful weapons that shoot further and faster and ships that allow travel to any location.

The second evolution took place on land and sea with the Industrial Revolution in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The power of steam, which was translated into rail, navigation, and mass production, combined with the telegraph and advances in chemistry and metallurgy to again amplify the components of manoeuvring, making weapons faster, more surprising, heavier, and even more lethal. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, war became industrial, which leads to the twentieth century great battles. Between World War I and World War II, there was a further transformation occurring because of the perpetual evolution of technology. This included the advent of the automobile, as well as aeroplanes,

submarines, and radios. War became mechanised and manoeuvre was disproportionately amplified because the elements of mass, speed, and surprise grew out of proportion. The advent of the nuclear weapon did not change the terms of the equation; if anything, it froze them. This brings us to the present day, where the advent of new communication and information technologies has, since the 1990s, triggered a new evolutionary process, that of digital warfare, which we spoke about earlier. This remains an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one, and it is always applied to the same ingredients.

In essence, military applications have always followed technological progress and will continue to do so. Conventionally, the first industrial revolution used steam to mechanise production. The second gave birth to mass production using electricity, and the third automated production through electronics and information technology. The fourth, theorised by Schwab, ‘will see a fusion of technologies that breaks the boundaries between the physical, the digital, and the biological’<sup>5</sup>. Within the framework of this latter evolutionary process, numerous innovations—the so-called *disruptive technologies*, from hypersonic weapons to exoskeletons via artificial intelligence — offer significant opportunities in the military sphere and a substantial competitive advantage to those who have them at their disposal<sup>6</sup>. These competitive advantages are likely to alter the strategic balance between the main players on the international scene, but will not change the constituent elements of classical manoeuvres and their relationship.

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<sup>5</sup> Definition taken from Schwab K. (2016), *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Milan: Franco Angeli.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the impact of emerging technologies on international security, see the recent Ruggie F. (ed.) (2019), *The global race for technological superiority*, Milan: Ledizioni—ISPI.

## 5. From Sarajevo to the China Sea: new wars, asymmetrical wars, and hybrid wars

As mentioned earlier, the conclusion of the Cold War generated a series of settling conflicts, both decomposed states weakened by the disappearance of the leading power—the Soviet Union—and baptised a new international order that was inspired by the winner of the confrontation, the United States. However, the initial affirmation of this new order—and its subsequent gradual loosening—had, however, not insignificant repercussions on international balances and, indirectly, also on the phenomena of war.

The first consequence was the advent of globalisation as the main tool for building the political and economic interdependence that, in US-based liberal thinking, is the preferred vehicle for building peace between nations. However, globalisation, by its very nature, could not help but erode the prerogatives of other nations by both exposing them to further risks of implosion and favouring the affirmation on the scene of multiple *nonstate actors*—some benign, others not—who were endowed with considerable potential. In this context, of particular importance has been the emergence of transnational terrorism in the Islamic matrix. This is a complex phenomenon in which different forms of conflict have converged, all animated by the common will to oppose the established order, and which has had a major effect on the world for at least two decades. This phenomenon has seemed to expropriate traditional states of their monopoly on war and has also been significantly aided in its global spread by the technological, informational, and financial tools made available by globalisation.

The second effect has been the emergence, alongside the above-mentioned nonstate actors, of powers that are not enthusiastic about the new order imposed by the victor, *antagonistic* to varying degrees to the United States, and therefore potentially *revisionist* to the post-Cold War balances. These nations are also endowed with considerable potential, even though they are unable to compete on a level playing field with the hegemonic power and are therefore necessarily asymmetrical towards it<sup>1</sup>.

From the point of view of war, the simultaneous emergence of non-State and revisionist powers have consequently seen the emergence or resurgence of forms of conflict that are also asymmetric, variously described by scholars over the last

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the events of the last thirty years, see Lucarelli S. (2020), *Cala il sipario sull'ordine liberale? Crisi di un sistema che ha cambiato il mondo*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero.

thirty years as *new wars*, *fourth-generation wars*, or *hybrid wars*, depending mainly on their nature, context, and interpreters. The West, for its part, first engaged in a head-on clash with terrorist offence—a *global war against terrorism*—of an essentially counter-insurgent nature. Subsequently, the West found itself increasingly struggling with the legitimacy and sustainability—political and moral, even more than economic—of interventions in crisis areas. It was faced with the state and nonstate challenges we have highlighted earlier in this book, and it embarked on yet another doctrinal reworking, churning out in rapid succession the concepts of *surrogate wars*, *remote wars*, and finally, *multidomain operations*.

Let us therefore consider these elements and what consequences they have had on war as we have characterised it so far<sup>2</sup>.

The fragmentation triggered by the end of the bipolar order, as well as the progressive erosion of the authority of certain states and their consequent failure—partly caused by globalisation and partly by the rise of non-state actors—has given rise to a series of irregular conflicts that contemporary authors, such as Kaldor, Smith, and others, describe as *new wars* or *people's wars*. Typical examples cited by scholars are the disputes that have erupted since the 1990s in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Horn of Africa and Central and West Africa<sup>3</sup>.

Although they have many characteristics typical of insurgent wars, these contests lack some of their founding principles in reality. In fact, new wars are fought over identity issues—local, regional, ethnic, and religious—and not for general ideological or political reasons. This has created the associated concept of *the privatisation of war*. Nevertheless, the aim is always the same: to bend the will of an adversary in order to acquire or maintain power, normally at a local but no more than a regional level. The centre of gravity is therefore the population, as is in most insurrectional activities. However, the new wars tend to establish political control of the population not through consensus building, as is typical of insurgency, but through the use of fear and the systematic imposition of terror. In addition, they are partly financed by predatory methods, which evidently require the continued use of violence. They are fought on the ground at a local level, employing small infantry formations using typical guerrilla procedures. These formations generally use outdated, unsophisticated or obsolete weapons and equipment and have very limited mobility and logistics. In essence, they use mostly waste materials, live on the territory, and move around very little. The

<sup>2</sup> For a critical examination of emerging forms of conflict, see Jean C. (2012), *Strategy in fifth-generation wars*, in Bozzo L. (ed.), *Studi di strategia. War, politics, economics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, mathematics*, Milan: Egea.

<sup>3</sup> The founding text is Kaldor M. (2012<sup>3</sup>), *New and Old Wars*, Cambridge: Polity Press; tr. it. Foglia G. (2015<sup>9</sup>), *Le nuove guerre. La violenza organizzata nell'età globale*, Rome: Carocci.

protagonists are, as mentioned at the beginning of this book, essentially non-state actors—insurgents of various kinds, terrorists, local militias, warlords, tribes, and private companies—who from time to time ally or fight each other for control of the territory. Therefore, the absence of certain interlocutors, the complexity of the situations, and the asymmetry of the contenders make solutions difficult, and any intervention by the international community is both costly and risky. In the words of Schuurmann, a Dutch scholar<sup>4</sup>,

Success in such conflicts no longer depends on the ability to inflict massive destruction, but rather on the ability to remove popular support from the adversary, separating the insurgents or terrorists from what they need most.

Consequently, the new wars have a devastating impact from a human point of view. In fact, the goal is population control, and the prewar system to achieve this is fear. Therefore, to achieve their objectives, the contenders use methods of mass violence that are simple, brutal, and particularly effective, such as gang rape in Bosnia, mass graves in Kosovo, and machetes in Rwanda. The first consequence of systematic violence is mass flight, which reverberates within and outside borders, causing massive humanitarian crises. At the same time, these conflicts develop in a complex framework of war and legal anarchy, which makes the application of humanitarian law very complex, both in terms of prevention and of repression of war crimes.

The presence of organised crime, local or transnational, is frequently an additional entanglement. This presence, although motivated exclusively by profit motives, plays an important role in supporting the contenders or in the appropriation of resources. Additionally, in certain circumstances, the competition of interests between delinquents and rival factions tends to artificially prolong the conflict, further exacerbating situations. War, in essence, turns out to be good business for all, and it pays to continue it.

Lastly, where local identity motivations are overlaid by other geopolitical or economic considerations—regional ambitions, power projections, or exploitation of raw materials—the new wars often see interaction with the local population.

The wind of foreign powers or transnational economic interest groups usually acting as intermediaries through local militias or private security companies, i.e. entities with which it is possible to deny any contiguity.

The ambiguous nature, which appears to be both apolitical and asocial, of the *new wars* has led many of the scholars who have analysed them (including van Creveld in 1991) to conclude that they are *nontrinitarian*. In essence, the

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<sup>4</sup> Schuurman, B. (2010), 'Clausewitz and the "New Wars" Scholars', in *Parameters*, 40, no. 1, pp. 89-100, translated by the author.

absence of a clear political will in conducting these wars, the lack of a unified military instrument in fighting them and the essentially passive role of the populations in supporting them can only mean the end of the Clausewitzian trinity and, in the final analysis, the definitive overcoming of Prussian thought, which is now overwhelmed by contemporaneity<sup>5</sup>. Other scholars maintain the continued validity of these factors, asserting that if one decides to wage war, it is done to impose one's will. Therefore, the end of conflict is political, regardless of the level at which it is expressed. To be realised, this end requires a military instrument, whatever that may be. Ultimately, the support of the population determines the success, regardless of how that support is obtained. All these statements are part of the debate between supporters and detractors of Clausewitz that began, as previously mentioned, immediately after the publication of his work and which continue to this day<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the *new wars* are indeed new, or whether, with the disappearance of state organisation and the contract that underlies it, conflicts do not simply regress to a stage of primordial and tribal simplicity without leaving the sphere of human sociality in the broad sense and, therefore, remaining in the canon of the Clausewitzian trinity. In essence, in war, there is always a leader who decides, there is always a people who support him, and there are always warriors who fight in the name and on behalf of both. Without these three elements, war—either old or new—does not occur. A similar line of reasoning can be made for the notion of *fourth-generation warfare*, also very much in vogue since the early 1990s thanks to the laudations of Lind<sup>7</sup>.

According to this thesis, modern warfare has gone through successive phases until becoming, in contemporary times, 'an evolved form of insurrection that employs political, economic, social and military instruments to convince the adversary that his objectives are unattainable or too costly'<sup>8</sup> It is also considered an evolved form of confrontation which resorts to terrorism and psychological warfare when it is unable to compete on equal terms. In essence, in order to wear down a stronger adversary, conventional war has progressively become irregular and asymmetrical. This tends to rule out confrontation on an equal footing in the future, while at the same time assuming that armies would have to be radically revised to cope with this particular threat. However, this assumption has been disproven by subsequent events, where conventional military instruments have not

<sup>5</sup> van Creveld M. (1991), *The Transformation of War*, New York: Free Press.

<sup>6</sup> Schuurman, B. (2010), *ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Lind *et al.* (1989), 'The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation', in *Marine Corps Gazette*, 73:10, pp. 22-26.

<sup>8</sup> Echevarria A. (2005), *Fourth-Generation War and Other Myths*, Fort Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, p. V.



disappeared and have instead continued to play a crucial role in the definition of power relations between states and, when appropriately deployed, have been able to deal with insurgencies, both in cities and rural areas. Adaptation is difficult, but not impossible, as demonstrated by the Israeli army.

In fact, as we already know, asymmetric wars have always existed, and their renewed formulation is simply the result of non-state actors using the increased opportunities offered by globalisation<sup>9</sup>. Their aim is always to bend the will of the adversary, and while the trinity is always present, the conflict necessarily becomes non-linear due to the disproportion between the contenders.

The Chechen wars fought in the 1990s between the Caucasus and Russia, the *Hezbollah* operations in Lebanon since 2006, the *Hamas* intifada and the Gaza war of 2008, the Iraqi and Syrian conflict from 2004 to the present day, the terrorising offensive of *lone wolves* and *quaedist* cells in the West, are but the most recent response of less gifted actors to the technological supremacy of the advanced countries, embodied in the *revolution* in US military *affairs*, which we discussed in the previous chapter. The response is combined with an unshakeable will to resist and prevail at any cost over the adversary, which is mapped out by an unconditional willingness to sacrifice yourself for one's own cause; the West is still struggling to understand this aspect of war.

As we have discussed, the techniques presented used an absolute dissimilarity between the contenders; one thinks of the comparison between IEDs and tanks in Iraq, or between Palestinian incendiary balloons and the Israeli *Iron Dome*. These techniques have the immediate purpose of achieving surprise, neutralising the adversary's material superiority, wearing them out, causing unsustainable losses, and obtaining a normally local advantage in the short and medium term. Long-term, by always striking unexpectedly and increasing and exploiting collective insecurity, an asymmetrical offence is capable of manipulating the political and human environment and compromising the adversary's will to fight, its cohesion, and its technological and military advantages. In good condition, in substance, it tends to unbalance the antagonist by playing on the political, economic, and human costs of resistance and response. Not coincidentally, all of these techniques were utilised in the 1990s by the Chinese Liang and Xiangsui in the aftermath of the western victory in the 1991 Gulf War<sup>10</sup>. But we will return to this later. Asymmetrical non-state combatants avail themselves of a series of competing elements made available by globalisation, which they exploit with great skill. First, they utilise the opportunities offered by low-cost and easily accessible emerging tech-

<sup>9</sup> Jean C. (2012), *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Liang Q., Xiangsui W. (2001), *War without limits. L'arte della guerra asimmetrica fra terrorismo e globalizzazione*, edited by F. Mini, Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana.

nologies, such as cyber offensive, unmanned aircraft, and elementary-level missiles. Second, by striking blows that often seem disproportionate, but are always done with good reason, they convey a disruptive message that influences the internal dynamics of the opposing nation. This message also affects their target audience and international public opinion, amplifying the effectiveness of their actions and exalting the legitimacy of their cause. Doing so expertly employs the entire spectrum of contemporary media, from the Internet to social networks. Third, these tactics make systematic use of transnational political, logistic, and financial sanctuaries. Finally, their tactics exploit gaps in international law so that they may act undisturbed.

If the non-state initiative of our times already appears to be one that is complex but manageable with traditional instruments, the asymmetrical offence conducted against the West—and the United States in particular—by the *revisionist powers* (mentioned at the beginning of this book) is of a very different calibre. These revisionist powers use asymmetric means for profoundly different purposes; for example, Russia uses them for defensive purposes as it feels threatened within its borders and finds it difficult to cope with the conventional overpowering of the United States and must therefore compensate accordingly. For China, these are used to offensive ends, as it aspires to regain a central position in international affairs but realises that the gap to be bridged to reach parity with the United States is enormous, and therefore seeks to strike its adversary where it appears most vulnerable. The Iranian regime exploits these means for survival purposes because it believes it must protect itself and its nation from an adverse regional context, and thus attacks to carve out a perimeter of security stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. The North Korean regime's objectives are of survival and strategic autonomy and relies on both nuclear weapons and Chinese *support* to keep afloat in a dangerous balance between Washington and Beijing.

We are therefore discussing the so-called *hybrid wars*, which are not so hybrid or even that new. These wars were already postulated by Chinese Liang and Xiangsui in the 1990s<sup>11</sup>, and were defined again in 2005 in the United States by Hoffman<sup>12</sup> based on the Iraqi experience. They were considered an amalgam of different forms of war, bringing together conventional capabilities, irregular modalities, terrorism, and criminal activities. Later, hybrid wars were used to narrate *Hezbollah's* war against Israel in Lebanon in 2006. They finally re-emerged in the West in 2014 during an analysis of Moscow's *modus operandi* in the first phase of the Ukrainian crisis; after that, they became the fashion of the day. In fact, hybrid

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<sup>11</sup> Liang Q., Xiangsui W. (2001), *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman F. (2007), *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies.

warfare methods, such as propaganda, disinformation, subversion, deception, sabotage, and other unconventional techniques, have always belonged to the Russian politico-military tradition—tsarist first and the Soviet later—as well as traditional Chinese thinking. They were also used by the West in the containment of Soviet expansionism from the 1920s until the end of the Cold War. The novelty of attacks seen in recent years lies, if anything, in their multifaceted nature, speed, scope, and intensity, which in turn have been facilitated by technological innovation and increased global connectivity<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, the Russian Federation has in turn accused the West of practising hybrid warfare, notably through the so-called *coloured revocations*; the People's Republic of China has made similar statements regarding its support for the causes of Hong Kong and the Uighurs.

In their most recent manifestation, hybrid offensives use military and non-military tactics military, conventional and nonconventional, and covert and overt means to exert increasing political, diplomatic, economic, and military pressure, directly and indirectly, locally and internationally, aimed at progressively wearing down and eventually breaking the cohesion of a society, thereby compromising its ability to endure and forcing a government or ruling class to yield. This pressure is, moreover, somewhere between peace and open war—in a *grey area*—and is therefore particularly destabilising and difficult to counter. What is evident here is the combination of the founding principles of Chinese military thought, as we described them at the beginning of the book, and the psychodynamic techniques developed by Soviet-era scholars to destroy the capitalist enemy. The ultimate goal is, in fact, to win against a stronger opponent, possibly without a fight, by manipulating their mental processes.

The immediate purpose is thus to achieve temporary strategic supremacy through local or regional superiority, while in the medium and long term, the hybrid fighter aims to either provoke a reckless reaction, thereby creating further pretexts for the use of force, or to take control of territories without a shot in the arm, to influence the politics of opposing coalitions, nations, and factions, and finally to support transnational agents in the pursuit of their own power objectives.

The means, as mentioned above, are the most varied, although well coordinated within an overall strategy at the national level, defined and implemented in the inter-ministerial sphere, and decided upon by the political leadership. In essence, it is unthinkable that the proclaimed attacks by Russian *hackers* on the US electoral system were carried out on the autonomous initiative of the security services of the Ministry of Defence without the active involvement of the Mini-

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<sup>13</sup> For an examination of the more recent hybrid offence in all its declinations, see Weissmann M. *et al.* (2021), *Hybrid Warfare. Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, London: I.B. Tauris.

stry of Foreign Affairs for an assessment of the effects, and without the endorsement of top-level political authority. The same applies to Iranian barge attacks in the Persian Gulf, missile launches by the *Houthis* against Saudi refineries, or systematic penetration of the US military-industrial complex by Chinese intelligence agencies.

Today, hybrid warfare is conducted through a skilled combination of violent and non-violent operations, directed against the adversary's main nodes of the adversary in government and command, industry, communication, critical infrastructure, and the population that uses it. Anonymous means, covert state organisations, drones and missiles, local and transnational agents, militias and private companies, spies and special forces are used for this purpose. Political and social upheavals, riots and unrest, and economic and energy instability are all generated at a distance. The preferred vectors are sophisticated but cheap technologies. Information warfare on political, social, or economic topics manipulates the audience through the use of *trolls* and proxies, that is, replicants and proximity agents, who artfully spread lab-made news. Cyber warfare, both state and non-state, penetrates management networks to damage government functions and everyday lives of the population, to generate insecurity, and to acquire information. It also involves clandestine operations that are aimed at espionage and covert destabilisation activities. In the most extreme cases, semiclandestine missile proliferation is used, using carriers of uncertain origin.

In essence, cyber warfare is both conventional and innovative in that it mixes established methods—violent and non-violent—and cutting-edge technologies with the absolutely traditional aim of bending the will of the adversary, acting *primarily* on the opposing political power and the population that supports it.

Up to this point, we have described, in great detail, the asymmetrical offensives of the last period, the purpose of which was initially—and still is, and will likely be in the future—to oppose the technological, military, and organisational supremacy of the West, which has already appeared to be struggling in the face of this reaction. The reasons for this difficulty are manifold, and we have already discussed them in part in this book. In addition to the exhaustion caused by a counterinsurgency effort of unspecified duration—the *global war against terrorism* and its substitutes—there are many political, economic, cultural, and moral qualms about the advisability of continuing to act in these crisis areas, which often occur in the face of controversial results in terms of effectiveness, duration, and legitimacy. Consequently, while from a conventional point of view, the prevailing tendency has been to continue to maintain a substantial technological edge over the main contenders, as far as asymmetrical adversaries are concerned, the preference today is to avoid direct and frontal engagement. In other words, an *indirect approach* is being adopted, whereby the war is waged by others, and the advanced

countries direct, support, and contribute in a limited way, but are careful not to intervene to the full extent of their capabilities. Recent interrelated concepts of *proxy wars*, *surrogate wars*, or *remote wars* are a response to this<sup>14</sup>. Whether they are remote, surrogate, or proxy wars, they begin from the same principle: Operations on the ground are conducted by others, such as local militia, third-country forces, or a transnational private company. The reference power generally only intervenes to provide an information framework, air, land, and naval fire support, specialised communications components, and medical support. It acts directly with its own special forces only to militarily frame the local ally and to conduct point operations, usually clandestine, aimed at achieving its own specific objectives. In the case of a multinational engagement, indirect kinetic operations can be combined with an overt assistance mission, as is the case in the Sahel, or in humanitarian support activities. However, in this context, technology plays a key role in *remoteizing* the intervention and reducing risk and cost. Just as information support can be provided remotely with the use of unmanned aircraft for reconnaissance, fire support can also be provided remotely, for instance, by using cruise missiles launched from ships hundreds of kilometres away, or by using air power in an extremely selective manner. In essence, today we are able to conduct our work, a remote military campaign, achieving the same results as a direct intervention and paying a very small price. This is the case with the US intervention in Syria, managed through the Kurdish militias, where the goal is not necessarily to undermine consensus but rather, to increase it. However, at the same time, the political, legal and moral concerns of such a course of action are evident, as is the risk of falling into forms of conflict beyond the country's control. The behaviour of Russia and Iran, again in Syria, is an example of this. *Remoteising* a conflict, or *substituting* participation in it, can be fine as long as a context of international legitimacy and respect for human rights is maintained.

However, it is a different matter when it comes to combating *hybrid wars*. It is in fact evident that the response to an offence against a state organisation, and the society it frames, as the centre of gravity of a nation is certainly beyond the sole sphere of responsibility of military instruments, even if such an attack is absolutely Clausewitzian in its inspiration. We are on other levels. When the challenge simultaneously involves politics, institutions, the economy, society, communication, and public order, the response can only be synergetic and integrated at the governmental level. This is even more true when the offence involves a system of alliances in which several member states are confronted with such threats; in such

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<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive examination of these concepts, see Krieg A., Rickli J. (2019), *Surrogate warfare: the transformation of war in the twenty-first century*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.

cases, the response must become intergovernmental, investing in several levels and dimensions.

Over the last decade, however, in parallel with the use of hybrid offensives, the classical military confrontation at the state level has re-emerged in all its importance (if it ever ceased) enhanced by the extension of the challenge to the cybernetic and space spheres, and the advent of the Fourth Technological Revolution. A previous chapter noted that emerging technologies, from hypersonic weapons to artificial intelligence, will offer a significant competitive advantage to those who have them. If these advantages succeed in manipulating nuclear arsenals, it is likely to both alter the strategic balance and exasperate the constituent elements of classical manoeuvre, namely mass, speed, and surprise. At the same time, the conventional military instruments of the US's potential planetary adversaries—Russia and China—have made great strides and, at least locally, appear competitive. Consider the periodic Russian land deployments in eastern Europe, or the air–sea pressure exerted by China on Taiwan. This is also due to a series of concomitant elements that condition the possibility of a western reaction, starting with the reduction of military instruments and the retreat of advanced troops. Concretely, therefore, in the contemporary US view, the risk lies in the growing capacity of the adversaries—both because of what they have today and because of what they will be able to deploy tomorrow—to limit or even completely prevent the manoeuvre of western forces in Taiwan.

The so-called *multi-domain operations*—the latest cry in Western military doctrine—responds to this risk by aiming to integrate responses to offensives conducted at a great distance, i.e., remotely, in multiple dimensions of the battle space.

PART TWO. THE NEW LOCATIONS OF THE BATTLE





## 6. From the Cold War to the Third Millennium: The Space War

BY FLAVIA GIACOBBE

Since the Cold War, space conquests have taken on the flavour of a contest between two enemies: the United States and the USSR. The unsuccessful, but always mimicked, conflict on Earth is thus projected quite naturally into space. At stake are national pride, technological prowess, and the need to show the rest of the planet which of the two contenders is the strongest, thereby determining the peaceful human exploration of space. In times when the conflict becomes tense, the confrontation also has repercussions in orbit, whereas in warmer times there have been opportunities for collaboration.

The confrontation officially began on 4 October 1957 with the first artificial satellite, Sputnik 1. For Moscow, this was a national victory; for the world, it was the dawning of the space age. For the US, however, it was the beginning of a race. The first successful American space flight did not occur until 1958, with the Explorer I rocket. The space race continued until 1961, when the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to reach space on the Vostok I capsule. He was followed by Alan Shepard, the first American to pass through the atmosphere aboard a Mercury module, a few weeks later. In 1962, the American John Glenn flew Mercury 6 into orbit.

In the meantime, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, was founded in the US in 1958; in 1961, President Kennedy launched the programme to conquer the moon. Space successes were intertwined with those on Earth; while Gagarin returned from space, the CIA's landing in the Bay of Pigs, Cuba, failed. Thus, the Soviet Union became convinced that it was one step closer to winning the Cold War. On 20 July 1969, everything changed because the Americans succeeded in a feat that was to be etched in human history. The American astronaut Neil Armstrong was the first human being to step onto the lunar surface, saying: 'One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind'. The moon landing represented an epoch-making event and marked the climax of the space dispute between the United States and the Soviet Union. With the Apollo 11 achievement, the USSR was forced to recognise that its primacy in space exploration was over.

Space programmes therefore reflect not only the economic health of a state, but also its position in the hierarchy of the international chessboard. In the future, due to the economic interest in exploiting the resources of the celestial bodies, appetites for space travel will increase and the sector will be targeted for reasons of prestige, wealth, and, above all, security. As they did then, the wind of competition, alignments, and alliances blows today.

Despite the emergence of new players, the United States continues to dominate space and is intent on maintaining this primacy. In 2017, President Donald Trump signed his first space policy directive, reversing the roadmap that was in place under President Barack Obama (the race to Mars) and prioritised exploring the moon. When President Biden was elected, he confirmed the moon prioritization. The need for continuity was undoubtedly determined by the need to confront China, but the strong involvement of private actors also contributed: a large part of NASA's budget for moon exploration will, in fact, go to private companies that will participate in the effort in exchange for commercial exploitation rights for lunar resources and, potentially, other celestial bodies. To bring partners and allies together on a set of common principles, including the commercial exploitation of space resources, NASA has drawn up the 'Artemis Accords' (signed by Italy). In the meantime, Washington's attention has shifted to China, which is now the great adversary of the United States in the new space race. However, on Earth, the confrontation-clash with Moscow has resurfaced and been centred with the Ukrainian conflict.

China's human space exploration programme dates back to 2003, when China became the third country to have autonomous access to space for astronauts. Beijing's first space station, Tiangong 1 (translated as 'celestial palace'), launched in 2011; Tiangong 2 launched in 2016 and already hosted taikonauts that year. In 2019, the mission for China's third manned space station, Tiangong 3, was launched and will be completed in 2023.

Meanwhile, in 2013 China made the third 'soft landing' on the lunar surface (after the US and USSR) with the Yutu rover, a feat repeated in 2019 with Yutu-2, the first lander in history to explore the dark side of the moon.

Between 2023 and 2024, the Chang'e 6 mission is expected to be launched, followed by Chang'e 7 and 8, which are dedicated to an in-depth study of the moon's surface. These missions will include a 3D printer to build research facilities in situ, and thus prepare the ground for the most ambitious goal: the landing of the first taikonauts on the moon.

After Moscow's exclusion from the American Artemis project, in which Washington accepted international partners and allies and narrowed the field to western countries, the Russians needed to join Chinese projects. The two countries signed a space agreement with the goal of reaching the moon before their Ame-

rican adversary.

But the alliance between the Russians and the Chinese is not without its pitfalls. Moscow is militarily and technologically powerful (and ready to use its strength, as demonstrated on the Ukrainian field), but economically it is not healthy (now less than ever, with sanctions and the collapse of the rouble after the conflict with Kiev), and it will not be easy for the Federation to find hundreds of billions of dollars necessary to build a moon base with Beijing.

Today's space is no longer the exclusive concern of two superpowers, and many countries are entering orbit. France, which has independently developed all space sectors, including a launch base in Guyana, is driven by new aspirations for space autonomy. More recently, states such as Brazil, India, and Japan have also entered the space sector. Iran was the first Islamic nation to venture into the cosmos, putting its Sina-1 satellite into orbit in October 2005. India, already active since 1969 with its own space programme, reached the Moon in 2008 with a probe that proved the the existence of water on the satellite.

The Old Continent also plays an important role in the space game and does so through the European Space Agency (ESA), an international organisation outside the European Union. However, the EU has also increased its space ambitions by reviewing its relationship with the ESA. Brussels decided to transform the GSA, which was in charge of the Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) programmes, into the EU Space Programme Agency (EUSPA) with the role of top programme decision maker, leaving the ESA as the group responsible for implementing operations.

In addition, the private sector has intervened in the sector; its presence, while unthinkable in the Cold War years, has revolutionised the approach to the space world. NASA is no longer in the front row for designing, developing, and operating complex systems; instead, while NASA defines the initial requirements, industry identifies the most convincing technical solutions, thus achieving lower costs and shorter timescales.

For nine years, the United States entrusted human transport to the Soyuz space programme's Soyuz. In 2020, the SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft allowed the US to become autonomous again in the transport of humans in space. This also marked the start of commercial spaceflight with private extra-atmospheric flights. This is an achievement that reaffirms a principle dear to the United States: the strategic importance of freedom of navigation, even in space.

The issue of space autonomy has become more pressing with the Ukrainian conflict. Moscow reacted to Western sanctions by withdrawing from major shared space programmes (most notably ExoMars and the European use of the Soyuz capsule to enable astronauts to reach the International Space Station).

## Modern Space Wars

The first form of space war began in 1957 with the launch of Sputnik, which appeared to allow a nuclear attack from space. The flight of Sputnik ended the strategic handicap that had exposed the USSR to NATO missiles and bombers. The cosmos, therefore, immediately became the field of another race, that of nuclear weapons, with both the USSR and the US experimenting with ballistic missiles capable of leaving the atmosphere with an atomic warhead and re-entering it to hit an enemy target on the other side of the Earth. The growth of satellites as observation tools gradually replaced risky missions conducted by planes and spy ships; indeed, flyovers from space began to be accepted as the king of the game. During Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s, the strategic defence system popularly referred to as 'Star Wars', i.e., the idea of being able to intercept enemy nuclear missiles in flight, was back on the table. The mere threat of a nuclear weapon was even more effective than the weapon itself, forcing the Soviet system into a new arms race for which it did not have sufficient resources. The Gulf War, in 1991, can be considered the first satellite conflict in history; it was replicated twelve years later during the campaign against Saddam Hussein, when the US faced attempts to disrupt its own GPS system. This was the first attack on the American space domain.

## Weapons in orbit

The movie *Star Wars* was released in 1977 and introduced dozens of now iconic military devices: battleships, armoured planetary warfare, and, of course, the legendary lightsabres. However, the first real space war simulation took place in 1985, when an American F-15 shot down an American satellite that had become defective. This was a demonstration of the strength and capabilities of the strength and capabilities of the world of the American war apparatus's strength and capabilities. In 2007, the Chinese government destroyed their own out-of-phase weather satellite by hitting it with a kinetic missile-launched killer vehicle. At that time, several countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Russia, protested the risk of a militarisation of space. In 2008, the American government responded by destroying their own malfunctioning spy satellite with a missile launched from a cruiser off Hawaii. The spotlight on the space wars was re-illuminated in 2020, when General Raymond, Commander of the US Space Command, denounced the latest test of antisatellite capabilities (ASAT) by Russia, which showed they were capable of destroying a spacecraft in low Earth orbit.

Today, the challenge of modern missiles is to achieve ever higher, 'hypersonic' speeds. In June 2019, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Beijing tested a new supersonic 'scramjet' jet engine that was capable of staying active for 600 seconds; this beat the record previously held by Boeing's X-51 demonstrator, which was capable of flying above Mach 5 for 210 seconds. The goal, Chinese experts explained, was to have a missile faster than the DF-17, which was the spearhead of the Dragon's arsenal. The DF-17 is a medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) capable of carrying conventional and nuclear warheads that passes through the atmosphere to re-enter it and gain greater speed. Unlike conventional missiles of this type, however, the DF-17 is in the hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) category: after re-entering the atmosphere, it performs a glide in the final part of the ballistic missile track. All of this occurs at hypersonic speed, i.e., above Mach 5. This detail makes the missile much more unpredictable without sacrificing manoeuvrability, and its range is estimated to be up to 2,000 kilometres. The DF-17 has convinced the United States to relaunch a project with the goal of developing a defensive infrastructure of in-orbit sensors and accelerating in the field of hypersonic missiles; this has been identified by NATO as 'one of the technologies that will revolutionise the way we wage war'. To address these threats, the Space Development Agency (SDA), the agency for military space procurement, is set to be established in 2019. One of SDA's first acts of SDA was the 'tracking phenomenology experiment' programme, a dense network of assets capable of detecting threats (especially hypersonic missiles) and, in the future, neutralising them through interceptors.

In March 2020, the Pentagon showed its focus on developing offensive capabilities by testing the Common Hypersonic Glide Body (C-HGB) vehicle. One of the main problems with this type of weapon is the debris it creates, which results from the 'kinetic' destruction of a possible orbital vehicle; the debris of a destroyed satellite could, in fact, spread throughout its orbital belt at very high speeds, hitting and destroying all objects in its path, including its own or friendly satellites. This kind of chain effect could even lead, in a 'total space war' scenario, to the complete destruction of the satellite constellations currently orbiting our planet. One solution to this problem could involve the use of directed energy weapons, such as lasers; an orbiting object hit by such energy would be neutralised without exploding, being practically 'fried'. Many experts consider the positioning of energy weapons in space to be only a matter of time.

Another case of space warfare is the approach of orbiting infrastructure by means of spying or jamming satellites. This second option remains the least proven at present, but in all likelihood also the most credible. Although the tests are in progress, from the ground (including by means of aircraft launches) are now numerous, and proximity manoeuvres to spy on or hit an orbiting satellite are still

at an early stage. In March 2020, the United States successfully demonstrated the possibility of intervening on an orbiting object by precisely modifying its orbit using a space drone, i.e., the Mission Extension Vehicle (MEV). For the first time in history, this automatic drone was able to take over an American commercial satellite, Intelsat, which had been in geostationary orbit for 19 years, bring it to a higher altitude, and extend its operational life by five years. Beyond the commercial value of the space drone, its strategic impact is revolutionary, so much so that a few days after the MEV's mission, DARPA (the US agency that deals with advanced research projects in the field of defence) selected Northrop Grumman, the manufacturer of the MEV, to build a complete fleet of space drones to serve the Pentagon. In fact, drones capable of docking satellites in orbit, as well as support or refuelling systems, can also become sophisticated and innovative means of attack in space, capable of physically removing enemy satellites from their orbital position. The American choice was entirely political, since a satellite in 2015 was approached and spied on by a mysterious Russian satellite called 'Luch', which was stationed next to it for many weeks despite strong protests from Washington. This was a space deterrence action with a clear message that was addressed not only to Russia: in 2018, Luch also spied on the French-Italian military satellite Athena-Fidus; the episode was publicly revealed by French Defence Minister Florence Parly. With their demonstration, the United States also wanted to reaffirm its space power to its European allies, primarily the French and Italian governments.

### **The birth of space forces**

The manoeuvres of the major powers to control space militarily have prompted several countries to reorganise their space defence, starting with the United States. Established on 20 December 2019, the US Space Force represents a historic milestone, as it is the world's first independent armed force in the world entirely dedicated to space theatre. For the time being, it is more dedicated to the control and monitoring of orbital space and the Earth via satellites in support of the other branches of the Pentagon. US military power is inextricably linked to satellites as force multipliers, and this has spurred the formation of a space force dedicated to their protection. Since Washington has the largest number of potential targets, with over 1,300 satellites in orbit, the US is also the most vulnerable in the scenario of a possible space war. Thus, for the US, maintaining supremacy in the cosmos is a primary issue, as it is certainly less expensive and challenging for their adversaries to prepare the means to destroy the American satellites than to spend huge sums of money in an attempt to match their numbers.

The same year, France created the Commandement militaire de l'espace. This

is not a real autonomous armed force like the American one, but is a structure that should nevertheless maintain programmatic and strategic tasks. Its objective remains the ability to monitor space and satellite protection. In the French strategy, the reference concept is 'active defence', which also includes the development of offensive tools.

Italy has also equipped itself with a special structure, with the creation of the *Comando per le operazioni spaziali* (Cos) which is dependent on the *Comando operativo di vertice interforze* (Covi). Other countries have also begun to equip themselves with their own specialised space forces, but these forces are generally an integral part of their air forces. The Russian Space Forces were autonomous in the Soviet era; today, they are a branch of the Moscow Air Force, renamed the 'Russian Aerospace Forces' in 2015. Japan also maintains a small Japanese Space Operations Squadron; at the moment, it is made up of only 20 soldiers.

Another example is China, which has since 2016 combined space, cyber, and electronic warfare expertise into a single independent armed force: the Strategic Support Force of the People's Liberation Army.

### **What do the treaties say?**

All of this is done in the most classic logic of deterrence, in defiance of the outdated 1967 UN treaty on the use of space, a document that established a ban on placing in orbit or installing nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction in outer space.

One of the basic principles of the treaty is the prohibition for signatory states of placing nuclear weapons and any weapons of mass destruction in Earth orbit, on the moon, or other celestial bodies, or otherwise stationing them in outer space. The provision in Article 4 of the treaty allows the use of the moon and other celestial bodies for peaceful purposes only, but expressly forbids their use for testing weapons of any kind, conducting military manoeuvres, or establishing military bases, installations, or fortifications.

The treaty also expressly prohibits signatory states from claiming resources located in space, such as the moon, a planet, or any other celestial body, as they are considered the 'common heritage of mankind'.

In 1979, a second Agreement was made governing the activities of states on the moon or other celestial bodies (known as the Moon Agreement). Considering the lunar ambitions of superpowers (and private individuals), it is no coincidence that this 'Moon Treaty' turned out to be a failure, as it was not ratified by some of the major aerospace powers.

## Space Reichs

What comes back to Earth from everything we have talked about so far (apart from missiles)? Let us start with a topic that is now at the centre of geopolitical analyses: rare-earth materials. These are the 17 famous elements of the periodic table that are essential resources for basic and advanced technologies; their use is growing across many sectors. China accounts for between 60% and 80% of the global production of some of these elements. These are minerals on which entire sectors of the world economy depend; just a few examples include electronic devices, such as smartphones, batteries, microchips, and components of the automobile industry components. The strategic nature of these items and their location in China, which could choose to stop making them available to the US market, require the US to reconsider its procurement of the minerals.

The challenge is concrete and systemic. Ely Ratner, chosen by President Joe Biden to lead the new Defence Task Force in China, called the control of the US industry supply chain against Chinese actions a 'huge priority', citing dependence on rare metals as one of the main challenges. The White House had already warned about this in 2018 in a report on the defence supply chain: 'Chinese actions seriously threaten other capabilities, including manufacturing machinery; the processing of advanced materials such as biomaterials, ceramics, and composites; and the production of printed circuit boards and semiconductors.' The aim is to minimise dependence on China, thereby wresting an important negotiating card from Beijing on other dossiers and ensuring peace of mind for domestic industries. To address this issue, some suggest searching for minerals on the moon. Experts theorise that the formation of our natural satellite and meteorite impacts indicate a higher density of rare earth materials on the moon than on Earth, especially near lunar cracks. The existence of a lunar mine could be instrumental in producing a significant change in the current balance and power relations on Earth. The rendezvous for the United States and China is therefore on the moon, both (and not coincidentally) heading for the south pole.



## 7. The power of the keyboard: cyber war

BY EMANUELE GENTILI

This analysis aims to examine the landscape of state cyber adversaries to illustrate their characteristics and, consequently, the offensive capabilities of the main states on the international chessboard.

### Opponents

By convention, threat actors are classified into six categories that ideally make up a pyramid with state adversaries at the top. Starting from the base and increasing, the actors' capacities, economic means, and the general level of sophistication increase.

At the lowest (first) level of the pyramid are the so-called *script kiddies*. They do not represent a real threat as they have limited technical capabilities and make use of publicly known tools and techniques. Such adversaries can rarely cause significant damage as the vast majority of security systems are able to contain them without any particular difficulty.

Moving upward, one finds common criminals and *insider threats*. These are individuals or small groups who are generally motivated by personal ends or revenge and who target small organisations using known techniques, such as DDoS offences, phishing, or other unsophisticated attacks, such as DNS attacks.

The third level includes both cyber criminal groups and hacktivists. While the former are motivated by purely economic ends, the motives of the latter are political, social, and ideological. The targets in this case are specific users, often executives and medium-sized organisations. They are targeted with the goal of stealing information, obtaining financial gain and, in some cases, sabotage. These threat actors can rely on more complex tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP): they can make use of zero-day exploits, rootkits, and dedicated architectures.

Structured cyber crime groups and mercenaries make up the fourth level. The objective of these adversaries is exclusively economic and, consequently, the targeted entities are selected on the basis of possible profit. 0day vulnerability exploits are used at this level, as well as ransomware threats and proprietary malware. Offensives include theft of payment card data and attacks on PoS systems.

The second most dangerous level of the pyramid holds state-sponsored adversaries, characterised by particularly advanced TTPs, including 0day and proprietary threats. These actors can count on significant resources to pursue targets, even those of strategic importance, while also utilising multi-stage exploits. Victims of such offensives, which can be either CNE (Computer Network Exploitation) or CNA (Computer Network Attacks), can include critical infrastructures.

Finally, at the highest level are the state adversaries, which, of course, represent the most advanced of all cyber threat actors. This category includes intelligence agencies and special military units of the major state players active on the international and geopolitical chessboard. Armed with practically unlimited resources, these adversaries target governments and critical infrastructures, as well as influential private entities that are of particular interest for domestic purposes. The motives behind attacks in this area include espionage, theft of intellectual property, tracking dissidents, and using political manipulation to influence public opinion.

### **Categorising opponents**

As can be seen from the above, threat actors can be divided into three main categories, each characterised by different matrices, objectives, and methodologies.

#### *State-sponsored*

The activities of this type of adversary can be grouped into four macro areas: CNE, CNA, PSYOPS, and fundraising.

In this context, CNE (computer network exploitation) refers to all operation that involve the theft of sensitive data and information with the purpose of spying on targets of special government interest. These represent most of the offensives conducted by state-sponsored adversaries. Paradigmatic examples of this are the continuous and reciprocal attacks between the Indian Dropping Elephant and the Pakistani Barmanou teams, which reflect the existing tensions in geopolitical and international relations between the two states in the cyber world.

CNA (computer network attack) activities, on the other hand, are destructive in nature and are aimed at sabotaging or causing massive physical damage to target systems. Although the most striking and famous case of this category is the Stuxnet affair—which saw the US and Israel collaborate in 2009 to strike the Iranian power plant at Natanz—such offensives have never ceased. More recently, for example, the attacks conducted by the Russian group Gamaredon against the Ukrainian power grid have caused significant concern.

PSYOPS (*psychological operations*), which is an integral part of the *information*

*warfare* category, include all the activities of propaganda and dissemination of news aimed at influencing decision-making processes and destabilising international balances. One of the most active and effective players in this field is the Russian government, which takes ad hoc approaches influenced by institutional weaknesses or the level of Soviet penetration in the economic and commercial affairs of the state it is targeting. As an example, consider the *dezinformatsiya* campaigns detected during elections in recent years, both in the US and in Europe, that have involved not only government APTs, but also the now-famous IRA (Internet Research Agency), which is a troll factory in St. Petersburg.

The goal of fundraising activities is to fill state reserves through campaigns that target SWIFT systems and cryptocurrency exchanges, among others. The North Korean adversary Lazarus, for instance, has a section called Bluenoroff that is exclusively dedicated to this type of attack and is aimed primarily at banks and financial institutions, but invades casinos, financial trading software development companies, and cryptocurrency companies. It is evident how fundraising activities are conducted, in the specific case of North Korea, with the aim of financing the regime, especially in light of the sanctions the state is subject to.

In general, the methodologies exploited by state-sponsored adversaries include targeted and particularly complex attacks, such as supply chain attacks that aim to compromise the supply chain, often at the software level, but with the objective of harming specific end targets.

In addition, such groups make extensive use of unconventional digital weapons and possess high lateral movement and persistence capabilities.

### *Hactivists*

This type of adversary, whose name is a portmanteau of *hacking* and *activist*, is motivated by purely ideological and protest-orientated aims, often with the goal of opposing the work of governments and multinational corporations on the cyber level. Consequently, their objectives range from sabotage actions to propaganda in opposition to the official narrative.

The types of attacks are typically frontal and include scans and exploits of known vulnerabilities on systems and DDoS offensives, but also vandalising and exposing sensitive information.

In Italy, there are Anonymous Italia and LulzSecITA collectives, which are local sections of the corresponding hacktivist groups already operating globally. Although it has been decimated over the years by various police operations, Anonymous Italia has alternated between periods of feverish activity with long pauses, reconfiguring itself from time to time around new leading figures.

### *Cyber criminals*

The term cyber criminal refers to individuals and groups that have varying levels of structure and are pursuing only economic goals.

Activities include direct and indirect capital theft, such as the extraction of large volumes of data (personal or financial) for sale on the black market or for direct use, and the theft of information for extortion purposes. The main methodologies used include the exploitation of generally known vulnerabilities and social engineering techniques.

This kaleidoscopic landscape includes a plurality of threat actors with different TTPs and characteristics.

Among them, *human-driven* ransomware groups whose activities are characterised by multilevel extortion techniques have recently come to the forefront. The Russian-speaking matrix group FIN6, is one of the most active, and has attacked hundreds of victims, including some high-ranking ones. The group is active in many different sectors in different parts of the world. The team has activated a portal (a practice now established by all operators of this type) where it publishes the data exfiltrated to victims who were uncooperative and refused to pay the ransom demanded. FIN6 attacks are based on the threat known as Conti, which was distributed after the network had been compromised and mapped.

### *The Cyber Kill Chain*

Developed by Lockheed Martin, the Cyber Kill Chain model is designed to identify and prevent intrusive cyber activities. The chain consists of seven steps that list the stages needed by adversaries to pursue their objectives.

The first phase is reconnaissance, in which threat actors search for and identify their targets, selecting and collecting information to attack them.

The next step—defined as *weaponisation*—is preparation for the attack and consists of arming the files that will be used to target systems and facilitate the installation of malicious code, usually resulting from the coupling of RATs (Remote Access Trojans) and exploits.

The third phase, delivery, is the actual transmission to the victim, carried out mainly through malicious attachments or download links.

The next stage is the *exploitation stage*, which is when the exploit is exploited to execute malicious code on the victim's systems. *Exploitation* is followed by the *installation* phase in which the malware is actually installed, together with a backdoor that guarantees adversary persistence and continuous access to target systems.

The sixth step is *command & control* (C2), where communication channels are established with the adversary, who can now interact by sending and receiving

commands and instructions.

The last phase, known as *actions on objectives*, consists of the threat actor exploiting the infected system to achieve the set objectives (data exfiltration, encryption, etc.).

### *APT, Crime and Hacktivism*

Delving deeper into this analysis, it is possible for each type of adversary to identify the characteristic phases of their respective intrusion activities.

The table below presents the characteristics of each threat actor that shows how the degree of sophistication increases in relation to the type of threat actor.

|                                | APT | CRIME | HACKTIVISM |
|--------------------------------|-----|-------|------------|
| Target Definition              | X   |       | X          |
| Search for accomplices         | X   |       | X          |
| Tool acquisition               | X   | X     | X          |
| Target infrastructure search   | X   |       |            |
| Test detection                 | X   | X     |            |
| Deployment                     | X   | X     | X          |
| Initial intrusion              | X   | X     | X          |
| Outbound connection            | X   | X     | X          |
| Lateral movement               | X   |       |            |
| Persistence                    | X   |       |            |
| Data exfiltration              | X   | X     | X          |
| Detection coverage/<br>evasion | X   |       |            |

## The Carrier Market (Exploit)

As one can easily deduce from the discussion that has been discussed so far, one of the most important phases in the intrusive activities conducted by the most structured threat actors is the choice and use of vulnerability exploits. Concrete proof of this is the presence of real markets, more or less licit, that allow the purchase of this type of digital weapon. Putting aside the vast offering available within underground forums and markets, it is interesting to consider the case of Zerodium, a leading US company in this area, as an example.

The company, which buys 0day exploits in order to resell them to government agencies around the world, continues to update its listings upwards, demonstrating how the rules of the market are also and especially valid in this sector. In fact, the value of each purchased exploit purchased, in fact, varies depending on the vulnerable platform and the type of flaw. To give a practical example, the economic recognition of an exploit chain that causes the complete compromise of an Android device without interaction of the victim (*zero clicks*), also guaranteeing persistence, can reach \$2,500,000.

## Noteworthy events

By way of example, we have listed a few events that effectively demonstrate what has been discussed so far, highlighting the characteristics, methodologies, and targets of APT threats.

### *Operation Dianxun: Mustang Panda hits the telecommunications sector*

The Chinese state-sponsored group Mustang Panda (RedDelta) was associated with *Operation Dianxun*, a campaign against telecommunication companies that was taken over in March 2021.

Although the initial vector has not been definitively identified, it appears that the victims were induced to visit a site controlled by the adversaries from which they allegedly downloaded a fake version of Adobe Flash Player. Once in the system, the adversaries set up persistence tasks, created or modified a Windows system process, used Cobalt Strike, and then the DotNet payload. This malware is characterised by numerous features, such as downloading and backdoor management, as well as the ability to ensure persistence.

The attack was aimed at the exfiltration of 5G-related data and mainly affected users in the US and India.

*Ukraine: SBU denounces attack attempts by Gamaredon*

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) issued an alert in March 2021 concerning large-scale activities associated with the Russian Gamaredon group. The campaign, which appears to have been neutralised before any unauthorised access occurred, targeted the systems of the country's highest authorities. The SBU worked with the *National Cyber Security Coordination Centre at the National Security and Defence Council* and in cooperation with the central authorities. Countermeasures were agreed with the *Department of Supervision of Criminal Proceedings in Armed Conflict* and the Attorney General's Office.

*COVID-19: Russian disinformation campaign that was plotted against the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines*

An official of the Global Engagement Centre of the US State Department's Global Engagement Center, which monitors foreign disinformation efforts, identified in March 2021 four online scientific publications that were masking Russian intelligence forces.

Such publications had been used to question the safety of Western vaccines for COVID-19, including Pfizer and Moderna, and promote sales of the rival Russian Sputnik V.

In addition, Moscow's state networks and social media have made obvious efforts to raise concerns about the cost of the Pfizer vaccine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has, of course, denied any such accusations.

However, the report by the German Marshall Fund—an American think tank—analysed more than 35,000 tweets from the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian governments, and their respective state media on vaccine issues from the beginning of November 2020 to February 2021. The largest percentage of content came from Russia, with 86% of negative tweets directed against Pfizer and 76% against the Moderna vaccine.

The four publications identified by the US government and linked to Russian intelligence were: the *News Eastern* and the *Oriental Review*, directed and controlled by the Russian intelligence service SVR (*Foreign Intelligence Service*); the Russian intelligence service; the *News Front*, led by the FSB (*Federal Security Service*); the *Rebel Inside*, controlled by the GRU, which is the intelligence directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.

A January 2021 article in the *News Front* highlighted the risk that a person receiving the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines could contract Bell's palsy, while a February article in the same publication focused on a man in California who had tested positive for COVID-19 after receiving the Pfizer vaccination. In the same month, The *New Eastern Outlook* stated that the United States run biological

laboratories around the world, which were possible causes of infectious disease outbreaks. The article was republished in whole or in part on websites in Bangladesh, Italy, Spain, France, Iran, Cuba, and Sweden.

*Lazarus Group: MATA framework used to distribute TFlower ransomware*

A ransomware attack using the MATA framework—an advanced multiplatform associated with the North Korean state-sponsored Lazarus group—was identified in March 2021. Specifically, MATA was used to distribute the TFlower ransomware. From May 2019 to 4 February 2021, more than 150 IPs associated with C2s were tracked in relation to the framework. The framework consisted of three elements: the initial loader in.exe format; the DLL injected by the first loader that decrypts and executes the payload; and the payload component, which was a DAT binary file that implements the backdoor functions and connects to the command and control servers.

*COVID-19: two Indian vaccine manufacturers among APT10 targets*

In March 2021, a security firm detected a series of malicious Chinese activities against two Indian entities involved in the production of the COVID-19 vaccine. This was found to be a *Stone Panda-launched supply chain* operation against the company *Bharat Biotech* and the *Serum Institute of India* (SII), which were engaged in the production of vaccine doses of AstraZeneca and Novavax.

To achieve their objectives, adversaries identified vulnerabilities and weaknesses in the functioning of applications and CMSs installed on some of the public servers of the government institute's public servers.

*RedEcho: Chinese APT targets India's energy sector*

A campaign targeting India's critical infrastructure in the energy and maritime sectors was detected in mid-2020.

The offensive was attributed to the Chinese state-sponsored group RedEcho, which used the ShadowPad backdoor and a network architecture called AXIOMATICASYMPTOTE as part of the campaign.

In total, the attacks targeted 12 organisations, ten of them in the energy production and distribution sector, along with Indian seaports. Among the energy sector targets, four *Regional Load Despatch Centres* (RLDCs) were detected, along with two *State Load Despatch Centres* (SLDCs).



## Microsoft Exchange Gate

On 2 March 2021, Microsoft fixed a number of 0day vulnerabilities in Exchange Server 2013, 2016, and 2019, which had already been exploited *in the wild* for targeted attacks on high-level targets.

There were several flaws, later classified as critical, including: CVE-2021-26855 (later christened ProxyLogon): *server-side request forgery* (SSRF); CVE-2021-26857: deserialisation in the ‘Unified Messaging’ service; and CVE-2021-26858 and CVE-2021-27065: *arbitrary file write*.

The exploits for these vulnerabilities were used by the Chinese-owned state-sponsored adversary Hafnium, which began exploiting the flaws in January 2021. The operation involved loading web shells (ChinaChopper and ASPXSpy) to inject further malicious code and exfiltrate sensitive data.

In addition to Hafnium, at least three other Chinese groups (Emissary Panda, Tick, and Calypso) have taken advantage of ProxyLogon to attack targets in the US—and, to a lesser extent, in Europe—in the government, private, legal, financial, industrial, and health sectors.

Given the notoriety of the problem and the subsequent publication of the exploits, an increase in the number of malicious applications followed. Exchange servers that were still vulnerable ended up at the centre of massive scans and more or less targeted operations perpetrated by known adversaries (at least ten in total). Among the high-level European victims were the *European Banking Authority* and the Norwegian Parliament, while the ransomware DearCry and BlackKingdom were also allegedly distributed through Microsoft Exchange exploits.

## The SolarWinds case

Between the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, the situation that attracted the most attention was undoubtedly that of SolarWinds. The US company, in fact, ended up in the news as the victim of two separate offensives by structured opponents.

The first and most egregious consisted of a *supply chain* attack by the Russian state-sponsored Dark Halo (APT29) team, which exploited SolarWinds as a beachhead to select and achieve very high-profile targets. The vector would have been the 2019.4 HF5 and 2020.2 versions of the Orion product, which was used in March 2020 by up to 18,000 of SolarWinds’ approximately 30,000 customers of SolarWinds. The code used to compromise them was the Sunburst backdoor, which was exploited to distribute the Teardrop and Raindrop loaders followed by the Cobalt Strike payload beam. The execution of the second stage was made possible by creating an IFEO debugger value for the dllhost.exe pro-

cess. At the same time, the same adversary targeted other high-profile targets by exploiting applications with privileged access to Microsoft Office 365 and Azure environments. The possible entry point appears to have been either the breach of JetBrains (Czech Republic) or the exploit of CVE-2019-12157 exploit of their TeamCity product.

The final objectives of the offensive were *intelligence collection* for espionage purposes and, presumably, the preparation of future *supply chain* attacks.

The second attack on SolarWinds was the work of the Chinese adversary Spiral, who used the SUPERNOVA web shell by exploiting a vulnerability in the Orion software.

## Russian opponents

The landscape of state and government-sponsored adversaries in Russia mirrors the architecture of Moscow's intelligence services. Indeed, the main threat actors used by the Kremlin can be traced back to its constituent agencies. While in Soviet times there were two main intelligence agencies, the KGB and the GRU, there are four agencies in modern Russia whose competences are divided in ways that are less clear-cut than their past Soviet counterparts.

The FSB (*Federal'naja služba bezopásnosti Rossijskoj Federácii*) is the *de facto* successor to the KGB. It deals mainly with internal matters, but the scope of action has expanded in recent years to include foreign and cyber operations. Most of the activities carried out by this agency involve *reconnaissance* and *clandestine surveillance*. Within the FSB, there are two units operating in the cyber domain: the *16th Centre*, the main *signal* and *cyber intelligence* unit, and the *18th Centre*, which deals with surveillance and counterintelligence.

Adversaries directly linked to the FSB include Turla and Gamaredon. GRU (*Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie*) is the military intelligence apparatus and conducts cyber campaigns in the narrow sense, as well as disinformation activities, mainly through the Sixth Directorate. This department deals with SIGINT and cyber intelligence, using the best technologies available to the Russian special services.

There are several parts of the GRU, including: Unit 74455 (*Centre for Special Technologies*), also known as Sandworm, which was responsible for the attacks on the Ukrainian electricity network and the spread of the Petya malware; Unit 54777 (*72nd Special Service Centre*) to which *psychological warfare* operations and recent disinformation campaigns can be attributed, including those linked to COVID-19; Unit 26165 (*85th Main Special Service Centre*), which overlaps with Sofacy and is responsible for multiple offences, including those conducted in 2016 against the DNC (*Democratic National Committee*) and Hillary Clinton's

presidential campaign systems; and Unit 36360, which is responsible for *signal intelligence* and *electronic warfare* operations.

The SVR (Sluba vnenej *razvedki*) is the apparatus that deals with intelligence and espionage activities outside of Russian territory. Among its other tasks, the SVR is directly involved in the planning and implementation of the Kremlin's 'active measures', collaborating on the creation and amplification of narratives for the government. The APT 29 group appears to be closely related to the SVR.

The Federal Security Office (*Federalnaya Sluzhba Okhrani*)—formerly the Ninth Directorate of the KGB—focuses on the defence and security of the government and its personnel, including IT. It includes the Spetssvyaz unit, which deals with *signal intelligence* and military communications, ensuring data security.

Looking at some of the most famous and long-lived opponents linked to Cremlino, one cannot fail to mention Sofacy, also known by the aliases APT28, Fancy Bear, and STRONTIUM. Active since at least 2007, Sofacy belongs to the GRU, specifically Unit 26165. Over the years, the adversary conducted CNE (Computer Network Exploitation) attack operations against a plurality of high-profile targets mainly located in NATO countries and the former Soviet bloc, with the goal of identifying intelligence useful to the Kremlin or influencing opinions and events of international scope, always in an anti-NATO and anti-European key.

Among the techniques used are spear phishing and *watering holes*, both of which have the goal of inoculating proprietary malware and 0day vulnerability exploits, the exploitation of the Microsoft DDE (Dynamic Data Exchange) protocol, and the misuse of social networks and dissemination of disinformation. The group is linked to other Moscow teams, including Sandworm and Gallmaker.

The major offensives conducted by the group included the 2016 attack against the *World Anti Doping Agency* (WADA), but also and especially the multiple attacks launched on the eve of election processes in the United States and beyond. In September 2020, it became known how Sofacy had targeted more than 200 US organisations that had been involved in the run-up to the presidential elections, such as advocacy groups, parties, political consultants, and think tanks. These groups were hit by *brute forcing* or *password spray* attacks. Previously, in 2018, the group had targeted three candidates in the midterm US congressional elections, using spear-phishing techniques that directed potential victims to a malicious domain in order to exfiltrate their credentials.

Among the team's most notorious activities of the team is the attempted attack against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPAC or OPCW) in April 2018. On this occasion, four individuals traceable to GRU Unit 26165 were expelled from the Netherlands after entering the country three days earlier using diplomatic passports, renting a car, and parking in a hotel very

close to OPAC headquarters. In the car's luggage rack of the car, Dutch intelligence detected equipment capable of penetrating the organisation's network, including a bag with a battery, an antenna, and a transformer. Furthermore, one of the laptops found contained data leading to the WADA compromise and information regarding MH-17 flight. The intrusion is believed to have been caused by the investigation that the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was currently conducting against former secret agent Skripal.

Another well-known Russian government adversary, also linked to GRU and Sofacy itself, is Sandworm (Black Energy, Telebots, and Hades). Since it became active in 2009, it has struck with both CNE (Computer Network Exploitation) and CNA (Computer Network Attacks) operations that are particularly aggressive in high-profile Eastern and Western Europe and the United States.

Sandworm exploits, at the TTP level, mainly *watering holes*, spear phishing, Oday vulnerability exploits, and the compromise and distribution of legitimate applications for the purpose of inoculating malware of a proprietary nature.

Sandworm is associated with the notorious December 2016 attack on the Kiev power plant in Ukraine; this attack used the sophisticated threat known as *Industroyer* which is capable of destroying the active processes of industrial control systems (ICS).

Among the SVR-related teams, as previously mentioned, is APT29, also known as Dukes and CozyBear. This is a particularly organised and well-funded group, operational since 2008 and engaged in activities aimed at gathering intelligence to support the foreign and security policies of the Russian government. In fact, the group's main targets are western governments and related organisations, but also those of the *Commonwealth of Independent States*, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as organisations linked to Chechen extremism and Russian individuals involved in illicit drug trafficking. One of the most commonly used techniques is spear phishing with the aim of inoculating particularly sophisticated proprietary malware with extremely innovative masking methods.

Recently, the group was responsible for a campaign against organisations involved in the development of the COVID-19 vaccine in Canada, the US, and the UK. In this case, APT29 compromised its targets first by scanning specific vulnerability IPs, such as CVE-2019-19781 (Citrix), CVE-2019-11510 (Pulse Secure), CVE-2018-13379 (FortiGate), CVE-2019-9670 (Zimbra), and others. Additionally, it exploited spear phishing messages to obtain authentication credentials to the systems login pages.

Turla can be traced back to the government agency FSB. Its first activities occurred in 2005, making it one of the Kremlin's longest-serving groups. Its targets are high-profile organisations in NATO countries, but it also attacks domestic or localised targets in Soviet bloc states through CNE actions. The group is parti-

cularly advanced and targets strategic organisations and individuals to exfiltrate high-level information useful to Moscow's intelligence activities.

Among the TTPs observed were spear phishing for the purpose of inoculating malware (mostly proprietary in nature), exploiting 0day vulnerabilities, exploiting satellite connections to evade detection, hijacking legitimate services, and using unique tools traceable to the arsenals of other adversaries.

Among the group's most impactful offensives of the group were the attack on German government systems in 2017, the attack on the Austrian Foreign Ministry's network in January 2020, and the attack on various diplomatic entities located in Europe in the same year.

Like Turla, Gamaredon is also part of the FSB. The team only came to the headlines in 2013 when it started targeting high-profile Ukrainian individuals. In fact, although Gamaredon later also attacked targets linked to the Atlantic Alliance (NATO), its main target has always remained Kiev, in light of fears of Ukraine's excessive adherence to Europeanist policies and the effort to keep the country within the Soviet influence sphere.

### *US vs. Russia: US indictments*

Over the years, there have been increasing efforts by intelligence agencies worldwide, in particular the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), to trace and identify individuals belonging to the various Cremino-related groups.

Such efforts have often resulted in public *indictments* complete with names, photos of those indicted, and details of their operations. In July 2018, for example, the District of Columbia Grand Jury indicted 12 Russian officials regarding attempts by the Moscow government to manipulate the 2016 US presidential election and previous Democratic Party primaries. The indictment document reconstructed the organisational chart, infrastructure and capabilities of the GRUs. The defendants were Viktor Borisovich Netyksho, Boris Alekseyevich Antonov, Dmitrii Sergeyevich Badin, Ivan Sergeyevich Yermakov, Aleksey Viktorovich Lukashov, Sergey Aleksandrovich Morgachev, Nikolay Yuryevich Kozachek, Pavel Vyacheslavovich Yershov, Artem Andreyevich Malyshev, Aleksandr Vladimirovich Osadchuk, Aleksey Aleksandrovich Potemkin, and Anatoliy Sergeyevich Koval.

Specifically, Unit 26165 was indicted in connection with activities to compromise and steal information from the systems of the DCCC (Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee) and DNC (Democratic National Committee). Unit 74455 was accused of managing all social media actions that were functional in achieving the success of the manipulative activity carried out.

A further indictment was issued in October 2020 by the US Department of Justice in Pittsburgh that consisted of an indictment against six Russian citizens,

also members of GRU Unit 74455 and part of the Sandworm team. Six individuals were Yuriy Sergeyevich Andrienko (age 32), Sergei Vladimirovich Detistov (age 35), Pavel Valeryevich Frolov (age 28), Anatoliy Sergeyevich Kovalev (age 29), Artem Valeryevich Ochichenko (age 27), and Petr Nikolayevich Pliskin (age 32); they were alleged to have conducted ‘destructive’ attacks on behalf and at the behest of the Russian government with the intention of destabilising other countries, interfering in their internal politics, and causing chaos and economic damage.

The prosecution was based on several actions carried out by the group in the period 2015–2019 and directed against the Ukrainian government and critical infrastructure in Kiev via the BlackEnergy Industroyer and KillDisk malware, as well as the 2017 French elections and the systems of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics after the ban on Russian athletes.

In addition, actions taken to spread the NotPetya ransomware in June 2017 are also contested.

## Chinese opponents

The world of Beijing-linked threat actors and their links with state intelligence agencies is particularly complex and varied, reflecting the multiple fields of action and interest that are pursued by the plurality of governmental groups.

Of the more than 60 teams that have been potentially tracked over the years, the vast majority are under the close command of the People’s *Liberation Army* (PLA), which is the armed forces of the People’s Republic of China. After the 2015 reform and reorganisation of the country’s architecture, cyber responsibilities were moved from the Third to the Fifth Department of the PLA under the acronym *People’s Liberation Army Strategic Support Force* (PLASSF). The main objective of this department is to support operations to gain advantages in the cyber and space domains.

Among the most notorious adversaries operating in the Chinese landscape is Stone Panda, also known as APT10, in operation since at least 2009. Located in Tianjin and allegedly run by the Tianjin State Security Bureau, the group has targeted high-profile organisations and targets in the United States, Europe, Southeast Asia and Japan, with the aim of collecting information and intelligence useful to Beijing’s national security and the competitiveness of Chinese companies. The victims of Stone Panda’s victims range from the government sector to aerospace, telecommunications, and manufacturing. Among the group’s most notorious attacks is the massive cyber espionage campaign dubbed *Cloud Hopper*. This group was uncovered in 2017 but had already been active for a few years at that time. Cloud Hopper targeted several countries and sectors of industry and the global

economy, exfiltrating intellectual property, security details, and other documents from dozens of realities after the initial compromise of cloud service providers.

Another particularly active threat actor is APT31 (Zirconium), which is committed to gathering intelligence on intellectual property to support national development policies. APT31 has also carried out attacks on the *supply chain*: the group's primary targets are technology and services companies linked to civil and military fields and domestic opponents. Among the most frequently used techniques is spear phishing with the aim of inoculating malware, both proprietary and open source, but also frontal attacks on server infrastructures.

Applications for secure entry into private networks. Among the most notorious offensives launched by the group are attempts to compromise the staffs of Joe Biden and Donald Trump during the 2020 US presidential elections as well as recent COVID-19-themed spear phishing campaigns.

Emissary Panda, also known as Turbine Panda, has instead been active since at least 2010 with targeted CNE operations against high-level entities, initially in China, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, and later in other states and Central Asia. The primary objective has always been to steal intellectual property to support Beijing. For instance, in 2016, and after almost six years of non-stop hacking of foreign airlines by the group, the *Aero Engine Corporation of China* (AECC) launched the CJ-1000AX engine, designed to replace an engine previously manufactured abroad for the C919 aircraft. In 2019, Emissary Panda was also publicly accused by Iran's Ministry of Information and Communication Technology of launching a series of attacks against the country's *e-government infrastructure*.

The techniques most often used by the group included spear phishing and *watering holes*, with the aim of inoculating malware, including proprietary malware.

Among the many victims of Chinese adversaries detected on our territory is also the Holy See, targeted by the threat actor known as Mustang Panda. This group has been active since at least 2017 and has carried out many CNE operations, initially exploiting themes and *decoys* related to Mongolia, in which the group seemed to have a specific interest, and then broadening its focus to include targets related to the Catholic Church. Some of the attempted compromises took place in view of the planned renewal of the 2018 China–Vatican agreement, which would have allowed the Chinese Communist Party to gain greater control and oversight over the historically persecuted Catholic community in China.

### *US vs. China: US Indictments*

Our previous discussion on the efforts of intelligence agencies to identify and prosecute members of adversary groups also applies to Beijing.

In February 2020, the US Department of Justice issued warrants for the arrest of four Chinese nationals as part of the investigation into the data breach suffered

by the Equifax company in 2016. The men—who go by the names Wu Zhiyong, Wang Qian, Xu Ke, and Liu Lei—were all members of the APT10 group associated with the *54th Research Institute* of the *Chinese People Liberation Army* (PLA). After gaining access to the systems by exploiting the exploit for an Apache Struts vulnerability, the defendants were able to subtract information from over 147 million US, British, and Chinese citizens, Canadian as well as Equifax's intellectual property.

A further US *indictment*, also in 2020, led to the identification of two individuals (LI Xiaoyu and DONG Jiazhi) linked to the Chinese *Ministry of State Security*, guilty of compromising the computer systems of organisations and government agencies in the United States and several other countries. According to the Office of Public Affairs of the US Department of Justice, the operation for which the two men were responsible had been going on since at least September 2009, that is, for more than ten years, and allegedly claimed global victims in the hi-tech, IT, entertainment, energy, pharmaceutical, and defence sectors.

Some members of the APT41 organisation were also arrested on official charges by the US Department of Justice. The individuals indicted were Zhang Haoran and Tan Dailin, who collaborated with Jiang Lizhi, Qian Chuan, and Fu Qiang, employees of *Chengdu 404 Network Technology*, a company linked to the Chinese Communist Party, to carry out cyber espionage activities. The activities affected the United States and other states around the world, including India and Vietnam (targeting the latter's government systems), and the same individuals were also accused of carrying out attempted attacks against the British government.



## **8. The power of the word and of the image: Information warfare**

BY EMANUELE ROSSI

Social networks are a new organisation of society and social life that is increasingly central and widespread in people's daily lives. Social media elements have shaped the concept of domination, and with it transformed the field of media and information circulation into the most crucial, economical, rapid, hybrid type of warfare to the point where all activity can be denied. That way in which information moves is a complex battlefield and a tactical and strategic endeavour, as much as is the control of resources, the ability to protect one's borders, or the will to project one's strength within areas of geopolitical conflict.

Information warfare (IW) is now a rapidly evolving and yet undefined field, which is therefore of growing interest to defence planners and policymakers. While it has always existed, the infowar is now a source of interest for governments and private actors due to the so-called information revolution, driven by the ongoing rapid evolution of cyberspace, microcomputers, and the associated information technologies. At the same time, international actors are seeking to exploit the global information infrastructure, its evolutions, and associated technologies, for military purposes. In the 1980s and 1990s, the growth of traditional media and the launch of the Internet (even though it is different from the current function of the internet) had forced a general revision process to the concept of power. It was no longer possible to exercise economic-military-commercial-political power without managing the articulated variables involved in controlling the circulation of information. From there the control of the souls of the citizens was passing and would pass in an ever more penetrating manner.

If up to now the media was predominantly regarded as a tool, it is now considered a theatre where economic and trade policy activities, activities concerning diplomacy and international relations, as well as military pressure on partners and shores, could be simultaneously mobilised. These are a patchwork of actions that could quickly pass under the shadow of hybrid activities. Shared values are a major part of massive propaganda and soft power, making them cross into information warfare, making them crucial to any desire or effort for domination.

The qualitative dimension of both technology and concept began in the 1990s

and has been present since the advent of the Internet 2.0. This means that the superficially virtual world becomes the real battleground between powers because it is a human dimension and a component of people's real lives of people. As a result, investors move to this space, causing the capitalisation of companies operating in this sector to remain higher in absolute terms than other sectors, and it is where the attention of collectivities is focused. Here, the fates of electoral candidates, social demands, the international success of any brand, and even a government's capacity for political action and the stability of executives are determined. The concept of geoinformation, i.e., the geopolitics of information, is gaining ground, and the psychological and physical weapons connected to the world of communication have become a penetrating and sought-after force through which pass the destinies, successes, or misfortunes, of countries. Information warfare is no longer the classic military weapon used to control the passage of information within the chains of command; instead, it has become that set of strategic operations that work on the way people see the world, on their opinion, on their cognitive level, creating constant PSYOPS (psychological operations).

From cultural influence activities to more sophisticated targeted and directed activities, countries such as Russia and China are undermining US-designed information dominance<sup>1</sup>. Their activity is often entrusted to complex structures within the intelligence community; they are constantly involved in activities that are sometimes confused with hacking; however, hacking is used as an instrument of force, and these activities are structured in an increasingly widespread and articulated way. It is no longer enough to control information in the classical way (i.e., to steal it, to spy on it) to have an impact on decision-making chains and be effective in the exercise of influence in the political systems of rivals. Information can now be manipulated, handled, and altered for one's own exclusive benefit. The spaces and tools that can accomplish this are becoming easier to use; it is possible to directly reach the citizens whose view of reality must be altered for the attempts to be effective. This was clearly visible with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Harbulot and Lucas<sup>2</sup> wrote:

Actions with the purpose of providing or blocking certain information and indications to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motivations, and objective reasoning, and to intelligence systems and executives at all levels to

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<sup>1</sup> This is an indication of the level of cognitive superiority (information superiority) that allows the beneficiary to use cognitive systems and capabilities to gain an operational advantage within a conflict or to control the situation within MOOTW (Military Operations Other Than War) operations (Field Manual 100-106). Reprinted in Harbulot, C.H., Lucas, D. (eds.) (2002), *La guerre cognitive*, Limoges: Lavauzelle.

<sup>2</sup> Harbulot, C.H., Lucas, D. (eds.), *op. cit.*

influence official assessments, resulting in behaviour and actions that meet the source's objectives of the source (originating). In different ways, the control of perceptions coordinates truth projection, concealment and disruptive actions, and psychological operations.

At a time when we are confronted with a clash between models of the world's interpretation—Democracies on the one hand and authoritarian systems on the other—strategic operations centred on communication assume a crucial role. In the global diplomacy with which American President Biden's administration has turned democratic values and respect for human and civil rights into a vector of international politics, there is no room for those who oppose the (Western and therefore American) model. The narrative is constant, hammering, and exploiting every possible space. This is equally true from the authoritarian side, where every form of inconsistency in political action with respect to those practices and values hoisted as a model becomes fertile ground for the counternarrative to take root.

The aim of these actions is to sow doubt among citizens who live within a determined system of thought (and thus interpretation of the world). By confronting them with their own doubts and stirring up others, it is possible to confuse communities, to exploit their cracks and faults to one's own advantage. Producing disgruntled and untrusting electorates while also pushing the desire of political actors' desire for consensus (which is becoming more and more volatile) is an added value of impact against a rival. The process does not necessarily have to become blatantly public, but may simply embed itself in certain existing rifts, favouring (or exasperating) their course.

The president believes that communication is a critical part of national security to communicate. U.S. foreign policy to a global audience in times of peace as well as war', Dan Bartlett, White House Communications Director under George W. Bush, explained in 2002 in a New York Times article with the eloquent title: 'A nation challenged: heart and Minds; Bush will continue the wartime operation promoting America'<sup>3</sup>.

'Hearts and minds' are the key words here: control of hearts and minds is a crucial factor because management of public opinion is fundamental such for any war today and in the future. It is not just the dissemination of false or altered news, but also the careful distillation and constant flow of true information, which in some cases is also provided through official channels used to direct the course of specific dossiers or to corroborate strategic lines of action. Communication activities are now at the heart of information warfare. We therefore move

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<sup>3</sup> Becker E., Dao J., 'Bush Will Keep Wartime Office Promoting US', in *The New York Times*, 20 February 2002.

on to Information Operations, which target enemies as much as competitors, partners, and sometimes allies.

In the most classic and didactic of classifications, all that has been discussed so far—information warfare—is commonly divided into six domains. *Command and control warfare* (C2W), which tends to undermine the enemy command's exercise of activity by the enemy command against the available forces in pursuit of the mission by denying the enemy access to information, thus disrupting the enemy's command and control capabilities. *Intelligence-based warfare* (IBW) is based primarily on protecting one's own information management systems, even, if not especially, by polluting the adversary's field through altering actions. *Electronic warfare* (EW) concerns any type of military action against the electromagnetic spectrum aimed both at offensive action and at preventing enemy actions. *Psychological warfare* (PSYOP) (*psychological operations warfare on individuals or the masses*) refers to situations where information is used to influence and change the thoughts and opinions of friendly, neutral, or enemy subjects; this is the most important field in hybrid conflicts. *Hacker warfare* (HW) and *cyber warfare* (CyW) involve attacks against computer systems. *Economic Information Warfare* (EIW) involves the elevation, diversion, blocking, and conditioning of information to achieve economic supremacy.

However, it is evident from what has been written so far that this kind of classification is a useful cataloguing of activities that are almost never carried out in a univocal and direct form but are summed up and interconnected. The characteristics of these summations produce an exponential increase in the probable consequences of strategic information warfare. Hence, one conclusion appears fundamental: the key assumptions of classical military strategy may be inadequate to deal with the threat posed by strategic infowar.

It goes without saying that, at the same time as the development of these new dimensions of war, and with the associated advances, moral concerns have developed. Conventional wars are analysed by scholars according to the 'just war' theory, the doctrine of studying the morality of conflicts according to the criteria of 'jus ad bellum' and 'jus in bello'. But are these same criteria applicable to information warfare? Can they apply to operations aimed at influencing to the point of, if necessary, transforming the thinking of rival collectivities?

The moral and legal ambiguities surrounding these particularly new forms of war challenge the very concept of 'jus belli justii' for several reasons. First and foremost, it is the attack itself that presents more limited characteristics than a conventional action; above all, those characteristics produce effects that are less evident in the immediate future but are no less harmful for that. So much so that several nations have started to increase sanctioning and bring punitive measures against individuals who are blamed for information warfare campaigns

and psychological operations. One example is the US reaction to the complex Russian campaign on the 2016 US presidential elections. However, given the relative extent of counterattack or punishment, informational actions seem to be encouraged.

That said, it is the information and communication technologies (ICT) themselves that show how offensive actions are possible against them, so exposed are they to risk and are currently immersed in the world of digital technologies. The problem is that these kinds of attack, which often unfold through cyberwarfare, are launched from and target civil infrastructures, making it even more complex to control them. Meanwhile, the control of civil infrastructures, such as those where information circulates on the Internet, involves ethical and legal concerns. This complicates the defence against certain exposures complicated. Although defence and cybersecurity systems are continually improving in quality, offensive capabilities are growing at the same rate. For example, cyber-attacks are often the basis of information operations: the production of mass actions through computer algorithms (robotic systems) makes it difficult or impossible to trace the perpetrator of an attack. Considering how these attacks are becoming methods of military action, even offensive actions, with increasing frequency, it is concerning that operations can be carried out on civilian components without the perpetrators being identified. Ethical and legal concerns follow. Lieutenant General Keith B. Alexander, who served as head of cyber command under American President Obama, noted in a report sent to the Senate Armed Services Committee that there was a 'discrepancy between our technical capabilities to conduct operations and the laws and policies that govern'<sup>4</sup>. A key point of concern is the targeting of civilian institutions for cyber-attacks, to which the general promised to try to maintain a similar mindset to traditional warfare, where efforts will be made to limit the impact on civilians.

## **Psychological operations (PSYOPS)**

Understanding PSYOP is not an easy task. Historically, both military and civilian, and discussions of PSYOP across the leadership spectrum have regularly replaced clichés, myths and non-truths with evidence or analysis of what PSYOP is and how it can serve international objectives. PSYOP policy and doctrine have not received their deserved attention, whereas hostile PSYOP efforts against the United States are misunderstood and often ineffectively countered.

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<sup>4</sup> Nomination before the Armed Services Committee S. Harg. 111.86 [https://irp.fas.org/congress/2010\\_hr/alexander.html](https://irp.fas.org/congress/2010_hr/alexander.html)

The above is an excerpt from the book *Psychological Operations. Principles and case studies*<sup>5</sup>; Provides a severe warning, but the lesson was not well understood if one considers what happened with the 2016 US presidential elections. The context has changed even further now, as actors identified by the US National Security Strategy as ‘rival powers’, including Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, have developed great capabilities in the cyber field and use them as a basis for the implementation and dissemination of actions and psychological operations. This is possible because of the enormous diffusion with which the cyber world now pervades the lives of communities.

One element of vulnerability is the constant courting of the momentary popularity with which domestic political actors in various (all?) countries of the world approach public opinion. Institutional instability is coupled in many cases with a lack of political capacity, which leads governments to need to continually seek consensus. In such a context, it becomes easier to organise activities that are capable of altering public debate and divert discussions by leveraging the social fault lines within the various states in order to steer the actions of the executives to their own advantage and according to certain trajectories. Since these actions are created as interference works, they are, therefore, offensive.

Former White House spokesman Bill Moyers once told a story that is pertinent to this point. During a time of crisis, US President Johnson and his advisors met in the Cabinet Room to discuss alternative courses of action. One of the advisors, tired and struggling to (not) find a solution to what they were facing, said: ‘If only we knew what the people of this country really want’. The president looked at his malin councillor for 39 seconds, Moyers recounted, then replied: ‘If we knew what they wanted us to do, how could we be sure we would have to do it?’ Instead, it is likely that rather than knowing the needs of one’s own people are more important to understand those of the enemy (rival, competitor, partner): an advantage that would allow them to instil drops or waves of vacillation and insecurity on others. Now, through the enormity of data that are shared daily by people on the Internet (on social networks or in other browsing spaces), this is more easily possible. By collecting and analysing Big Data, a government can not only understand the thoughts, tastes, and interests of its own population, it can gather that information about others. From there, an open field for interference operations arises: if the government of Country X cannot (or does not want to) grant a particular element to its citizens, a wedge opens up for rival Y. It can use propaganda activities through information and communication systems (even altering realities as far as possible) to instil or exacerbate within the rival citizenship

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<sup>5</sup> Goldstein F.L., Fiendly B.F. (1996), *Psychological Operations. Principles and case studies*, Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press.

thoughts of discontent related to specific issues and factors capable of creating destabilisation and thereby weakening the the citizenry.

It is now clear that psychological factors can be as 'real' as guns, ships, planes, or nuclear weapons, because humans are psychological animals. Therefore, psychological value data is systematically collected and classified in intelligence assessments of given situations. The psychological requirements for the achievement of a country's goals—be they related to external projection or the maintenance of internal balances—are now accurately calculated and subject to every effort, through leadership, persuasion, public diplomacy, and, when necessary, even complete or partial alteration of the truth, to ensure their achievement. In short, psychological factors are essential if a given nation aims to be a leader in a given geopolitical context.

Psychological Operations Soldiers (PSYOPs) conducting what the United States refers to as Military Information Support Operations (SOCoE—IMSO, from Fort Bragg) are experts in mass media communication and use their unique skills to persuade, change, and influence foreign audiences. These soldiers communicate with a wide audience through various media, such as newspapers, radio, television, leaflets, and loudspeakers. According to the US Special Operations Centre of Excellence, to fulfil their missions, the main tasks of PSYOP soldiers lie in their ability to:

- Influence foreign populations by subjectively expressing information to influence attitudes and behaviour and achieve compliance or other desired behavioural changes;
- Advise the command on the actions and targeting restrictions that the military force can perform;
- Counter enemy intelligence activities to deny the enemy the ability to polarise public opinion and political will against a country and its allies;
- Provide public information to foreign populations in support of humanitarian activities, restoring or enhancing legitimacy, alleviating suffering, and maintaining civil order;
- Serve as the voice of command to convey intent and establish creation.

Infowar is therefore an articulated subject, the main complexity of which is linked to the fact that, in order to be functional, an information warfare operation must remain as unrecognisable as possible. Unlike a bombing or any conventional kinetic military act, this kind of operation tends to be kept hidden to increase its effectiveness. Activities to divert the flow of public opinion would not work if it became apparent that they were pushed by a rival country to alter internal dynamics.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly necessary for nations to use this

kind of operation to avoid becoming directly involved in acts of war and to be able to deny levels of involvement. Infowar is an integral part of the hybridisation of conflicts, a way in which states can target competitors, gain advantages, and structure defences without being openly embroiled in confrontations.

The future will see the repetition of certain situations and uses, both because of the possibility of denying responsibility (which is the political and diplomatic value of the infowar), because certain techniques are less costly (in terms of both socio-political and economic costs), because they are very often more pervasive and effective than any other kind of military campaign. In fact, information operations manage to penetrate deep into the depths of a public opinion and contribute to eroding discernment in it, weigh down the doubts that a community may have about its rulers, and direct the actions of an administration according to a popular consensus altered by the infowar campaigns themselves.



PART THREE. WESTERN SOCIETY, NEW CONFLICTS AND LAW



## 9. Law and Conflicts: The role of new actors and technology

BY FIAMMETTA BORGIA

### Critique of the concept of 'hybrid' or 'asymmetrical' warfare

Today, the new war scenarios, characterised by the opposition of military forces belonging to territorial entities with different legal *statuses*, as well as the use of advanced technologies capable of 'depersonalising' conflicts, not only seem to require further definitional efforts but also pose new questions for international law.

With the aim of identifying the legal framework applicable to such situations, the question arises as to whether the traditional notion of armed conflict (international or non-international) is sufficient or whether the now frequent references to so-called 'hybrid' or 'asymmetrical' wars should be considered new legal categories for all intents and purposes.

The problem is not purely one of terminology, but also of substance<sup>1</sup>. At present, armed conflict means any situation of armed clashes, even because of actions authorised by the Security Council or internal conflicts<sup>2</sup>. However, the many critical issues related to this concept<sup>3</sup> have led scholars to search for new 'formulas' capable of better describing and grasping the existing reality.

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<sup>1</sup> As is well known, even replacing the concept of war with that of armed conflict is not a mere terminological change, but is of a substantial nature. See, among others, Partsch, P. (1992), *Armed Conflict*, in *Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*, edited by I. Bernhardt, Amsterdam: North-Holland, p. 249 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Castellaneta, M., *Armed Conflicts* (entry), *cit.*, p. 319. In other words, as clarified by the Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Tadi case, an armed conflict exists whenever there is recourse to armed force between states or prolonged armed violence between government authorities and organised armed groups or between these groups within a state. See *Prosecutor v. Tadi, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction*, 2 October 1995, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Let me refer to this point to Borgia F. (2018), *L'uso militare dei droni. Profili di diritto internazionale*, Naples: Editoriale Scientifica.

The concept of 'hybrid warfare' arises in this context and precisely indicates those conflicts or crisis contexts in which states and non-state actors exploit not only traditional means and methods, but all modes of warfare simultaneously, using advanced conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and disruptive technologies, or crime to destabilise an existing order<sup>4</sup>. The concept of 'hybrid warfare' is also used in the context of the 'hybrid war' concept.

The hybrid character of the conflict is also given by the different nature of the operations carried out: from terrorism to regular fighting, from guerrilla warfare to the use of information campaigns and advanced weaponry<sup>5</sup>, and including conventional and unconventional tools and techniques aimed at achieving a specific military and political objective.

According to this reading, hybrid wars would today see nonstate actors (such as al-Qaeda) or quasistate actors (such as IS) facing off against state actors who, in addition to conventional means and methods, use unconventional strategies and invest in even high-level threats such as weapons of mass destruction<sup>6</sup>.

However, despite its undisputed appeal, this reconstruction is not convincing<sup>7</sup>. All conflicts can be described as 'hybrid'. War is hybrid by nature, as it is always fought using all the instruments available at that historical moment and with the level of integration and coordination allowed by the technology of the time<sup>8</sup>.

The same observations apply to the concept of 'asymmetrical wars'. The terms symmetrical and asymmetrical conflict, which are generally referred to in military context to strategies, forms of combat and/or conflicts, and have been progressively used more and more widely, with reference to a variety of situations<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkie R. (2009), 'Hybrid Warfare—Something Old, Not Something New', in *Air & Space Power Journal*, vol. XXIII, no. 4, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Bachmann, S., Gunneriusson, H. (2015), 'Hybrid Wars: The 21st Century's New Threats to Global Peace and Security', in *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Mansoor, P.R., *Hybrid Warfare in History*, Murray, W., Mansoor, P.R. (eds.) (2012), *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup> It is not the means or methods of combat that are new or unknown, but rather the nonchalance with which state and nonstate actors propose and use novel combinations of new and old practices of warfare.

<sup>8</sup> Thus in Defence Staff, Third Department, Military Policy and Planning, Defence Innovation Centre, *Evolution of terminology in the description of conflicts—use of the term 'hybrid'*, available at [www.difesa.it](http://www.difesa.it).

<sup>9</sup> Hoffman, F.G. (2007), *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, p. 8; Id. (2009), *Hybrid threats: Reconceptualising the evolving character of modern conflict*, 240 Strategic Forum, p. 1; Id.

An asymmetrical conflict can be defined as one in which the parties, although presenting a basic homogeneity, display an appreciable difference in offensive capabilities. Thus, if one of the contending parties has militarily insignificant capabilities or capabilities that are decidedly inferior to those of the other, and, instead of focussing on the military component, focusses its main effort on the possible weaknesses of the adversary, which are present in all the other component sectors of the state, the conflict would present itself as asymmetrical. In this perspective, for example, the actions carried out by Western states against terrorist networks and organisations, such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, which started after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, would be ‘asymmetric warfare’.

Then it seems evident that when one defines an ‘asymmetrical’ conflict, one becomes a ‘asymmetrical’

is emphasising one of the characteristics present in the broader phenomenon of hybrid warfare, as previously described. However, even in this case, it is more a theoretical construct aimed at detecting the difference in the capabilities of the belligerents rather than a proper legal or military category: Every conflict, even when not technically ‘asymmetrical’, in any case presents a higher or lower degree of asymmetry in the potentialities of the belligerents.

These preliminary reflections aim to clarify the legal context in which the ‘new actors’ and the ‘new technologies’ operate. It is not ‘new’, therefore, and can be traced back to the notions of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. Therefore, it remains to be ascertained whether there has been an evolution of the two systems of reference that has produced a change in the legal sphere.

### **The role of the ‘new actors’ in the evolution of the *jus ad bellum***

In the context of recent crises, it appears essential to identify new actors of international relevance that are capable of having an impact on *jus ad bellum*, even in the absence of international legal personality. Reference is to the so-called ‘non-state armed groups’, whose definition is not unambiguous, but depends on the context and concrete circumstances in which these groups act and manifest themselves<sup>10</sup>.

Although there is no clear classification of the various phenomena, the most interesting question is that of the admissibility of a state reaction in self-defence to an ‘armed attack’ launched by the latter.

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(2009), ‘Hybrid warfare and challenges’, in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 52, pp. 1-2.

<sup>10</sup> Jayasekera K. (2015), *Identification of nonstate armoured groups in non-international armed conflicts: a legal analysis*, in *Proceedings of the 8th International Research Conference*, KDU.

Traditional doctrine has long since ruled out that terrorist attacks constitute ‘attacks’ which could justify legitimate defence against the government, part of the of states<sup>11</sup>. This was a restrictive interpretation of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, which is undergoing a progressive evolution under the impetus of international terrorism, and was aimed at extending the notion of ‘armed attack’ also to such conduct<sup>12</sup>.

Practice shows us a certain evolution in this sense. This first occurred with Operation Enduring Freedom against Afghanistan in 2001, which was an attempt to impute the conduct of terrorist groups, in this case Al-Qaeda<sup>13</sup>, to a state and thus justify a reaction on the basis of Article 51<sup>14</sup>. In that case, self-defence was still exercised against a state, but because it was held responsible for the ‘at-

<sup>11</sup> See O’ Connell, M.E., *Unlawful Killing with Combat Drones: A Case Study of Pakistan, 2004-2009*, in Bronitt S., Gani M., Hufnagel S. (eds.) (2012), *Shooting to Kill: Socio-Legal Perspectives on the Use of Lethal Force*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. On the possibility of non-state actors carrying out an armed attack, see Kowalski M. (2010), ‘Armed Attack, Nonstate Actors and a Quest for the Attribution Standard’, in *Polish Yearbook of International Law*, pp. 101-130; Bethlehem D. (2012), ‘Self-Defence against an imminent or Actual Armed Attack by Non-state Actors’, in the *American Journal of International Law*, p. 769 ff.; Trapp KN. (2015), *Can Non-State Actors Mount an Armed Attack?* in *The Oxford Handbook of the Use of Force in International Law*, M. Weller (ed.), cit., pp. 769-777.

<sup>12</sup> Ruys T., Verhoeven S. (2005), ‘Attacks by Private Actors and the Right of Self-Defence’, in *Journal of Conflicts and Security Law*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 289-320.

<sup>13</sup> For this point, see Scott M. (2003), Malzahan, State Sponsorship and Support of International Terrorism: Customary Norms of State Responsibility’, in *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, pp. 83-97; Travalio G., Altenburg J. (2003), ‘Terrorism, State Responsibility, and the Use of Military Force’, in *Chicago Journal of International Law*, pp. 97-119; Dupuy, P.-M. (2004), *State Sponsors of Terrorism: Issues of International Responsibility*, Bianchi, A. (ed.), *Enforcing International Law Norms against Terrorism*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 3-16; Becker, T. (2006), *Terrorism and the State. Rethinking the Rules of State Responsibility*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing; Trapp, K.N. (2011), *State Responsibility for International Terrorism. Problems and Prospects*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Trapp, K.N. (2014), *Terrorism and the International Law of State Responsibility*, in Saul B. (ed.), *Research Handbook on International Law and Terrorism*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 39-56.

<sup>14</sup> On this point, see Villani U., *Legitimate defence and the fight against terrorism in Operation Enduring Freedom*, cit. and the bibliography cited in footnote 1, where the various theses supporting a connection between the attacks and the Afghan State are critically analysed. Furthermore, the author’s conclusion on p. 1791 seems more than convincing: ‘Operation *Enduring Freedom* cannot be justified and, consequently, represents an international offence in open violation of the ban on the use of force in international relations’.

tacks' on the Twin Towers in 2001. Subsequently, the possibility of responding in a legitimate way was raised defence against non-state actors even in the absence of a connection between acting actors and a state<sup>15</sup>. In particular, the military intervention against ISIS in 2015, after the Paris attacks, was allegedly justified by agent states, mainly France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as collective self-defence against a territorial armed group, at the invitation of Iraq.

International jurisprudence itself seems to be gradually moving from a restrictive interpretation to an extensive interpretation of the concept in question, progressively including attacks by terrorist cells in this notion. Thus, while in its 2004 advisory opinion on the wall in Palestine, the International Court of Justice ruled out the possibility that an armed reaction to terrorist attacks could be justified as legitimate defence<sup>16</sup>, in the case of *Military Activities in the Territory of the Congo*, the Court avoided taking a position on whether a reaction to attacks conducted by anti-Ugandan terrorists based on Congolese territory was lawful, limiting itself to ruling out legitimate defence because it had not found satisfactory evidence of direct or indirect involvement of Uganda<sup>17</sup>. The Court, according to some, left open the possibility that the behaviour of nonstate actors could itself constitute an armed attack<sup>18</sup>.

In conclusion, it can be argued, at the level of legal logic, that the lack of an express reference in Article 51 to the need for the state to carry out the armed attack leads to the assumption that the attack can also be configured as an armed

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schmitt M.N. (2002), 'Counter-Terrorism and the Use of Force in International Terrorism', in *Israel Yearbook on Human Rights*, vol. 32, p. 53 ff; Duffy H. (2005), *The War on Terror and the Framework of International Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in part p. 444. *Contra* Villani U., *Legitimate defence and the fight against terrorism in Operation Enduring Freedom*, cit.

<sup>16</sup> I.C.J. Reports (2004), *Legal consequences of the construction of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian territory*, advisory opinion, p. 136, para. 139

<sup>17</sup> I.C.J. Reports (2005), *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda)*, Advisory Opinion, paras. 146-147. Indeed, as the Court has previously ruled, a state's substantial involvement in sending troops or assisting an organised armed group can amount to an armed attack when the group carries out a certain severity against another state (IJCJ). Reports (1986), *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, para. 195 and *Congo v. Uganda*, cit. pp. 146-7).

<sup>18</sup> I.C.J., *Congo v. Uganda*, cited above, para. 147. In their dissenting opinions, Justice Koojmans at para. 30 and Justice Simma at para. 12, doubted that self-defence can only be asserted against state acts: "It would be unreasonable to deny the attacked state the right to self-defence merely because there is no attacker state, and the Charter does not so require", expressly recalling the opinion of Y. Dinstein (2001), *War, Aggression, and Self-Defence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd edn., p. 216.

attack when by non-state actors<sup>19</sup>.

However, on the subject of the possible application of self-defence against non-state actors, it should still be considered that doctrine continues to be rather divided on the basis of other considerations as well. In favour of qualifying armed reaction as legitimate defence would be, for example, an innovative reading of Security Council Resolutions 1368 and 1373 of 2001, up to Resolution 2249 of 2015, which defined international terrorism as a threat to international peace and security<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, the logical need to be able to defend oneself against an attack of the same force and magnitude, whether it is launched by a state or by groups of individuals, would dictate that such an armed reaction should be justified. Finally, there is the position that a state that cannot or does not want to stop attacks originating from its own territory would subject itself to the possibility of an 'appropriate reaction' by the attacked states<sup>21</sup>.

The opposing point of view is that Article 51 of the Charter is a rule addressed to states and is therefore not applicable to asymmetrical situations (states-groups of individuals). From the same perspective, the objections are that the cited resolutions do not constitute the basis for the legitimacy of unilateral actions by states but rather the guideline for future Security Council authorisations. Moreover, even if the concrete effects of the act are the same, the rules on the use of force regulate the conduct of states and not of individuals. Finally, even in the presence of a failed state, an armed reaction would in any case constitute a violation of its sovereignty<sup>22</sup>.

However, the lack of agreement in doctrine and jurisprudence on the possibility of acting in self-defence against terrorist cells within a third state has not prevented states from making wide and uninhibited use of this right in the fight against terrorism and, in particular, with respect to military actions carried out

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<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, it could be argued that since a non-state armed attack was inconceivable in 1945, specifying it was unnecessary.

<sup>20</sup> Res. 2249 constitutes the first resolution adopted in response to the ISIS threat containing a call for the preparation of all necessary measures; the others had concerned the condemnation of acts perpetrated by ISIS and the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters in general (see also Res. 2170 of 2014, Res. 2178 of 2014, Res. 2199 of 2015 and Res. 2214 of 2015). For a commentary, see: Nigro R. (2016), 'UN Security Council Resolution No. 2249 (2015) and the legitimacy of the use of force against ISIS under international law', in *Human Rights and International Law*, vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 137-156.

<sup>21</sup> Lubell N. (2012), 'Extraterritorial Use of Force against Non-State Actors', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 94, no. 885, pp. 317-327.

<sup>22</sup> For a critique of the evolution of the concept of self-defence, see: Brunnée J., Toope S.J. (2017), 'Self-Defence Against Non-State Actors: Are Powerful States Willing but Unable to Change International Law?', in *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, pp. 1-24.



with drones<sup>23</sup>. In addition to the aforementioned conflict in Afghanistan in 2001, the military operation launched by Israel in Lebanon in 2006, the interventions conducted in Iraq and Syria against Isis, the French one in Mali in 2013, and finally, the missions carried out with armed drones in Yemen and Pakistan are based on this principle, despite their marked difference.

### **The role of ‘new actors’ in the evolution of *jus in bello***

It is now necessary to ask whether the military actions of a state against organised armed groups, carried out within the territory of a third state, constitute an armed conflict<sup>24</sup>. With regard to Islamic terrorism, for example, the practice of the United States, since the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, has repeatedly based this possibility on the idea of being at ‘war’ with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups around the world<sup>25</sup>. In other words, therefore, the emergence of these ‘new actors’ in the international law sphere would have produced a *tertium genus* of ‘permanent and global’ armed conflict, not *envisaged* by humanitarian law and to which current norms would obviously not be applicable<sup>26</sup>.

This reconstruction clearly cannot be accepted; rather than an autonomous legal notion, the US theory of war describes certain characteristics of current armed conflicts<sup>27</sup>, which remain in any case international or international.

<sup>23</sup> Ratner, S.R. (2013), *Self-Defence Against Terrorists: The Meaning of Armed Attack*, in L. van den Herik and N. Schrijver (eds.), *Counter-terrorism Strategies in a Fragmented Legal Order: Meeting the Challenge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 334-352.

<sup>24</sup> See Focarelli C. (2015), *Trattato di Diritto Internazionale*, Milan: Utet Giuridica, p. 1813.

<sup>25</sup> On the subject of the war on terror from the US perspective, see *Executive Branch Memoranda on Status and Permissible Treatment of Detainees*, in *American Journal of International Law*, 2004, p. 820 ff.

<sup>26</sup> In *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, before the US Supreme Court, denied that the conflict with Al-Qaeda could be considered an international armed conflict within the meaning of Common Article 2, stating that it could only be qualified as an armed conflict between states. See *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, Government Brief on the Merits, p. 39. As to the qualification of the conflict as non-international under common Article 3, it was held that since the conflict between the United States and Al-Qaeda is in several countries, the conflict has an international character, which makes common Article 3 inapplicable (*ibid.*, p. 48). Consequently, neither the rules for international conflicts nor those for internal conflicts were applicable to this conflict.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, for example, in order to emphasise the ways in which hostilities are conducted that include extra-territorial or cross-border military actions, the term transnational has been used to describe phenomena that actually existed in the past. Similarly,

Instead, it seems interesting to frame the phenomenon in one of the aforementioned conflict categories to assess whether the emergence of these new actors, even within the framework of the existing rules, has introduced any change. In this regard, first of all, it is unlikely that hostilities between a state and a nonstate group with terrorist roots can be qualified as an international conflict<sup>28</sup>. To come to such a conclusion, in fact, it would be necessary to admit that under certain conditions there can be an international conflict even when one of the parties is not a state<sup>29</sup>.

The qualification of the 'war on terrorism' as a non-intercountry conflict is also controversial<sup>30</sup>. A more careful and evolutionary reading of art. However, 1(1) of the 1977 Protocol, in light of its object and purpose, however, seems to us to allow today an extensive interpretation of its scope, such as to include, in addition to civil wars, any other conflict, including those arising from the phenomenon of terrorism<sup>31</sup>. This approach, in addition to being shared by most doctrines, responds to the need to fill an 'otherwise inexplicable' gap in humanitarian law<sup>32</sup>, without explanation, creating another *genus* of armed conflict; it would be difficult in any case to identify the applicable discipline if this were done. Ultimately, it

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terrorist or guerrilla actions, certainly more frequent today, already existed as a method of warfare in the past.

<sup>28</sup> Thus in Focarelli, C., *Treatise on International Law*, cit., pp. 1813-1814.

<sup>29</sup> Beyond the subjectivity hypotheses suggested for ISIS by some doctrine, it is not possible to arrive at such conclusions today. However, a systematic reading of humanitarian law could justify, in the future, a process of evolution similar to the one that has already taken place with reference to wars of national liberation, now included in the category of international conflicts thanks to the First Additional Protocol, where liberation movements are, under certain conditions and on the basis of the principle of self-determination of peoples, equated to States, and therefore the conflict is international. The direct consequence of such a development would not be insignificant, as it would allow all the rules (and limits) relating to the conduct of hostilities in international armed conflicts to be applied to both sides.

<sup>30</sup> The reasons that would induce one to reject such a qualification would have to be found at a factual level, in the literal interpretation of both Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions and the phrase 'non-international' in Protocol III. These instruments, conceived essentially for civil wars, would not actually contain any reference to conflicts that do not end within national borders but have elements of extraterritoriality; the possibility of extending their discipline to hostilities conducted against terrorists would therefore be excluded.

<sup>31</sup> This broad interpretation was also accepted by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, cited above, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Sassoli C. (2004), 'Use and Abuse of the Law of War in the War on Terrorism', in *Law and Inequality*, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 195-221, in part, pp. 200-201.

would represent a series of internal conflicts with elements of extraterritoriality.

Having defined the framework in which attacks against terrorists take place, the question remains as to whether the internal conflict generated by the fight against terrorism should be considered *sui generis* with regard to the application of the principles of humanitarian law to be applied.

In other words, the question arises whether military necessity, distinction, discrimination, proportionality, or precaution have a different content when used against terrorist groups in the context of an armed conflict.

Generally speaking, the type of target or the means used for the attack must in any case be assessed through the lens of the relevant principles of humanitarian law and be applicable in both international and internal conflicts. It is evident, however, that some problems with the application may arise. For example, it seems to us that the issues of respect for the principle of distinction are more complex when it comes to targeting civilian property for military use or individuals directly participating in hostilities. In such cases, the possibility of error increases exponentially precisely because of the characteristics of terrorism, which eludes definitions and declinations of objectively relevant behaviour<sup>33</sup>.

In this context, once again, the US administration attempted to coin a new figure of combatant, whose membership in a terrorist armed group, without further differentiation according to the function performed, would make the individual a legitimate target under international law, that is, a kind of 'unlawful combatant'<sup>34</sup>. This reconstruction must be rejected for two reasons. First, because such a category is not included in the relevant conventions. Second, it seems that the purpose of this approach is essentially political and translates into allowing civilians to be targeted as combatants regardless of their degree of participation in the terrorist group and without granting them the protections provided for legitimate combatants. The consequence would be that they would lose their protections under humanitarian law as civilians, but also the minimum guaranteed to legitimate combatants. In other words, because they belong to a terrorist group, they would 'opt out' of the humanitarian law protection system.

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<sup>33</sup> For this point, see Focarelli C. (2011), *Brevi note sul problema della definizione del terrorismo internazionale*, in M. Meccarelli, P. Palchetti, and C. Sotis, *Le regole dell'eccezione. Un dialogo interdisciplinare a partire dalla questione del terrorismo*, Macerata: EUM, pp. 313-321, in part p. 16, who observes that 'the term terrorism constitutes a label instrumentally used by political opponents to discredit themselves politically. And it is equally well known that acts that are considered terrorist by one state are not so for another; or acts that were considered terrorist in one historical epoch have ceased to be so in a subsequent epoch'.

<sup>34</sup> See Harold Honju Koh's speech at the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law on 25 March 2010.

On the other hand, a position that seems more convincing to us, on the other hand, is one that conceives of 'terrorists' as individuals who directly participate in hostilities, in the more general sense regarding non-state armed groups<sup>35</sup>.

In particular, it seems to us that the position of the Israeli Supreme Court should be accepted. When asked the question, that court distinguished between those who participate only sporadically in hostilities, who may therefore be the victims of direct attacks only during the period in which they directly participate in the conflict, and those who are part of a terrorist organisation. Those who are part of the organisation lose the protection intended for civilians for the duration of the hostilities; the pauses between attacks would become part of a single project of hostile acts<sup>36</sup>.

This approach appears to be shared by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, Alston, who points out that

although illegal activities, for example terrorism, can cause harm, if they do not meet the criteria for direct participation in hostilities, then States' response of the states must conform to the standards of lethal force applicable to self-defence and law enforcement<sup>37</sup>.

The other problematic aspect is proportionality. Indeed, in the case of attacks against individuals belonging to terrorist groups, one might ask, for example, whether the elimination of terrorists who do not have a leading role but contribute to the hostilities through their conduct is proportionate to the possibility of causing killings, injuries, and damage to civilians. The assessment must be made on a case-by-case basis, but it seems doubtful that such conduct meets the criterion of proportionality.

What is particularly problematic is how to assess the use by terrorist organisations of human shields, i.e., civilian individuals who place themselves in front of or near military targets in order to achieve objective success in preventing attacks by their presence<sup>38</sup>. It must therefore be determined whether, in armed

<sup>35</sup> For this point, see Vogel, R.J. (2010), 'Drone Warfare and the Law of Armed Conflict', in *Denver Journal of International Law & Policy*, vol. 39, p. 121; Schmitt, M.N. (2010), 'The Interpretative Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities: A Critical Analysis', in *Harvard National Security Journal*, vol. 1, pp. 5-44, ep. p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> See *The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel v. Government of Israel*, 13.12.2006, HCJ 769/02, para. 39. For a commentary, see Benvenuti P. (2007), 'Judicial Review in the war on Terrorism in the Israeli Supreme Court's Decision on Targeted Killings', in *Comparative and European Public Law*, no. 2, pp. 13-23.

<sup>37</sup> See *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston*, 28.5.2010, A/HRC/14/24/Add.6, para. 64.

<sup>38</sup> As is well known, this practice constitutes a violation of humanitarian law and,

operations by states against non-state armed groups, the military objective can also be considered lawful in the presence of voluntary or involuntary human shields. This question is particularly controversial. It seems to us, in fact, that even the presence of, say, children at the door of a building in which a terrorist is hiding may be subject to different assessments. One may consider that since the use of human shields by belligerents is not only prohibited under humanitarian law, but also constitutes a war crime, this constitutes a violation of international law by nonstate actors. At the same time, such use may be considered to involve, according to Article 51.8 of the First Additional Protocol, compliance with the provisions relating to the protection of the civilian population in any event<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, in these circumstances, therefore, the attack of the state could not be lawfully implemented.

However, the prevailing view of states is that the military target surrounded by human shields is not immune from attack<sup>40</sup>. For the purpose of applying the principle of proportionality, therefore, this principle must be applied if the shields are involuntary. In the event that the shields are voluntary, however, the action is not subject to scrutiny of the fulfilment of the proportionality principle. In this case, in fact, the 'human shield' falls under the definition of a civilian actively participating in hostilities<sup>41</sup>.

In conclusion, it seems safe to say that international terrorism and thus the emergence of 'new actors', has led to a certain evolution of international law related to armed conflicts. There has been a gradual extension of the protections provided by humanitarian law to situations with very different characteristics from those that states have taken into account at the moment stipulated by conventional instruments. However, this process does not require the creation of new conflicts qualification of conflicts or new categories relating to the principles

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in particular, of Article 51.7 of the First Additional Protocol. It constitutes a war crime under Article 8.2 of the Statute of the International Court, which addresses the use of civilians for the purpose of preventing certain points or military forces from being exempt from military operations.

<sup>39</sup> On this topic, see Ronzitti, N. (2015), *International Law of Armed Conflict*, 5th Ed., Turin: Giappichelli, p. 314 f. where some relevant practice on the subject is also analysed.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the US War Manual holds that the belligerent party employing human shields must assume full responsibility for their killing as a result of the attack against the military objective at which they were present; thus, the principle of proportionality is not relevant in such a case. See Department of Defence, *Law of War Manual*, 2015, para. 5.12.3, p. 243 and para. 5.12.3.3, p. 244. In the same vein, France placed a reservation to Article 8 of the ICC Statute, stating that the presence of human shields does not preclude an attack if they are placed to protect a military objective.

<sup>41</sup> This definition has been sufficiently discussed *above* in the same paragraph.

of humanity. On the contrary, it is believed that, albeit with some difficulties in application, traditional legal categories can be considered capable of satisfactorily addressing new issues in contemporary crises.

### **The Impact of Technology in the Evolution of *jus ad bellum***

Technology can have a major impact on the use of force in international relations. In particular, the question of how to situate cyber attacks against a state, whether carried out by or on behalf of a state or by organised non-state groups, is relevant.

The first question, therefore, is whether a cyber attack today constitutes a prohibited offence under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and, second, whether a state can react in legitimate defence against such conduct<sup>42</sup>.

A cyber attack is an action carried out via a computer network in order to disrupt, destroy, degrade, or prevent access to computers and networks or to the information contained therein. In other words, it is an algorithm, encoded by means of a computer, capable of spreading harmful effects against states; the effects vary greatly, depending on the type of attack or target system.

The problematic aspect of the configurability of such conduct as contrary to Article 2.4. of the UN Charter is constituted in two ways: by the immediate consequence of the attack, which can have as its object either information (with the aim of degrading, destroying, disseminating or manipulating it) or the destruction or manipulation of state apparatus (with the production of physical damage), and by its composite nature, since the attack can be conducted autonomously or in support of a conventional attack.

With regard to the first question, the so-called intangibility of the informatic attack is relevant: it could, for instance, be information contained in a server. In this case, in order to prove the violation of the *jus ad bellum*, reference must be made to the result actually produced by the attack (*results-based theory*)<sup>43</sup>. In fact, armed coercion is not characterised by the fact that it is employed or issued kinetic energy but rather by the nature of the intended result, specifically a physical injury or an assault on human life. With regard to the second aspect, the damaging event resulting from the manipulation of a system in itself may not constitute a violation of the prohibition of the use of force but merely a tort to be assessed within the framework of conduct subject to ordinary liability. However,

<sup>42</sup> See also Bufalini A. (2012), *Usò della forza, legittima difesa e problemi di attribuzione in situazioni di attacco informatico*, in Lanciotti A., Tanzi A. (eds.), *Usò della forza e legittima difesa nel diritto internazionale contemporaneo*, Naples: Jovene editore, p. 403 ff.

<sup>43</sup> Schmitt, M. (1999), 'Computer Network Attack and the Use of Force in International Law: Thoughts on a Normative Framework', in *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, vol. 37, p. 885.

when the cyber attack is capable of triggering a chain reaction that ultimately causes damage comparable to the use of armed force, the cyber attack can easily fall within the indirect use of force, which is now peacefully prohibited by the case law<sup>44</sup>.

Another particularly complex issue, especially for the purposes of ascribing the conduct to a state, is locating the agent. Current technology makes it possible to effectively conceal not only one's identity, but also the place of origin of the attack. However, this aspect is more to the technical-operational aspect than to the legal one.

In conclusion, it seems to us that a cyber attack constitutes a use of force within the meaning of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter when it directly or indirectly causes a physical consequence, i.e., a total or partial destruction, dispersal, or deterioration of movable or immovable property, or renders the property unusable, or causes injury or loss of life. On the contrary, when a cyber attack affects only information or causes extremely minor physical harm, the conduct will have no relevance in terms of *jus ad bellum*.

Finally, with regard to the possibility of responding in self-defence to a cyber attack, once it has been established that the attack is relevant for the purposes of the rules on the use of force, states may react in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, subject, however, to the criteria necessary for the defence to be legitimate.

### **The Impact of Technology in the Evolution of *jus in bello***

As is well known, *cyberwar* can be understood as the set of conducts carried out in cyber space to manipulate, sabotage, damage or destroy computer systems and/or related civil and military targets for the specific purpose of causing effects corresponding to the threat or use of armed force, before and/or during a conflict involving one or more subjects of international law<sup>45</sup>.

This phenomenon, therefore, does not in itself bring any novelty in terms of *jus in bello* since it does not identify a specific category of warfare dissipated by its own rules, but simply addresses the use of particular technical and informational tools during an armed conflict.

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, it is a question of assessing the relation-

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<sup>44</sup> Miller K.L. (2014), "The Kampala compromise and cyberattacks: Can There Be an International Crime of Cyber-aggression?", in *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal*, vol. 23, p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> Greco E. (2014), *Cyber war e cyber security. Diritto internazionale dei conflitti informatici, contesto strategico, strumenti di prevenzione e contrasto*, in *Archivio Disarmo*, no. 11, p. 3 ff.

ship between the use of technology and existing armed conflicts, conceived—as pointed out—within existing legal categories.

Previously, new technologies have had a strong impact on military strategies. With the advent of the electronic age and new advanced technologies, the parameter of the type and quality of weapon systems has become so important that they are decisive for the outcome of a conflict's outcome<sup>46</sup>. Unmanned aircraft (drones), lethal autonomous robots, cyber weapons, such as the Stuxnet<sup>47</sup>, *boost glide* weapons, *cyborg insects*, space technologies for anti-satellite actions, micro-computers, and computer networking are just some of the new weapons that are available today or will be in the not too distant future.

One wonders to what extent and how the development of these new technologies is able to affect current armed conflicts by challenging existing legal categories.

In order to assess the lawfulness of new technologies and in particular the weapons introduced by them, it is necessary to analyse them, on a case-by-case basis, in their actual mode of operation. According to the combined provisions of Articles 35, 51 and 37 of the First Additional Protocol, it is therefore necessary to ascertain that such systems, as a whole, do not inflict unnecessary suffering<sup>48</sup>, do not have indiscriminate effects, and do not have any harmful effects<sup>49</sup>, do not cause extensive and lasting ecological damage<sup>50</sup> and are not an expression of 'perfidy'<sup>51</sup>.

Excluding such circumstances, it seems to us in any case that complex and

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<sup>46</sup> For a closer look at the Italian perspective, see De Masi R. and Caviggiola P. (2005), 'La ricerca tecnologica generatore di conoscenza e crescita per una Difesa competitiva', in *Informazioni della Difesa*, vol. 1, pp. 41-48.

<sup>47</sup> Stuxnet is a computer virus specifically created and spread by the US government as part of Bush's 2006 'Olympic Games' operation, which consisted of a wave of digital attacks against Iran in collaboration with the Israeli government. The purpose of the software was the sabotage of the Iranian nuclear power plant in Natanz. Specifically, the virus was supposed to disable the centrifuges of the plant, preventing detection of malfunctions and the presence of the virus itself.

<sup>48</sup> On this point see, in addition to Art. 35 of the First Additional Protocol, the Preamble to the Declaration of the Prohibition of the Use of Certain Projectiles in Time of War in 1868 St. Petersburg, in 1868 St. Petersburg: '[L]e seul but légitime que les Etats doivent se proposer, durant la guerre, est l'affaiblissement des forces militaires de l'ennemi; (...) in this effect, it suffit to put out hors de combat le plus grand nombre d'hommes possible; (...) ce but serait dépassé par l'emploi d'armes qui aggraveraient inutilement the souffrances of men mis hors de combat ou rendraient their mort inévitable'.

<sup>49</sup> See Article 51 of the First Additional Protocol.

<sup>50</sup> See Art. 35.3 of the First Additional Protocol.

<sup>51</sup> See Article 37 of the First Additional Protocol.



composite weapon systems produced by technological advances in the war industry are not per se contrary to the *jus in bello* unless they are equipped with prohibited weapons. There are numerous treaties that prohibit certain types of weapons, which could, in principle, be transported and used by means of remotely piloted aircraft. For example, weapons that contain poisons<sup>52</sup>, bullets that shrink or expand<sup>53</sup>, certain conventional weapons<sup>54</sup>, incendiary weapons<sup>55</sup>, blinding lasers<sup>56</sup>, chemical<sup>57</sup>, biological and bacteriological weapons<sup>58</sup> are prohibited.

The most relevant problems, in any case, are those that arise in relation to the compatibility of these new weapons with the principles of humanity applicable during armed conflicts<sup>59</sup>. This is particularly true due to the advancement of technology in the field of artificial intelligence. If, in fact, it sometimes appears complex to prove the compatibility of weapons of the use of new technology with the principles of necessity, distinction, discrimination, proportionality, and precaution in the course of armed conflicts<sup>60</sup>, it is clear that the possible use of an algorithm, in place of a human component, in the decision-making process of military actions could lead to a disruption of the existing legal framework. Currently, no new weapon is capable of reliably distinguishing between civilians and military personnel or legitimate military targets, nor to take the necessary precautions to avoid an erroneous target detection process, or, finally, to assess the proportionality between the expected military benefits and the damage caused. Indeed, even if current automatic recognition systems were capable of automatically detecting certain types of military targets, such as hostile weapons systems and communication networks, these actions always require additional precautionary

<sup>52</sup> See *Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land*, The Hague, 1907, Art. 23.

<sup>53</sup> See *Declaration concerning the Prohibition of the Use of Projectiles with the Sole Object to Spread Asphyxiating Poisonous Gases*, The Hague, 1899

<sup>54</sup> See the *United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons*, Geneva, 1980.

<sup>55</sup> See the *Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Incendiary Weapons (Protocol III)*, Geneva, 1980.

<sup>56</sup> See *Protocol IV on Blinding Laser Weapons*, Geneva, 1995.

<sup>57</sup> See the *Chemical Weapons Convention*, Paris, 1993.

<sup>58</sup> See *Biological Weapons Convention, London, Moscow and Washington, 1973*.

<sup>59</sup> Schmitt, M.N. (2013), 'Extraterritorial Lethal Targeting: Deconstructing the Logic of International Law', in *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, vol. 52, pp. 77-112, esp. p. 92 ff.

<sup>60</sup> Of the same opinion is Martin C. (2015), 'A Means-Methods Paradox and the Legality of Drone Strikes in Armed Conflict', in *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 142-175, in particular, p. 147, who notes that the application of these principles applies to both international and non-international armed conflicts.

measures, including the assessment of proportionality, which can only be taken by a human operator. If constant technology updates allowed the decision-making process for an armed attack to be automated in the future, such weapons would then constitute an indiscriminate weapons system, which is prohibited by humanitarian law<sup>61</sup>.

### **Concluding remarks**

Today, states and the internationalist doctrine are faced with the need to justify the most diverse situations of recourse to armed force, to attempt to expand the existing legal categories or create new ones and are encountering strong criticism from those who consider the prohibition of the use of force to be the cornerstone of the contemporary security system.

In this context, there are both 'new actors' and the use of technological means that transform contemporary language.

'War' becomes an armed conflict but includes any clash between armed forces that exceeds a certain threshold of severity; 'the operator' is the combatant who flies a combat drone in military missions in foreign territories; 'Collateral damage' is the number of victims of military attacks. We seem to be able to conclude, however, that changing terminological categories cannot change reality and that legal qualification must be brought back to the existing categories interpreted in an evolutionary way.

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<sup>61</sup> In this sense, see Sharkey N. (2012), *Drones Proliferation and Protection of Civilians*, in Von Heinegg H. (ed.), *International Humanitarian Law and New Weapon Technologies*, in the *34th Round Table of Current Issues of International Humanitarian Law (Sanremo, 8-10 September 2011)*, pp. 108 ff. *Contra* Boothby W.H. (2012), *The Law of Targeting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 282-286, according to whom 'automated drones' would be lawful in 'certain, narrowly defined circumstances'.

## **10. But don't call it a war: Why Italy fights without saying it**

BY GERMANO DOTTORI

### **The difficult legitimisation of the Italian use of force**

Italy has long since returned to deploying its armed forces in crisis theatres, often even supporting intense combat operations. The process that has reintegrated the military dimension among the instruments of Italian foreign policy has been slow and gradual, and it has entailed quite a few semantic adaptations, which have served to facilitate its acceptance both in public opinion and, above all, in the political system.

For years, for example, it has been constantly emphasised that our units are engaged in 'peacekeeping missions' to mark a clear break with the practice of the monarchy, which led to the disaster of the Second World War. This practice has even affected the configuration of some of the most complex weapon's systems, which the Italian Defence Force now increasingly claims to be dual purpose, so as to broaden the spectrum of possible uses and further confuse ideas, turning the armed forces into a kind of militarised civil defence.

There is evidently a problem of legitimacy of the use of force that has not yet been completely overcome. It is no coincidence that, in the presence of controversial deployments of our troops, all those who oppose them invoke Article 11 of our Constitution, citing it incompletely to recall how the Republic repudiates war as an instrument of offence against the freedom of other peoples and as a means of settling international disputes.

To fight would therefore be in some way contrary to the spirit of our legal system, even though in fact the Constitution itself determines, in other articles 78 and 87, who has the power to decide on a state of war and who has the duty to declare it, thus admitting that Italy can use the force at its disposal, albeit only in certain hypothetical situations.

The Republic would only be precluded from waging wars of aggression, which are now an international offence, while it would be recognised as having the right to self-defence, which is also affirmed by the UN Charter.

It is within this perimeter that the confrontation between supporters and opponents of the Italian recourse to force took place in general, as well as in reference to some specific cases, such as the participation in the war for Kosovo in 1999 and the non-belligerence that was decided on in relation to the allied attack on Iraq in 2003. In fact, the two moments must be considered together, both for their particular significance and because they were associated with the moment when the Supreme Defence Council, meeting precisely to assess Italy's possible participation in *Iraq's freedom*, identified the criteria based on which a military intervention by our country could or could not be considered compliant with the rules of the Constitution. On that occasion, under the direction of then-President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, it was established that the use of military force by Italy is constitutionally lawful when authorised by a mandate from a United Nations Security Council resolution or motivated by the need to defend itself or its NATO allies or the European Union<sup>1</sup>.

The role played in the Kosovo conflict was retrospectively portrayed as a contribution to the collective defence of the Atlantic Alliance, echoing what the pro-tempore Premier Massimo D'Alema and the Defence Ministry itself had hotly affirmed to justify the actions that led our Tornado ECRs to destroy Yugoslavian anti-aircraft radars<sup>2</sup>.

On that occasion, moreover, the supporters of the intervention also used the humanitarian motive, emphasising that in the Albanian-majority region of the then-Yugoslav Federation there was an emergency caused by the Serbian attempt to violently alter the ethnic identity of Kosovo<sup>3</sup>. However, doubts remained about the legality of the NATO operation and our participation in it due to the failure to reach an agreement in the UN Security Council and the consequent absence of a resolution authorising the action.

Their justification therefore had to be formulated in other terms: Since the Atlantic Alliance is a defensive organisation, its interventions would necessarily also be defensive, and our contribution to their implementation is a form of contri-

<sup>1</sup> See Giannini M., 'Ciampi: senza Onu e Nato l'Italia non andrà in guerra. Né un soldato, né un aereo se l'intervento non sarà autorizzato dagli organismi internazionali', in *La Repubblica*, 15 March 2003. By the same author, see also "Quando Ciampi minacciò: scrivo al Parlamento", in *La Repubblica*, 18 May 2004.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bombardieri italiani nei raid sulla Jugoslavia', in *La Repubblica*, 14 April 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The circumstance is also documented in the speeches made to the Foreign and Defence Committees of the two branches of Parliament by the then-Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, Lamberto Dini and Carlo Scognamiglio Pasini.

bution to the protection of all member states. It mattered little that the Yugoslav Federation was not threatening anyone other than a part of its own population.

However, joining the US-led coalition that overthrew Saddam Hussein could not be argued in this way either. In the absence of a Security Council mandate and no collective organisation of which Italy was a member, the Supreme Defence Council took a negative stance, tying the hands of the pro-tempore government, which was headed by Silvio Berlusconi.

Our country, meanwhile, was able to legitimately send its own contingent at a later stage, i.e., after the fall of the Baathist regime and the establishment in Baghdad of the Coalition Transitional Authority, the CPA, which had been entrusted with managing the political and economic reconstruction of Iraq. Thus, Old Babylon was born; however, it was then necessary to consider the development of armed resistance to the Allied presence, being involved in combat operations that also involved the use of heavy vehicles, as in the 'battle of the bridges' on 6 April 2004<sup>4</sup>.

For specular and symmetrical reasons, Italy was instead able to take part in *Desert Storm* in 1991 without any problems, as there was a UN Security Council resolution encouraging member states to organise themselves to liberate Kuwait, which was occupied by the Iraqi army.

It also seemed—but here we enter the realm of politics—that the intervention against Saddam Hussein could also constitute the founding element of the new world order that had arisen since the end of the Cold War, would contemplate the repulsion of armed aggression, and would also be more compassionate, as the subsequent unfortunate humanitarian intervention in Somalia would attest.

## **The political use of the humanitarian motive**

Although indispensable to allow the deployment of Italian military contingents to the e-state, the limits placed by the Constitution on the Italian use of force do not explain the importance of the pacifist and humanitarian narrative that has been adopted in any case to justify the involvement of our Armed Forces in often nonpermissive contexts, which have forced the use of combat.

In fact, every country has its own political-strategic culture, a peculiar fact that reflects the history and experiences accumulated over a long period of time by any given society and decisively conditions the way each state relates to the reality of war. After all, the Constitution itself and the way the political system is organised are reflections of this.

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<sup>4</sup> For an accurate reconstruction of the facts, vds. Scollo L. (2018), *La battaglia dei ponti. Iraq 2004: Operation Ancient Babylon III*, Bassano del Grappa: Itinera Progetti.

Our Basic Charter never refers to the pursuit of national interests in the international arena and, on the contrary, explicitly excludes the armed force of the Republic from being used to resolve disputes. Above all, in Article 11, it states that our country may renounce part of its sovereignty with a view to building a more just and lasting order among nations.

Therefore, in the DNA of the Italian Republic, there is a mission of universal nature, part of which is the readiness to contribute with its military instrument to the promotion of peace and international justice. This creates not only the moral obligation to participate in the repression of aggression, however it occurs, but also the obligation to intervene to safeguard human rights in the presence of an appeal to do so by the institutions of the international community, in particular the United Nations Security Council.

Thus, the consideration of the national interest struggles to assert itself in the public discourse on Italian wars. Since the humanitarian motive must prevail at all costs and because the war must be immediately before it is functional to the country's political objectives, it also becomes necessary to mask the reality of the combat in the eyes of public opinion and political actors.

If one sends soldiers to crisis theatres, officially giving them the mission of protecting the consolidation of institutions closer to ours in terms of respect for human rights while overlooking the fact that there may be forces hostile to the political transformation of the country in which we are intervening, one expunges armed confrontation from the list of plausible possibilities. If we add the extensive recourse made in the Italian model of intervention to the provision of medical services and aid of various kinds, misunderstandings become common.

Some of the tricks used to gain accreditation in the theatre and also to strengthen internal consensus on the mission at hand end up being mistaken for the objective. This has two significant consequences: the surprise effect on national public opinion in the event of deaths of our soldiers and the general underestimation of the contribution of our contingents to military operations on the ground.

Soldiers are depicted as armed missionaries—without an explanation as to why they should carry weapons—in such a way as to dehumanise even the eventual adversary.

This strategy has generally worked, as we saw after the Nassiyriah massacre. The massacre led to a moment of shared mourning in the country, just as had happened so many years earlier after Mogadishu, when Italians fell victim to a bombing at the Pastificio, but the narrative insisted on the different character of the action we were carrying out in the field in open divergence from the more muscular posture chosen by the American allies.

## The price of ambiguity

In most cases, the predominance of this distorted representation of the nature and motivations behind each intervention has allowed the ongoing missions to continue but prevented the relevance of the action deployed in the field from being grasped, with negative consequences that have also reverberated abroad, reducing the political gain that can be extracted from the sacrifices of our soldiers.

This distortion has been a constant in recent decades. There are no reconstructions of the Kosovo campaign that appropriately emphasise the quantified contribution of the Italian armed forces to its success, which was, however, extremely significant beyond the bases provided. We were among the largest contributors, with 1072 air sorties carried out by over fifty aircraft.

Few also know of the intense fighting our troops endured in Afghan cities such as Bala Buluk, Bala Murghab, or Musahi Valley, in circumstances that also earned them a gold medal for military valour, such as the one placed on Andrea Adorno's chest by President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano.

A dark cloud also hangs over our participation in the war against Gaddafi, apart from the transformation of our peninsula into a large aircraft carrier. However, according to some publications, Aeronautica and Aeronavale carried out 7% of the allied missions, making that intervention the largest Italian air operation since the Second World War<sup>5</sup>.

Obviously, the existence of governments with composite and complex majorities, in which parties and personalities of clear pacifist inspiration sometimes have an appreciable blackmail potential, has often made it indispensable to resort to sugar-coated descriptions of events for the mere political survival of the incumbent and the very possibility of mission continuation. At the time of the second Prodi government, for example, the position of the Trotskyist Senator Franco Turigliatto, who had been elected in the lists of the Communist Refoundation, led to the need to impose a certain secrecy on what was happening in Afghanistan.

However, the price to be paid is high because in such cases, we almost never manage to collect the credits we accrue from our allies beyond formal gratitude for the show of solidarity in exposing them to the same risk. Keeping Italian public opinion in the dark about what our soldiers are doing means hiding this fact from international public opinion, and thus from the governments of our allies. We owe most of what we know to investigative journalism, which is too little to change the perception of foreign observers' perception of military interventions

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<sup>5</sup> Camporini V., De Zan T., Marrone A., Nones M., Ungaro A.R. (2014), *Il ruolo dei velivoli da combattimento italiani nelle missioni internazionali*, in *Quaderni IAI*, Rome, 2014, pp. 53-54.

abroad<sup>6</sup>.

In other words, the weight of humanitarian considerations on the narrative of our missions reflects some basic data of our political-strategic culture and the fundamental needs of the governments of the day, which must survive the conditioning of the movements and groups most hostile to the use of military force, which is present in every majority that has come to power in our country. However, it finds its counterpart in a general underestimation of what we do, since we tend not to communicate to the outside world what our soldiers, ships, and aircraft do in crisis theatres.

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<sup>6</sup> Of particular interest in this regard is Gaiani, G. (2007), *Iraq-Afghanistan guerre di pace italiane*, Venice: La Toletta. The same author reported that Italian troops could have neutralised up to 300 Taliban militiamen in May and June 2009 alone. Cf. “Il sacrificio di Alessandro”, in *Libero*, 15 July 2009, pp. 12-13. Unofficial estimates would later put the number of insurgents eliminated by our soldiers between 2002 and the summer of 2010 at 1,00-1,300.



# 11. War after war

BY VIRGILIO ILARI

The United States, with its allies and coalition, lost the war.

I am not referring to the withdrawal from Kabul, but to the loss of what the Atlantic world knew about the war before 1991. Not because it has been forgotten, but because the West's use of force is no longer governed by the culture of war but by the culture of peace, and not by political rationality but by the presumption of ethical-legal superiority and coercive omnipotence over the rest of the world.

To understand how this came about, one must first reflect that the end of the Cold War was, for the West, also the end of a virtual 'civil war' between communists and anti-communists, the paradoxical outcome of which was to bring the Left to power and discriminate against the Right. With the collapse of Marxist, pro-Soviet and third-world internationalism, the Euro-American Left has in fact ceased to be antagonistic, regaining its original pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist connotation, annexing anti-communism but remaining 'third-world internationalist' and further strengthening its hegemony over the 'civil religion' of the West. For their part, the establishment, the deep state and the Pentagon saw in human rights a legitimisation of the use of force more effective than the old Western weaponry, decried on Christian values, national pride and virility.

That the Euro-American interventionism of 1994-2021 should be attributed to radical militarism contradicts the commonplace that associates bellicism and imperialism with the right and pacifism with the left. But since 1776, revolutions, civil wars, resurgences, and imperialist and selective support for the liberation of oppressed nations show that radicalism's inclination to the use of force is greater than the conservative and populist right, historically isolationist and refractory, out of selfishness and cynicism, to military adventures. Explaining the reasons for the withdrawal from Kabul, George Friedman noted that in the first two decades of the 21st century, the US has already accumulated more years of 'war' than in the entire 20th century (only 17).

As is well known, the ideology of the 'Global War on Terror' (2001-2021) was forged by the neocons, a school of Trotskyist intellectuals who colonised American and European strategic culture, by simply repeating the 1941 operation, whi-

ch in part succeeded in transforming the US intervention in the Second World War into a true 'Freedom Crusade', affirming with Nuremberg, according to Carl Schmitt, the new liberal principle of 'discriminatory warfare'. Having archived the Cold War, which had made geopolitical realism prevail, it seemed possible to thaw out the radical world revolution archived in 1946. From there came the rhetoric of the 'new Hitlers' and 'weapons of mass destruction', the coloured revolutions, the enlargement of NATO to the East (vainly opposed on his deathbed by George Kennan, the inventor of containment), the export of democracy the emphasis on 'human rights' with the consequent hollowing out of the principle of non-interference in the name of 'responsibility to protect' (R2P), the right of US-led contingency coalitions to '(re)build' the invaded nations, and finally the embarrassed propaganda mumbling to minimise and mystify the withdrawal from Kabul bargained with the 'enemies of mankind'.

The neocon idea, to some extent translated into agreements and legal principles, was to give a decidedly supranational set-up to the New World Order that George Bush sr had instead theorised in a realist and geopolitical key. And not the Onusian supranational order proclaimed in 1942, which is still founded on the representation and consensus of states, but rather an order imposed unilaterally, by hook or crook, by sanctioning and bombing, analogous to the *Pax Romana*. In fact, the official name of the initiative that launched the Long War was 'For a New American Century' (PNAC).

Now the first and most conspicuous effect of the *Pax Romana* is the closing of the Temple of Janus. Not the simple renunciation of war, but precisely the abolition, in principle and in fact, of war. In principle, first of all, because the *Pax Romana* does not recognise *hostes legitimi*. Peace is imposed ('peace enforcing'), not negotiated. Against antagonists it does not apply international law, but criminal law. Not even the emperor has the *ius belli*: but in return he is the sole holder of the *ius gladii*, the right to punish, or, as Virgil says, to '*debellare superbos*'. The interference, economic sanctions, sponsorship or incitement to revolt, and armed interventions that for a quarter of a century the United States and its allies and cohorts have conducted in the Balkans and Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa have not been conceived as 'wars' against states, but as police operations against individuals qualified as criminals, who have also been blamed for the damage and civilian casualties caused by these policies.

This presupposes a capacity and speed of coercion such as to deter or render futile any challenge or defence. Of course, the effectiveness of the United States' coercive power (not only military and technical-scientific, but also economic, financial and judicial) is neither absolute nor immutable; but the United States' Hyper Power is unprecedented in history, and in fact has so limited and conditioned the deterrence and coercion capabilities of other states that the obsolescence

of 'kinetic' warfare has been theorised. *Hyper Power*: not *Absolute Power*.

Unfortunately, the pernicious afterthought that the United States is the reincarnation of the Roman Empire with the addition of omnipotence, and that the only problem is preventing the *Decline and Fall* with Herod's strategy, simply by eliminating potential antagonists, are not mere slogans or 'narratives' of convenience, as candid geopolitical realists often delude themselves. They are now translated into legal and pedagogical institutions officiated by civil and military priesthoods intolerant of the slightest criticism. What is more, they are ingrained in the western mentality, in the common sense of the self-styled sovereignists themselves, and in Europe even more slavishly than in Washington. Not to mention that the faith of our autocracies and bureaucracies in the absolute value of our 'civil religion', as well as in the right-duty and practical ability to impose it not only on the (incurably pagan) domestic majority but also on the rest of the world, is certainly superior to that of those who still profess the shaky Christian religions. And it will certainly not be the 'callous' flight from Kabul (complete with the Trojan pipeline left to the greedy and stupid Chinese) that will call it into question. Common sense, as Manzoni wrote, recently quoted by President Mattarella, was also there in the quarter century of radical hybridity: but it was hidden, for fear of common sense.

Analogies with the ancient world are part of our classical culture and, used by those who know how to master them, can also bring out aspects and issues otherwise unthought of. But the United States *is* certainly not an empire (as only Rome, Constantinople and Beijing have been), and it is already misleading hyperbole to say that it *has* an empire. For us Italians, transnationals *ab origine*, it may be reassuring to hear us explain that we are a 'province of the American Empire', albeit with an EU *Governor*. But now it is also for the entire EU, which opposed Trump precisely for fear of being abandoned by the United States and is now frozen by Biden's substantial continuism.

But *having* an empire entails unbearable social costs and leads to citizen revolt. It also happened in Rome, when it *had* not yet become the Empire and was only a Republic *with* an Empire. Do you remember the famous oration of Tiberius Gracchus on the 'masters of the world who possessed not even a sod of their own'? The aristocratic populist tribune who, thirteen years after the parallel destruction of Carthage and Corinth, ended Rome's transmarine expansion and opened, with his assassination, the century of civil wars between *nobilitas* and *populares*? Does he not echo in Trump's America First, 'tribune of the plebs' forgotten by the elites? In reality, to *have* in Empire means to swoon and collapse (as happened to the first British Empire in America and then to the second in India, to the European colonial empires and finally to the Warsaw Pact). Better then also for Europe would be if the United States would rid itself of the radical syndrome and return

to being what it more properly became since Wall Street overtook the City (year 1900), i.e. a 'hegemon (as) benign as possible'.

And it would be better if the Pentagon would once and for all get rid of the Orwellian neo-language it has been spouting for a quarter of a century to explain how the military almighty could not extricate itself from the quagmire it had provoked without reason or strategy in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, while a Russia that had been given up for dead had taken advantage of it to retake the Crimea, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, putting Georgia, Ukraine and the entire Intermarium in check, foiling Euro-American projects in Syria, Turkey and Belarus, and playing cards in Egypt, Libya and Central Africa, as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia. But what 'nth generation wars' and 'hybrid wars': it is war, beauty, that old 'chameleon that changes its nature in each concrete case'.

The old anti-Clausewitzian dream of all power, thanks to overwhelming technological superiority, to reduce war to a mere kinetic dimension, and the latter to a lightning-fast 'one-shot', i.e. to surrogate politics by mere force and eliminate what Clausewitz called the 'friction' and the 'fog of war', has already produced the two longest wars in American history, both lost. And it seems poised to produce a third, infinitely longer and more devastating than the previous two. Power - as physics says and the history of Naval and Nuclear Power confirms - is at its greatest when it is not applied: and it degrades in geometric proportion to its use, especially when it is used without criterion and as a substitute for political rationality. This was the case after eight years of Vietnam: it took twice as long (and exceptional personalities like Reagan and Kissinger) to rebuild a real cultural and political capacity for intervention (Desert Storm). Why should the same not happen after twenty years of GWOT?

Biden's 21 September address to the UN General Assembly belies those who (by 'geo-politically' isolating Afghanistan from the geo-historical context of the GWOT) still the day before were denying the epoch-making significance of the Kabul pullout, refuting the comparison with Saigon. If it was the president of the *populares* who recognised the necessity of the withdrawal, it was providential that the implementation was carried out by the president of the *nobilitas*. It is this abjuration, imposed by reality and the profound will of the American people, that marks the historic and unappealable defeat of radical arrogance. But the lesson has not been learned, and the United States seems to have freed itself of the 'Afghan trap' only to slip further into the funnel created twenty years ago by NATO enlargement and the attempt to sever Euro-Russian interdependence, which leads fatally to World War III.

The West won the Cold War because nuclear deterrence allowed it to maximise the structural supremacy of defence over attack. Escalation dominance was the

translation into practice of the Clausewitzian paradox that it is the defender, not the aggressor, who sets the stakes and decides the war. Enemy of the attack and ally of the defence is 'time'. A classic military aphorism is that the defender can gain it by giving up space, even to the point of adopting defence in depth (which happens very rarely, if ever). The West had ceded sufficient space with the Yalta Accords of 1943, and compensated for the insufficient depth of the European promontory with horizontal escalation (ability to extend the front along the entire Eurasian 'rimland') and the double oceanic barrier of the American sanctuary. But above all, the West *had* historical 'time' and knew how to govern it. America had given Old Europe, which committed suicide in 1914, faith, albeit naive, in the future, social progress, economic freedom and democracy. The 15-strong NATO, *regional, defensive* and *alive*, was the continuation of the Allied Powers of the Second World War enlarged, with their convinced consent, to the defeated/liberated. And America was the benign hegemon that, without overly dramatic geopolitical and palingenetic upheavals, freed old Europe from imperial ballast and guided the former colonies towards full self-government, if not all towards full sovereignty. To diplomatic, technological and economic containment was added a coherent advanced military defence, based on compulsory conscription, national identities and sovereignty, internal security and discrimination against pro-Soviet parties.

Instead, the Soviet Union was 'fighting against time'. The eschatological future (the bet of socialism in a single country and the prophecy of the collapse of capitalism) could not hold a candle to the immediate future and quickly converted from utopia to dystopia. The radical challenge to the real world, with the 'spectre' of world revolution, put the Communist International in a state of blockade, burdened by the cost and counterproductive effects of the elephantine security apparatus (arms race, permanent occupation of Eastern Europe, police oppression, support for European communist parties and African, Asian and Latin American revolutionary movements), while the Soviet threat of 'sortie' (invasion of Western Europe), although unrealistic due to the nuclear stalemate and global power relations, strengthened the North Atlantic axis and further compromised the competitiveness of the socialist system.

The ephemeral 'victory dividends' having faded and the multilateral 'New World Order' having been archived, the West has had to face the second globalisation of the contemporary age, penalised by an uninterrupted series of 'Black Swans' (from subprime to pandemic) and China's dizzying economic growth. Understandably, this, together with Islamic terrorism, has fuelled a dystopian syndrome and, in America, the idea of having reached the 'high point' of its own historical fortunes. Aggravated by the professional catastrophism of the apparatus and media, however, the dystopian syndrome has fostered a series of cumulatively

counterproductive decisions and initiatives.

The re-founding of NATO as a global and proactive alliance and its enlargement to the East, followed by that of the European Union and the anti-Russian economic war, have actually diminished inter-alliance cohesion, with the multiplication of regional sub-alliances, the UK increasingly globalised and other Cold War veterans increasingly impatient with the anti-Russian posture of the new Polish-led *Intermarium* partners, not to mention the resounding Russian-Turkish cooperation and the Mediterranean backlash of the Western catastrophe in MENA and Central Asia.

The US abuse of the various forms of economic warfare, which has escaped presidential control thanks to the congressional practice of imposing them by law, has also had counterproductive effects. Indeed, in the long run, the state of economic warfare on the one hand drives the sanctioned countries to cooperate to the point of undermining the unity of the global market, and on the other hand degrades the cooperation of allies to mere passive consent, especially when, as in the case of Europe, they must, in order not to be sanctioned in turn, bear the greater costs of sanctions imposed unilaterally by the United States.

All this paradoxically ended up putting the United States, and its allies, in the same psychological situation that the Soviet Union found itself in forty years ago, and before that Hitler and Napoleon: that is, feeling 'fighting against time' and 'in a state of siege'. The Stavka continued to plan the 'decisive sortie' even after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. And even after ours, we will continue to imagine the dismemberment of Russia (hypothesised in 1830 and 1863 and attempted in 1919) and China (successful in the century of the great humiliation). Regardless of possibility and convenience, the (geopolitical) prophecy of the dissolution of the adversary corresponds to the (economic) prophecy of the collapse of capitalism. Both deny the reality principle, and manifest a situation of anxiety and a deficit of strategy. Russia and China are not the Schmittian *Kathékon* 'holding back' the fullness of the Faustian world. But they are the world's largest state and one of the two most populous, driven to ally not only by the need to resist Western pressure, but also by sharing the Trans-Siberian and Central Asian land routes and the Arctic route. Painting the Russian-Chinese axis and the Arctic route as paper tigers is one of the mantras of Western propaganda, contradictory to the bogeyman of the Eurasian threat and the 'Thucydides trap'. Insisting on this path is the best way to replace the geopolitical concept of 'Europe' with the geographical concept of 'Front Asia'.

The West is one-eighth of humanity and half the world's wealth. It must free itself from the dystopian vision of the future and the Faustian and radical idea that it represents the culmination of human history. If we take comfort, the case of Rome: the idea of decline and the end has accompanied its rise since the 3rd

century BC. Our attitude towards Russia and China began after the Seven Years' War, at the same time as the emancipation of America. Our offensive wars against Russia and China were mere kinetic phases, followed by cooperative phases, of a single historical process that had and still has for its object the control of the flow of wealth between the Far West and the Far East, with the ancient Silk Road bypassed from the Atlantic via the Cape of Good Hope and the Strait of Malacca, then via the middle shortcuts, Trans-Siberian Railway and the Suez Canal, and today via the Arctic Route.

A military aphorism of the ancient world is that one must let pass that which cannot be stopped. The illusion of being able to stop the historical process is a losing and senile idea that precedes death. Instead, the historical process must be controlled, in the only possible way, i.e. by going along with it. Kissinger, the statesman who opened up to China, explained the difference between Western and Chinese strategy by comparing their respective 'war games': "chess aims at the decisive battle, Wei-Qi (Go) at the protracted campaign".





PART FOUR. A LOOK AT THE PRESENT DAY



## 12. War of the past: Korea and Kim Jong Un's atomic bomb

BY STEFANO FELICIAN BECCARI

The complex dynamics of security on the Korean Peninsula are home to a varied and comprehensive set of options; both the potential for a conventional 'symmetrical' confrontation, that is crystallised in a Cold War dimension (pro-US *versus* 'pro-communist' state), and a non-conventional confrontation coexist in the area. The latter, which has been particularly exploited by the North, is in turn articulated on different levels: If by now the use of terrorism has decreased (over the years, it has ranged from infiltrations and attacks on South Korean territory to even an attack against South Korean subjects in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>), targeted killings (such as the assassination of Kim Jong Nam at Kuala Lumpur airport, called 'worthy of a James Bond movie'<sup>2</sup>), espionage, disinformation, and cyber attacks, aimed not only at the South's rivals but also at third parties, as in the case of the Japanese company Sony<sup>3</sup>.

In the unconventional dynamics involving the Korean Peninsula, the most cumbersome and threatening one (including from the regional point of view) is the nuclear variable, which for years has been well present in the debates involving the geopolitics of Asia-Pacific.

After decades of research, long and complex attempts, tormented negotiations and experiments, offers of denuclearisation, and sudden rethinks, it is clear that the North's nuclear power is the sum of a vast array of factors and analyses that go beyond the mere military dimension. Pyongyang's nuclear power can be approached with an analytical reading through different levels, focussing on the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/10/world/bomb-kills-19-including-6-key-koreans.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/how-north-korea-got-away-with-the-assassination-of-kim-jong-nam>. Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Un's older brother, was assassinated at the airport in Kuala Lumpur, Indonesia, with a powerful nerve agent, a chemical weapon, which led to his death in minutes. The entire incident was caught on airport surveillance cameras

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/world/asia/north-korea-hacking-cyber-sony.html>

most tangible element (the military dimension of nuclear power) and arriving at the political-symbolic (the role of nuclear power in propaganda), the diplomatic (nuclear power as an element that influences the North's regional and geopolitical dynamics of the North) and the technological dimensions (the relationship between missile developments and the nuclear arsenal). The sum of these different analyses can offer a completer and more accurate picture of the implications of this technology for North Korea and its 'ruling' dynasty.

### **North Korean Nuclear Power: The Military Dimension**

The most immediate implications of the North Korean atomic bomb are directly related to the very birth of the country, i.e., to be precise, to the Korean War (1950-1953), during which the then-commander of UN troops, the famous General MacArthur, threatened to use the newly formed atomic weapon against the North's Chinese allies ('his finger was on the nuclear trigger'<sup>4</sup>). While remained theoretical, after the end of the war and as early as the 1950s, Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea, realised how nuclear power (and not only in the civil arena) represented a great opportunity for the country. Moving deftly between Soviet and Chinese support, the country's founder managed to obtain support and specific knowledge, albeit reluctantly, from the Soviet and Chinese governments regarding nuclear technology. In the 1980s, with the accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty<sup>5</sup>, North Korea's military nuclear journey appeared destined to end; North Korea's subsequent famine and severe internal crisis confirmed the (temporary) removal of nuclear power from Pyongyang's agenda. However, with the unilateral withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003<sup>6</sup> and the subsequent admission of a military nuclear programme, the North's *status of the North* as an atomic power was strengthened. At the same time, diplomacy tried to reopen the negotiating knuckles to stop Pyongyang's military development. The best-known format was the so-called *Six Party Talks* that were 'aimed at ending the North Korean nuclear programme through negotiations with China, the United States, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas'<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> Brands H.W. (2016), *The General vs. the President. MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War*, New York: Doubleday, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> In 1985 to be precise, as per <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/north-korea-nuclear-disarmament/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/dprk/fact-sheet-on-dprk-nuclear-safeguards>

<sup>7</sup> Bajoria J., Xu B., 'The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Programme', in *Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program>

but which lost their momentum without having achieved much.

However, in parallel with the concerns of the international community, however, is Pyongyang's growing commitment to testing atomic capabilities is growing. With its first test in October 2006, North Korea *de facto* announced its presence in the world's elite 'nuclear club', confirming its countercultural choice. Over the years, such tests have continued every three or four years, except for 2016, when there were two tests in the same year. Thus, the tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, 2016 (two tests) and 2017 served to consolidate the atomic presence in the North Korean arsenal, showing the world that the Kims have, among their military options, the power of the atom. In fact, North Korea was the only state in the world that carried out nuclear tests in the 21st century, an uncovered record that the international community, including China, has always stigmatised.

The analysis of the North's nuclear capability of the North must be placed in the defence of the context of the small Asian country's defence. As is well known, for years, North Korea has topped the world rankings in terms of the number of people under arms; out of a total population of around 25 million, Pyongyang has 1.2 million active duty soldiers, 600,000 reservists, and no less than 5.7 million paramilitary soldiers<sup>8</sup>. Quantitatively speaking, these numbers place the North among the states with the largest military arsenals in the world, but behind this 'muscular' façade lies a set of technologies, weapons systems, and capabilities well below current *standards*. A simple look at the North's arsenals makes it easy to understand how, on the ground, in the air, and on the sea, the North's technological level of the North is substantially modest, and this also explains, in part, the recourse to the nuclear dimension. For this reason, in the words of the authoritative *International Institution for Strategic Studies*, 'North Korea, aware of the qualitative inferiority of its conventional forces, has invested in asymmetric capabilities, particularly in the development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles'<sup>9</sup>. In other words, as a guarantee of external security and to compensate for the weakness of its military capabilities, Pyongyang has accelerated the development of atomic weapons precisely to compensate for the progressive ageing of its conventional arsenal. The mere presence of an embryonic atomic capacity is, in fact, sufficient to (re)balance, in favour of the North, the technological and capacitive imbalance it suffers in relation to the South and the United States; hence, the nuclear variable assumes a military relevance that no one in the region can now avoid considering. It is obviously a 'defensive' nuclear concept, especially with respect to the United States; it is indeed, the Kims are unlikely to be able or willing to use this capability against an adversary. Rather, even having a small

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<sup>8</sup> IISS, *The Military Balance 2021*, p. 274.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

atomic arsenal would make a violation of North Korea's sovereignty extremely costly in terms of economic, military, and human life terms. Therefore, these considerations allow us to introduce another 'internal' reflection on the North's nuclear power of the North, namely its political-symbolic dimension.

### **North Korean Nuclear Power: The Political-Symbolic Dimension**

Although the 'military' importance of the Kims' atomic power is a necessary starting point for any analysis, it may not provide all the answers to the controversial choice to possess this power. Having opted for an explicit nuclear capability and having carried out several experiments in the first two decades of the century has in fact 'cost' Pyongyang a lot, in terms of isolation and criticism even from neighbouring countries and allies, such as Russia and China. But at the same time, resorting to nuclear power and even exalting its experiments to such a degree (as, moreover, missile tests are exalted) transcends the military dimension of nuclear power to pass into the field of internal politics and even propaganda. In North Korea, the rhetoric surrounding nuclear power is perfectly in line with the dictates of the government, the party, and the *wishes of* the Kim family: to strengthen the feeling of 'siege syndrome' in the population that is already naturally present in the North Korean mentality. Korea, even when united, is as small peninsula surrounded by ambitious neighbours and has been drawn into the influence of Chinese and Japanese dynasties for hundreds of years. The Japanese occupation (1910–1945) was particularly tragic and is still an open wound in the collective imagination of both North and South Korea. Since the Korean War, for Kim Il Sung's North, the political cornerstone has always been independence and, as far as possible, 'non-interference' by third parties in its sovereignty. To reinforce this concept, and at the same time guarantee itself against the ever-increasing depletion of its conventional arsenal, the choice of the atomic bomb has proved decisive precisely because it guarantees sovereignty externally even as it strengthens national cohesion internally. The missile and nuclear tests are often announced on the North's state TV in enthusiastic and triumphant tones; they are successes of Pyongyang's scientists and military, and 'necessary' conquests that the Party achieves precisely to defend itself from the 'militarism' and aggressiveness of its external rivals, ie, the United States, Japan and 'the other Koreans', i.e., the South. In a rhetorical combination of denigration of the adversary and exaltation of its own nationality, North Korea finds in the atomic bomb an excellent propaganda element to reassure its compatriots about the protection that the Kim family offers to the whole country. Kim Jong Un, for example, has often been immortalised in images and videos, even in public circulation, alongside nuclear devices: feelings of prestige and national pride are easily conveyed by the regime's

propaganda, in support of the government and the many resources dedicated to these capabilities<sup>10</sup>. The value of nuclear power does not stop at the domestic level. It is also transferred to the regional dimension, so much so that the Kims' nuclear power is now an essential element in the negotiation dynamics involving Pyongyang.

### **North Korean Nuclear Power: The Diplomatic Dimension**

A third key to interpreting Pyongyang's atomic bomb is the negotiation capacity that this instrument provides to the North's *leadership* in the many open *dossiers* on international tables involving the small republic. The North's isolation of the North from the international economic and trade context is well known. On the contrary, if it were not for its Chinese neighbour, which is very 'generous' in terms of reduced prices and food and energy aid, North Korea would have serious difficulties in survival. This is demonstrated by the considerable decrease in trade between China and North Korea since the appearance of COVID-19; the North Korean economy has gone into recession, as Kim Jong Un himself<sup>11</sup>. Diplomatic isolation is also clearly visible; the North's only strategic ally is the former Celestial Empire, and it has only limited relations with other states. Furthermore, recent nuclear tests have also attracted significant criticism from countries friendly to Pyongyang, including China. Therefore, when Pyongyang's diplomats sit at the negotiating table, they have few cards to play; the nuclear variable is critical. Of course, it is not in the North's interest of the North to threaten its use, but knowing that it has this capability and promising denuclearization can generate attractive profits for Pyongyang, mainly in the form of food aid, raw materials, oil, and energy, which are particularly needed in the country's various moments of crisis. In successive negotiations over the years, the nuclear weapons/denuclearisation issue has often been at the heart of negotiations about the North's future, and the latter has always cleverly exploited the 'possible' denuclearisation to obtain aid and subsidies in return, which are regularly collected but never followed by a real abandonment of nuclear capability. On the contrary, clearly pro-denuclearisation declarations on the peninsula have followed one after the other after every *summit* or *meeting*, including those Kim Jong Un has had with US President Donald Trump, promises have not been followed by deeds: atomic

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/24/world/asia/north-korea-propagan-from-photo.html>

<sup>11</sup> White E., "Kim Jong Un warns of a new 'Arduous March' in North Korea", in *Financial Times*, 9 April 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/5498ca9c-755e-4973-bce5-c6e843b-df8d7>

weapons in the capable hands of North Korean diplomacy remain an important negotiating element. This ‘diplomatic’ role of the nuclear variable also explains why the two tests in 2016 occurred just when tensions with the United States were at their peak. The explosions not only served to verify the effectiveness of the devices, but also to send a precise ‘message’ to Washington, namely that in the event of an invasion by North Korea, the latter would not hesitate to also use the nuclear weapon in its defence. The ‘international’ dimension of the North’s nuclear weapons would be of little use if there were no capacity to ‘hit’ targets: hence the last dimension, that of technology, particularly technology focused on missiles, comes into play.

### **North Korean Nuclear Power: The Technological Dimension**

To complete the analysis of the implications of the North’s nuclear power, no reference is missed to the instruments with which devices can hit targets, ie missiles, a leading technological capability for the North Korean industry. The launcher (the missile, often referred to in the press as a ‘rocket’) in itself would not be a particular concern: In many states, these instruments are regularly used for scientific, telecommunication, or space exploration purposes. What is frightening about North Korea is the possible installation of nuclear warheads on the missiles (‘miniaturisation’<sup>12</sup>) because this would expose many neighbouring states (*first and foremost* the adversaries South Korea and Japan) to a direct threat from the North. If this reasoning seems straightforward in theory, practice is more complex. Installing a nuclear warhead, however low-powered, on a carrier requires very advanced engineering capability; from the available data, it is not yet clear whether the North has this capability in full, but the mere possibility is enough to worry the various diplomacies. Furthermore, launch increase in range and the many experiments Pyongyang has carried out in recent years have not calmed the climate; instead, they have increased the criticism of North Korea’s ‘provocations’; according to a recent study by the *Council on Foreign Relations* and *The Guardian*, some of Pyongyang’s missiles have a range of more than 10,000 kilometres and are therefore capable of striking anywhere in the US<sup>13</sup>. Often, in fact, even missile tests are ‘diplomatic’ instruments, ie, they convey certain Pyongyang ‘messages’ to other countries, typically adversaries, as well as highlighting the North’s offensive capabilities. In recent times, Pyongyang’s arsenal has been joined by very

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.38north.org/2015/02/jlewis020515/>

<sup>13</sup> The CFR study is <https://www.cfr.org/background/north-koreas-military-capabilities> while that of the Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/28/north-korea-has-fired-ballistic-missile-say-reports-in-south-korea>



relevant technological developments, such as submarine-launched missiles<sup>14</sup> or, more recently, a train-based missile system<sup>15</sup>. These 'mobile' platforms would be perfect for striking the adversary and then 'disappearing' or leaving the launch site, guaranteeing greater survival and also strengthening the concerns of North Korea's possible adversaries.

### Other unconventional skills

Although nuclear weapons are the most obvious unconventional threat at Pyongyang's disposal, for the sake of Pyongyang, it is at least necessary to mention other unconventional capabilities at the North's disposal. To complete the picture of weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological capabilities should also be mentioned, although they are much less ostentatious than the nuclear ones. From the available data, it seems that Pyongyang has between 2,500 and 5,000 tons of chemical agents available<sup>16</sup>, and has a small arsenal of biological agents<sup>17</sup> that could possibly be launched by its own missiles. If these two capabilities, however obscure, have long been present in North Korea, other types of pitfalls potentially exploitable by Pyongyang have recently come to the fore: cybernetic threat, which was already referred to as an 'emerging problem'<sup>18</sup> in a recent study by the US CSIS (Cordesman, *Korean Special, Asymmetric, and Paramilitary Forces*, 2016). North Korea's extreme level of energy and technological poverty should not be misleading: however small, Pyongyang's typically asymmetrical potential is respectable, perhaps even 'more dangerous than missiles'<sup>19</sup>, according to Larsen. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of cyber-attacks attributed to the North, thanks to 'a staff of 6,000 operatives, who handle daily disinformation, espionage, and cybercrime activities'<sup>20</sup> and a collection of universities and 'research' institutes that in reality appear to be 'screens' masking real centres of *hackers* from the North regime<sup>21</sup>. The various successive cyberattacks are certainly less visible than nuclear tests or missile launches; yet some are now almost 'historical'

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/north-koreas-newest-submarine-launched-ballistic-missile-same-as-the-old-one/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-58588272>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/chemical/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/biological/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/korean-special-asymmetric-and-paramilitary-forces>

<sup>19</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/15/north-korea-missiles-cyber-attack-hacker-armies-crime/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/23/building-resilience-to-the-north-korean-cyber-threat-experts-discuss/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/why-is-north-korea-so-good-at-cybercrime/>

and are often cited in the literature as attributable to the North Koreans themselves. In 2014, for instance, Sony's systems were attacked because the Japanese company had produced a film critical of the North Korean leader; In 2016, a cyber attack on a bank cost the latter approximately \$ 80 million, while in 2017 a ransomware known as Wannacry affected several states around the world<sup>22</sup>. In each of these attacks, a conditional attribution is necessary, because it is very difficult to clearly identify the attacker, and North Korea has always avoided acknowledging these actions; or more precisely, these actions are much quieter than the full media coverage attributed to missile or nuclear tests. All in all, the unconventional threat presents itself as an articulated set of options for the North, capable of constituting both a direct and indirect threat, and above all are exploitable not only in the military sphere, but also in other areas that seem distant. With these *wild cards* at its disposal, North Korea is able to compensate for its weaknesses in various planes, and at the same time impose itself on the negotiating tables as a subject that is perhaps not fearsome, but certainly neither negligible nor to be underestimated at regional level and perhaps beyond.

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<sup>22</sup><https://us-cert.cisa.gov/ncas/alerts/aa20-106a>

# 13. Adapting to Asymmetrical Warfare: Israel and Hamas

BY NICCOLÒ PETRELLI

To be fully effective, an military organisation must adapt to the nature of the conflict facing it. Adaptation can be understood as a set of changes and adjustments in structures and processes, tactical configurations, and operational models, in anticipation or in response to external changes<sup>1</sup>. There are no ‘models’ of adaptation; in contrast, military effectiveness is a phenomenon characterised by ‘equifinality’<sup>2</sup>, i.e., it can potentially occur through different pathways or different combinations of ‘adaptation’ at the various levels of combat (tactical, operational, strategic). This article aims to contribute to the debate on what can be called the ‘paths of adaptation’ in the military sphere through an analysis of Israeli military operations against Hamas during the al-Aqsa intifada (2000–2005).

In recent years, the topic has received some attention in the academic and professional literature. The prevailing conclusion has been that the Israeli armed forces have failed, creating conditions for the rise of *Hamas* to the role of the main Palestinian political actor. More specifically, according to this view, Israel has shown a remarkable capacity to adapt to tactical challenges, but its operational and strategic performance has been characterised as less effective. However, this conclusion is the result of either overly narrow (especially tactical) analyses or overly influenced by the events of the moment. Several questions therefore remain open: to what extent was Israel able to adapt operationally and strategically? Were the non-military aspects of the conflict with Hamas effectively met

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<sup>1</sup> Murray W. (2011), *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 3; Tillson, J.C. et al. (2005), *Learning to Adapt to Asymmetric Threats*, Alexandria: Institute for Defence Analyses, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/encyc-of-case-study-research/n126.xml#:~:text=Equifinality%20is%20the%20concept%20of,Robert%20Kahn%20for%20organizational%20studies.>

or neglected? Finally, to what extent has Israel been effective in aggregate terms in fighting Hamas?

### **The first phase: ‘Containment’**

The al-Aqsa *intifada* began in September 2000 as a popular uprising (like the 1987 *intifada*) and initially saw a rather limited use of weapons by the various Palestinian combatant groups, including Hamas. In fact, they mostly limited themselves to stone throwing, tyre burning, and barrier building<sup>3</sup>.

The Israeli government therefore requested that the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) develop an operational approach of ‘containment’ (*Hachala* in Hebrew) which would be aimed at avoiding any development that could negatively affect the diplomatic process or lead to internationalisation of the conflict. For its part, the IDF concluded that, to bring the Palestinian leadership back to the negotiating table, it was first necessary to impose a decision on the battlefield and suppress the insurgency. This resulted in an extremely aggressive tactical-operational approach; In the first months of the al-Aqsa *intifada*, the IDF reportedly fired 1.3 million bullets, causing an extremely high number of casualties even among Palestinian civilians. The IDF’s harsh response of the IDF to the uprising was intended to demonstrate strength and restore the ‘posture of deterrence’ of the Jewish state’s ‘posture of deterrence’. However, rather than deterring Palestinian insurgents, the intensity and scale of the IDF response strengthened the determination of combatant groups to resist, refusing a ceasefire from a position of weakness<sup>4</sup>.

Consequently, after about two months, the conflict changed its character from a popular uprising to a terrorist insurrection, with the start of a suicide attack campaign within Israeli territory led by Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement.

### **The second phase: ‘Leverage’**

On 6 February 2001, Likud candidate Ariel Sharon won a landslide victory over incumbent Labour Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and the IDF was asked to adopt a more aggressive approach. This request resulted in the development of a new operational configuration called ‘leverage’ (*Minuf*) or ‘continuous pressure’, aimed at exerting pressure on the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), combatant groups and the population to push them restore the *status quo ante*<sup>5</sup>. The

<sup>3</sup> Drucker R., Shelach O. (2005), *Boomerang*, Jerusalem: Keter, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Report of the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee*, Washington, DC, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Ya’alon M. (2007), ‘Lessons from the Palestinian ‘War’ Against Israel’, in *Policy*

‘leverage’ applied against Hamas was targeted assassinations (through air strikes and special forces raids) of general mid-level leaders which, as became clear almost immediately, did not produce tactically significant results. The force applied in the so-called ‘surgical’ forms was in fact not only more manageable, politically, and operationally, for the IDF, but also fundamentally ‘bearable’ for Hamas with its vast network of middle management. Furthermore, targeted attacks were carried out primarily based on ‘windows of opportunity’, and often against figures extraneous or marginal to Hamas military activities. The ‘eliminations’ in fact did not degrade the capabilities of the organisation: Between March and December 2001, the Islamic Resistance Movement carried out 25 suicide bombings and numerous guerrilla attacks<sup>6</sup>.

At the end of 2001, the Israeli political and military leadership concluded that the ‘leverage’ approach was failing, particularly with respect to Hamas. The most widespread belief was that it was not possible to attempt to exert deterrence while trying to push the PNA to control the Islamic Resistance Movement. However, until March 2002, despite a certain intensification of targeted attacks against the commanders of Hamas’ militia wing, the *Izz-al-Din-al-Qassam* Brigades (such as a failed assassination attempt against Muhammad Deif in August 2001, or the killing of Mahmud Abu Hanoud on 23 November 2001), the IDF continued to operate against Hamas following a logic of ‘deterrence by punishment’<sup>7</sup>.

### **The third phase: ‘Systematic Deconstruction of the Terrorist Infrastructure’**

The realisation that it was impossible to apply ‘levers’ to either the PNA or Hamas, together with a significant increase in terrorist attacks, especially suicide attacks in urban centres, led the IDF to develop and implement a new approach aimed at the ‘systematic dismantling of the infrastructures of terrorism’, as well as forcing the civilian population to reduce its support for combatant organisations, *mainly*, of course, *Hamas*. This new approach was implemented in two phases, through Operation ‘Shield Defensive’ (March–April 2002) and Operation Determined Path’ (June 2002–May 2003).

The ‘Defensive Shield’ operation began on 29 March 2002. The IDF deployed the largest number of troops since the Lebanon War of 1982, including infantry,

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*Focus*, no. 64, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Israel Security Agency, *Spotlight on Hamas—Ideology and involvement in Terror*, 15 January 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Ya’alon M., Dichter A., Ross D. (2005), ‘Lessons from the fight against Terrorism’, in *Peacewatch*, no. 533.

armoured, engineer, and special forces units. The IDF reoccupied all major Palestinian population centres in the West Bank. Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Bethlehem, and Hebron and imposed a 24-hour curfew. After encircling the cities, the IDF began conducting intensive intelligence gathering through sensors of various types, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and interrogations of both enemy personnel captured during the advance and civilians fleeing the combat areas. Once they had acquired a sufficient degree of virtual control over the battlefield, IDF units began to replicate on a larger scale tactics developed and tested over the previous months<sup>8</sup>. Where possible, infantry units and special forces advanced under the cover of armoured forces, D-9 bulldozers, and Apache helicopters, while in refugee camps, applying a tactical model of ‘reverse geometry’, soldiers literally forced their way through the walls of buildings<sup>9</sup>. The newly introduced improvements in learning mechanisms and knowledge-sharing procedures within the IDF ensured the dissemination of information on technological behaviour between combat units in almost real time during the course of the operation<sup>10</sup>.

The weakening of Hamas during this operation was limited. In fact, the IDF and the internal intelligence organisation, Shabak, succeeded in striking some of the movement’s infrastructures, as well as explosives and ammunition factories. They also eliminated and arrested a series of relatively important figures within Hamas due to their particular ‘know-how’. However, in some areas, such as Nablus, the network of the Islamic Resistance Movement was only marginally damaged, and in all three, including Hebron, the movement was barely attacked at all<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, the infrastructure of the destruction of the Palestinian Authority’s infrastructure that took place during ‘Defensive Shield’ effectively eliminated the main source of socio-economic *governance* in the Palestinian territories, irreversibly damaging social order. In a condition of near-anarchy, the Palestinian population in many cases had no choice but to rely on the educational, social, and health services provided by Hamas’ *Da’wa* system<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Boukris, O. (2003), ‘Command and Control during Operation Defensive Shield’, in *Ma’arachot*, no. 388, pp. 32-37.

<sup>9</sup> Glenn, R.W. (2010), *Proceedings of the 2010 Zvi Meitar Institute for Land Warfare Studies ‘Fighting in Urban Terrain’ Conference*, Latrun: Zvi Meitar Institute for Land Warfare Studies—ILWS.

<sup>10</sup> Shavit O., Ariely G. (2005), “What Is Operational Knowledge Management?”, in *Ma’arachot*, no. 303/304, p. 36-43

<sup>11</sup> Harel A., ‘Dozens of Terror Suspects Rounded Up in Villages’, in *Ha’aretz*, 18 April 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Ben-Yishai R. (2004), ‘Changing the Strategy to Combat Terrorism’, in *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 6, no. 4.

The limitations of 'Defensive Shield' became clear within a few weeks. Between the end of May and the first weeks of June 2002, Hamas launched a wave of suicide bombings and guerrilla attacks. The Israeli forces responded on 22 June with a new large-scale ground operation in the West Bank, 'Determined Path'. The IDF and Shabak focused their operation specifically on the military wing of the Islamic Resistance Movement, systematically attacking the local networks that Operation Defensive Shield had spared: Hebron, Jenin, and Nablus. Particularly intense was the Nablus operational activity in the area and the northern part of the West Bank, considered by the intelligence community the planning centre of Hamas' suicide attack campaign<sup>13</sup>. For more than three weeks, Israeli armed forces and security services attacked the Hamas command network, middle cadres, and also conducted raids against weapons depots and explosives laboratories. The operation not only heavily damaged the Movement's local networks of the Movement, but also produced relevant information about its internal structure, the leadership's role in providing strategic vision and the interpenetration between the civilian component and the military wing<sup>14</sup>. The most direct consequence of this new intelligence picture was the decision to attack the entire Hamas leadership.

On 23 July 2002, the Israeli Air Force killed the commander of the *Izz-al-Salad* escorte.

*din-al-Qassam* Brigades, Salah Shehada, in an air raid. The assumption was that the elimination of such a high-profile figure would generate deterrence in the Hamas leadership; however, the action initially produced rather uncertain results. The Hamas leadership demonstrated its readiness to consider a *hudna*, which is a cease-fire for a long, but limited period, for the first time. However, the attacks perpetrated by Hamas dramatically intensified. Within the movement, in fact, the central leadership provided vision, direction, guidance, and coordination, exercising command and control at the operational and strategic level; however, they did not provide support at the tactical level, i.e., for actual attacks. The killing of the brigade commander caused local military networks to react by taking terrorist and guerrilla attacks to their maximum capacity level<sup>15</sup>.

### **The Fourth Phase: 'Regularisation and Operational Stabilisation'**

From mid-2003 onwards, there was a sharp decline in suicide attacks and in the overall number of attacks by Palestinian combatant groups. Although popular,

<sup>13</sup> Pedahzur A. (2005), *Suicide Terrorism*, Cambridge: Polity, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> Harel A., 'IDF Plans to Draught More Reservists', in *Ha'aretz*, 1 July 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Ganor B. (2008), 'Terrorist Organisation Typologies and the Probability of a Boomerang Effect', in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 277.

Hamas began to show a significant decline in ‘operational capabilities’<sup>16</sup>. This caused the IDF to introduce a new ‘regularisation and operational stabilisation’ (*Hasdara*) approach to Hamas, which included a combination of pressure on the leadership through increased targeted attacks and countering the *Da’wa* system<sup>17</sup>.

The intelligence acquired during operations ‘Defensive Shield’ and ‘Determined Path’ was exploited by the Israeli authorities throughout the summer of 2003 to make a series of demands and appeals to countries in different parts of the world to close foundations and associations related to the Islamic Resistance Movement. Furthermore, on 21 August 2003, the Israeli government formally approved a plan to ‘decapitate’ the Hamas leadership in Gaza, killing prominent leader Ismail Abu Shanab the same day. Between September of the same year and March 2004, the movement’s leadership was completely eliminated, including Hamas’s founder himself, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin<sup>18</sup>. The operational objective of targeting Hamas’s leadership in Gaza was twofold: first, to create a strategic vacuum within the movement in the hope that it would undermine its ability to function; and second, to generate deterrence towards the surviving members of the internal leadership and possibly also the more intransigent external leadership, *al-Maktab al-Siyasi*. The ‘beheading’ of Hamas produced immediate results, prompting the movement’s leadership to propose an agreement with the Israeli government that they would stop carrying out targeted killings of Hamas leaders in exchange for a stop to suicide bombings, which was immediately accepted<sup>19</sup>.

Weak and deprived of its most effective combat tactics, Hamas was a weak group.

forced to switch from an operational approach focused on terrorist attacks to one more orientated on guerrilla warfare. Specifically, starting in 2004, the *Izz-al-din-al-Qassam* Brigades focused on the ground/air and underground dimensions. They invested in the development of local production capacity, in the Gaza Strip, of rockets (the Qassams). A vast infrastructure of underground tunnels was also created in Gaza itself, as well as into Israeli territory<sup>20</sup>.

On 18 May 2004, Israel launched a ground offensive in Gaza called Operation ‘Rainbow’. Deploying three combined brigades supported by armoured units and attack helicopters, the IDF did not to replicate the ‘surgical’ approach frequently adopted in recent years in the West Bank, but to use one with an un-

<sup>16</sup> Israel Security Agency, *Palestinian Terrorism in 2008, Statistics and Trends*.

<sup>17</sup> Amidror Y. (2007), ‘Principles of War in Asymmetric Conflicts’, in *Ma’arachot*, no. 416, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Harel A, Isacharoff A. (2005), *La Septième Guerre d’Israël*, Paris: Hachette Littératures, p. 394.

<sup>19</sup> Eldar S. (2012), *Getting to Know Hamas*, Jerusalem: Miskal, pp. 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Schiff Z., ‘The Qassam Strip’, in *Ha’aretz*, 31 December 2005.



precedented level of aggression in the Gaza Strip. This led to a high number of civilian casualties and caused extensive damage to local infrastructure to generate deterrence<sup>21</sup>. Hamas emerged extremely popular from the operation and, not at all intimidated, immediately resumed firing rockets towards Israeli territory; however, the attacks were less intense due to problems with coordinating combat activities<sup>22</sup>.

In response to the continued launching of Qassam rockets, the IDF launched a new ground operation called 'Days of Penance' (30 September–16 October 2004) specifically aimed at 'changing the behaviour' of the Islamic Resistance Movement<sup>23</sup>. Ground forces penetrated the northern Gaza Strip, occupying small areas of territory and surrounding several areas of interest. Subsequently, attack helicopters, F-16s, and UAVs were deployed to conduct 'surgical' attacks against Qassam launch squads, Hamas military wing operational headquarters, and various types of infrastructure<sup>24</sup>.

Despite the fact that, from the point of view of deterrence, the results of this umpteenth Israeli operation once again appeared uncertain, Qassam launches were considerably reduced after the last quarter of 2004. In February 2005, Hamas, practically acknowledging the gravity of the losses suffered, declared that they would respect the truce negotiated between Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas, essentially putting an end to the al-Aqsa intifada<sup>25</sup>.

During the al-Aqsa Intifada, the Israeli military was able to adapt to the changing nature of the conflict and was ultimately effective in fighting Hamas through a course of adaptation that focused on the operational, rather than the tactical or strategic level. Often during the five years of the revolution, the IDF found itself repeating 'old' tactical mistakes, especially relating to the use of extremely aggressive tactics, as well as strategic ones, showing little ability to translate politicians' guidelines into appropriate strategic military concepts. At the same time, however, the operational decision to drive a wedge between Hamas and its supporters in the civilian population through coercion, collective punishments, and

<sup>21</sup> White J. (2009), 'Examining the Conduct of IDF Operations in Gaza', in *Policy Watch*, no. 1497.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.shabak.gov.il/SiteCollectionImages/english/TerrorInfo/Terrorism2007re-port-ENGLISH.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Margalit L. (2010), 'Modifying the Opponent's Behaviour through the Use of Force', in *Ma'arachot*, no. 440, pp. 44-50.

<sup>24</sup> Schiff, Z., "Analysis: Be wise Hamas—Stop the Qassams", in *Ha'aretz*, 17 October 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Dichter A., Byman D. (2006), *Israel's Lessons for combating terrorists and their Implications for the United States*, Saban Centre Analysis Papers, no. 8.

destruction of infrastructure and private property, in parallel with the decision to interfere, directly and indirectly, with the Movement's social activities of the movement, proved to be extremely effective, greatly expanding the effect of the attack on the leadership.

## **14. The Hybrid and Asymmetrical: Iran, Hezbollah, and proxy wars in the Middle East**

BY MATTEO BRESSAN

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, understanding Iran's capabilities and strategic intentions has become essential for the defence and security strategies of regional and global actors. Generally, the development of ballistic missiles and nuclear programmes has always attracted attention and is relevant to an analysis of Iran's capabilities. These two programmes affect the tension between Iran and the US and other regional actors (Gulf monarchies and Israel). However, in the current context of the Middle East, Iran has a third capability that is creating a strategic advantage: the ability to fight by, with, and through third parties. Iran has possessed this capability since 1979, but its power and significance have increased significantly over the past 10 years; Iran has now achieved influence and status as a regional power beyond its nuclear programme and ballistic missiles.

### **The 'imposed war' (1980–1988)**

The process of deciphering the conflicts that occurred during the fifty-year period that was characterised by confrontations between the US and the USSR is complex and controversial. Certain events in this time period have determined and continue to determine history, choices, and alignments in the Middle East. An example is the Iraq–Iran war, which Iran calls the 'imposed' war. The war lasted from 1980 to 1988 and took place with alternating events along the border with Iraq and, for Iran, is still one of the founding elements of the Islamic Republic. It is celebrated, like the revolution of 1979, through museums, holy places, pilgrimages, the memory of veterans, and testimony from the relatives of the 'martyrs'. Depictions of martyrs are such a distinctive feature of Iran that in Tehran and many other cities, it is possible to see photos of martyrs of the Iraq–Iran war in place of the traditional billboards. When looking at the photos of the martyrs, one characteristic that stands out is their young age. Boys who between 1980 and 1988 were the Syrian army clashed with Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army in a conflict that allegedly erupted over the demarcation of the border between Iran and Iraq (which had been established in 1639 between Persia and

the Ottoman Empire). It then turned into a regional war for dominance in the Persian Gulf. However, the border dispute between Iraq and Iran does not explain the international context within which the conflict between the two countries matured and spread, so much so that at least two other theories have been formulated to understand the motivations for the Iraqi attack. It is not entirely improbable that Saddam Hussein feared the expansion of the Iranian revolution among Iraqi Shiites, and it is certainly plausible to believe that Saddam wanted to exploit the climate of uncertainty following the events of 1979 to gain some territorial advantage over the Shatt al-Arab and the oil fields of the Khuzestan region. Saddam Hussein's desire to show himself to the Arab world as a powerful national leader and protector of the Arabs of Iran's Khuzestan, together with his adventurous and opportunistic nature, seems to explain the initial reasons for the first phase of the conflict. On 17 September 1980, Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq no longer considered itself bound by the Algiers Agreements<sup>1</sup> and, on 22 September, some 45,000 Iraqi ground troops entered Iranian territory in four attack columns, backed by air support. At this stage, the Iraqis exploited the surprise factor and achieved significant successes. The Iranian defence was weak at first, but increased as the reservists arrived and moved toward the collection points; another key factor was the arrival of the volunteers who would form the backbone of the Sepah-e Pasdaran. Volunteers were enthusiastic, but often lacked combat experience and suffered heavy losses in the first months of the war. In the recent history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iraq–Iran war is known by the expression 'the imposed war' or 'sacred defence' because of the military operations carried out by the various militias of the Sepah, Basij and Armed Forces militias to counter the Iraqi invasion. This was a local war that, over the years, turned into a regional conflict. Many scholars consider it to have been the first Gulf War, preceding the 1990–1991 war that included a large western coalition against Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Kuwait. Many western countries involved in Operation Desert Storm had, in the course of the Iraq–Iran war, supported Saddam Hussein to varying degrees. The United States, Russia, France, Germany and the Gulf monarchies had contributed to militarily support Saddam Hussein's war effort, also financed by the 25 billion dollars granted by Saudis<sup>2</sup>. It was a bloody conflict, and the number of casualties is still uncertain, fluctuating between one million and one million lives on both sides. The legacy of that conflict, the regional actors involved, and the role of the international community are still present in Iranian politics, not only among the veterans of the conflict, but also in much

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<sup>1</sup> Agreements signed in 1975 between Iraq and Iran to demarcate the geographical borders and bilateral relations between the two countries.

<sup>2</sup> Fisk R. (2009), *Cronache Mediorientali*, Milan: Il Saggiatore.

of public opinion<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Doctrinal Framework and Instruments of Iranian Strategy**

Iran's response to regional challenges and opportunities in the aftermath of the war included a strategy shaped by increasingly ambitious goals, limited resources, and difficult-to-predict scenarios. Through strict self-control over the extent of its direct involvement in conflicts, Tehran avoided the high costs of engaging in conventional warfare and refrained from overt attacks on more powerful actors that could have threatened the regime. The lack of state allies, a plethora of regional and international adversaries with greater resources, as well as outdated armed forces and pressure from sanctions, forced Tehran to develop a military doctrine that avoided direct or extended conflicts with superior conventional powers. This doctrine took its cues from the Soviet Union, the United States, Iran's revolutionary experiences, the Iran–Iraq War, and observations of the results achieved by the United States against Iraq in 1991 with Operation Desert Storm. Moreover, it cannot be ignored that those who developed the Iranian strategy studied the covert campaign in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.

An important factor in the consistency of the Iran doctrine is the longevity of its revolutionary leadership. Since 1989, Supreme Guide Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been the guardian of Iran's strategic posture and has shared national security issues with a small circle of loyal to him. Likewise, Iran's military leaders often remain in their positions for a considerable number of years. Few of Iran's adversaries can match this continuity of leadership.

Tehran's experience in the Iran–Iraq war was the basis of its military paradigm. Iran suffered more than one million casualties and the cost of more than \$645 billion left the country's economy and infrastructure in ruin. Those who survived the conflict saw how Iran survived a war fought without allies and with an army that had used obsolete technology. The war taught Iran that, if Tehran wanted to prevail against stronger powers, its internal defence and operations abroad had to rely on layered defences and asymmetric responses.

In addition, the constitution of the Islamic Republic includes several sections that can be interpreted as an export mandate of the Iranian revolution. Iran's involvement in Lebanon and the Gulf in the 1980s confirms this thesis. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's supreme leaders have pursued a foreign policy in which Iran acts as the self-proclaimed leader of the world of Shia Muslims. The regional

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<sup>3</sup> Bressan M., 'The legacy of the war between Saddam and the Islamic Republic of Iran', in *InsideOver*, 19 May 2018, <https://it.insideover.com/politica/leredita-della-guer-ra-iraq-iran.html>.

intervention in the defence of Shia Islam provides evidence of its commitment to devoting resources to this cause. Tehran's role in a Sunni-dominated Middle East is also aimed at gaining more power for the Shia in the region. Iran's military doctrine, adopted in 1992 with the ordering of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran, contemplated drawing on a combination of conventional forces, with an emphasis on ballistic missile programmes, exploitation of geographical conditions and Islamic revolutionary energy.

This doctrine presupposes the unusual military architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army (Artesh) and an inexperienced but ideologically reliable revolutionary military force called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps IRGC (Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami). Established on 22 April 1979 by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the IRGC came into being at a time when the Artesh was viewed with deep distrust by Iranian revolutionary adherents, and its personnel were systematically purged. The IRGC constitution not only provided a counterweight to Artesh, but also allowed the new Iranian leaders to rally the hundreds of armed groups from the revolutionary committees that had dominated Iran in 1979. Article 150 of the Iranian constitution required the IRGC to protect the nascent revolution and its future achievements. As a force geared towards the sociopolitical values of the revolution's leadership, the IRGC was also tasked with supporting liberation movements and oppressed Muslims abroad. The IRGC focused on destroying the myriad leftist, monarchist, communist, and ethnic elements armed that opposed the ideology of the new Islamic Republic.

Gradually, the group developed bureaucratic cohesion and professionalism, aided by the lessons learnt in the Iran–Iraq war, and systematically removed those members who were considered to lack ideological adherence to Islamic values and the concept of political rule by the supreme religious authority (Velayat-e Faqih). After the end of the Iran–Iraq war, the IRGC gradually became an important economic player through its role in reconstruction and its veterans went on to occupy parliamentary and governmental positions. The relationship between the IRGC and Artesh during the Iran–Iraq War was strained. The IRGC doubted the latter's loyalty of the latter, while Artesh questioned the IRGC's lack of professionalism of the IRGC and the ambiguous demarcation of its role responsibility. However, the two forces are responsible for wartime cooperation in missile activity and navigation control in the Persian Gulf. In terms of defence, they share the responsibilities of executing a 'mosaic' response, resorting to unconventional operations, guerrilla actions, and exploitation of Iranian territory. The Iranian doctrine is based on deterrence and aims to increase the risks for its adversaries without increasing the costs for Iranian forces. In this doctrine, partners and proxies abroad are useful for Tehran in terms of perception and deterrence. Therefore, opponents should consider the possibility that an attack on Iran could

produce a counterattack by militias at a place and time of Iran's choosing.

Although Artesh has remained the model of a traditional military force tasked with defending the territorial integrity of Iran's territorial integrity, the IRGC has become Iran's dominant military organisation. The IRGC's loyalty to the regime has earned it a larger budget, greater prestige, access to Iran's leadership, the ability to run large para-state commercial enterprises, and greater autonomy from the control of civil authorities' control. His ownership of companies involved in rebuilding the damage caused by the war provided him with vast resources, as well as a network of business and political interests. As its power increased, and despite Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that the IRGC should not be involved in politics, the Corps increasingly criticised Iran's civilian leaders whenever their actions were perceived as a threat to the values or interests of the revolution.

### **The establishment of the Quds force**

The IRGC's extraterritorial mission of the IRGC to support revolutionary movements is based on the Quds Force (Jerusalem Force, or Niru-ye Quds), a non-contingent force established in the early years of the Iran–Iraq war by intelligence units and special forces with the mandate to engage in low intensity extraterritorial conflicts in support of 'oppressed' Muslims. Ayatollah Khamenei stated in 1990 that the mission of the Quds Force was to '*establish Hezbollah cells around the world*'. The Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, outlined this task in 2016, claiming that

The mission of the Quds Force is extraterritorial, to help Islamic movements, to expand the Islamic Revolution, and to strengthen the resistance and endurance of suffering people around the world and people in need of help in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

The early years of the Quds Force saw the unit deployed in the conflict with Iraq and in cooperation with Hezbollah. During the tenure of its first chief, IRGC Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, the Quds Force adopted a structure that allowed it to conduct operations in Afghanistan, Africa, Asia, Central Asia, Iraq, Lebanon, Latin America, and the Arabian Peninsula. It has established about 20 training camps in Iran and additional camps in Lebanon and Sudan. The creation of specialised logistics enabled them to handle international shipments of secret weapons.

As the group's reach expanded, Quds Force officers provided safe haven, funding, training, weapons, and ideological support to a wide group of international militants, including the Afghan Hazara group, Balkan Muslims, Gulf militants, and Palestinians. As confirmed by this list, the Quds Force can be ideologically

flexible, providing support to any group of the 'Axis of Resistance' that is willing to confront Iran's adversaries, especially the United States. Western and regional governments during this period have repeatedly accused the Quds Force of playing a role in terrorist operations in Argentina, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, as well as attempts to destabilise Bahrain and other Gulf governments. Some of these operations (e.g., in Beirut in 1983 and Khobar in Saudi Arabia in 1996) resulted in the death and injury of hundreds of Americans. In 1994, the attack against the Argentinean Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires left 85 dead and hundreds injured. However, the international reaction was limited to relatively mild economic sanctions and diplomatic initiatives, which did little to curtail the activities of the Quds Force.

### **The Pattern of Conduct of Iranian Military Operations**

Taking the Syrian and Iraqi conflict as a case study, we can see how Iran has become the strongest regional actor, in addition to Russia. While expanding and consolidating its presence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen (a nonessential but strategically valuable theatre for Tehran), Iran has suffered relatively minimal casualties on the ground. Understanding how Iran has been able to develop this network requires careful analysis. Many evaluations of Iran's role are influenced by the political positions of certain states towards Iran. This does not help us to understand several nuances related to how Iran exercises control over its proxies. Complicating the understanding of the phenomenon has been Washington's designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. As a result, this definition has been extended to all Iranian-backed groups, helping to portray the network between Iran and the proxies as a 'terror network'. These reading risks generalising the much more complex nature of Iranian networks of influence in the region.

When analysing the conflicts and tensions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, we see that Iran, in each of these theatres, supports one of the protagonists in different ways. In Iraq and Syria, the support is directed at both the state and nonstate actors allied; in Lebanon to Hezbollah, this is an entity separate from the state but at the same time a political actor supporting Lebanon's current president, Michel Aoun. In Yemen, support is realised through support for the opposition, the Houthis. Iran's means to extend its influence are not limited to the proxy network, but include extensive use of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and operations abroad against hostile and opposing states.



## The Iran—*non-state actors* relationship

Relations between Iran and several nonstate actors vary greatly, based on differing ideological, strategic, and political agendas and objectives. Some are organic and structured, while others are opportunistic. According to traditional definitions, a ‘proxy’ is the relatively weaker nonstate actor that depends on a state sponsor for its power and relevance and receives and executes the preferences of its ‘protector’. The term ‘proxy’ does not accurately describe the variety of relationships Iran has with its partners. Conventionally, Hezbollah and the Houthis are considered proxies. The former was established by Iranian agents in Lebanon and adhere to the principle of Velayat-e Faqih (religious jurisprudence), while the latter are an emanation of a tribal group belonging to a branch of Shiism, Zaydism, that does not recognise Velayat-e Faqih. Along with being quite different realities, each has a different utility and position for Iran.

The term ‘proxy’ also implies a hierarchical relationship, indicating that Iran is capable of direct, while the proxy obeys. If applied across the network of influence, it would, in turn, imply a uniform level of control and coordination of the groups by Iran. The relationships are not formalised, however, and there are no charters or treaties on the status of the various groups. The language used by Tehran to nonstate actors is emotional and religious and does not reflect the nature of a hierarchical relationship. The network of proxies has called itself the ‘Resistance’ (Jabhat al-Muqawamah), tending to express through this concept the ideological, military and cultural opposition to the existence of Israel and to Arab governments that are accused of subordination to Western powers and Israel. Based on the different operational relations that exist between Iran and these groups, the term ‘proxy’ could be replaced by ‘partner’, which better clarifies the entire range of Iranian–non-state actors relations, divided into four criteria:

- Ideological affinity: the level of ideological alignment and the corresponding loyalty it generates;
- Strategic convergence: the level of strategic alignment (i.e., of visions and interests regarding the shape of the regional order, the nature of threats, enemies, and strategies to be adopted);
- Political opportunity: the level and nature of political benefits generated by the relationship;
- Transactional value: the level of mutual security, military, political, and economic returns created by the relationship.

These criteria are then used to assess the classification of the partner, strategic ally, ideological ally, proxy, or state body and provide a more nuanced understanding of each partner’s relationship with Iran, which is also useful for making in-

tergroup comparisons and assessments of the probable duration and relationship with Iran.

|                | <b>Partners</b>  | <b>Strategic ally</b>  | <b>Ideological ally</b>  | <b>Proxy</b>   | <b>Body of State</b>   |
|----------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Report</b>  | The client only pursues its relationship with the sponsor for political or transactional convenience and may or may not continue. pursue common goals with the sponsor in the absence of its support | Without the support of the sponsor, the customer continues to pursue common goals with the sponsor based on convergence. strategic, albeit with more limited resources | Without the support of the sponsor, the client continues to pursue common goals with the sponsor due to their ideological affinity, albeit with more limited resources | Without the support of the sponsor, the customer continues to maintain objectives in compliance with the sponsor. but would not be able to pursue them | Without the support of the sponsor, the customer would cease to exist. |
| <b>Example</b> | Hamas  | Houthi   | Hezbollah  | Syrian National Defence Force  | Liwa Zainabiyoun   |

### **Iran's strategic objectives: the Iraqi case**

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided Iran with its first real opportunity to exercise the offensive aspects of its 1992 military doctrine. The war with Iraq had only ended 15 years earlier, and Iran would do everything in its power to permanently defeat Baghdad and establish a relatively compliant and benevolent government in its place. Moreover, the long-term spectre is in the future.

The American presence in Iraq would have been unacceptable. On 19 March 2003, American cruise missiles hit Baghdad. Within three weeks, the US-led international coalition occupied the Iraqi capital, putting an end to a regime that Iran had failed to defeat during the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988).

Within a few months, Iran was implementing an aggressive hybrid war strategy aimed at frustrating US objectives in Iraq while temporarily attempting to reshape Iraqi political dynamics in its favour. The campaign was based on a military doctrine that, recognising the weakness of Iran's conventional forces, avoided direct confrontation with powerful adversaries. The doctrine avoided operations that could result in heavy casualties and instead focused on the use of unconventional and proxy forces.

Tehran trained a foreign militia, the second since the creation of Lebanese Hezbollah, composed of Iraqis. Iran has trained these militias by providing them with military technology to target Western military forces. The rapid collapse of Iraq's political stability, combined with the absence of a western strategy to prevent and contain Iran's intervention, allowed Tehran to manipulate the political evolution of the collapsed Arab state, along the lines of Lebanon's precedent of Lebanon in the 1980s. The Badr organisation, a militia formed in Iran in 1982 by exiled Iraqis and dissidents of Saddam Hussein, was deployed in Iraq in 2003 as a unit entirely dependent on Tehran to integrate itself into the pro-Iranian Shia component present in Iraq. The Badr aimed to disrupt and hinder the American occupation and influence in Iraq through political, social, and military means.

In 2011, Iran's forces and political allies were firmly established in Iraq, and Tehran's influence on Iraq's dynamics was a *fait accompli*, recognised even by the international community itself. While domestic US support for its involvement in Iraq had plummeted, there was little visible dissent from Iran about the Iranians for their government's role, even during the electoral unrest in 2009. Iran's experience in Iraq provided important lessons. The defiance of Western powers in Iraq showed that there were few red lines regarding Tehran's use of unconventional forces and militias by Tehran abroad. Iran paid no price for its repeated lethal attacks against coalition forces or its interference in Iraqi affairs.

The Iraqi conflict has also helped transform the role and stature of the Quds Force. The relationship of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the al-Quds Force, with the Supreme Leader strengthened considerably during this period. As a result, the dominance of the Quds Force's dominance in Iraq was in stark contrast to the limited role that the Iranian Foreign Ministry had, especially when the Quds Force appointed its senior officers as Iran's ambassadors to Baghdad. A significant challenge for Iran came with the rise of the Islamic State. The initial success of ISIS in Iraq in June 2014 forced Soleimani to play a more significant role in supporting Iraqi militias engaged in combat to support Iraqi allies to prevent the collapse of Iraq and the establishment of the Islamic State on Iran's western border of Iran. Iran transferred hundreds of advisers to the Iraqi government, shipped tons of weapons to the Kurds, and recalled Shia militias from Syria to confront ISIS forces, which seemed like they might threaten Baghdad at one

point. On the Iraqi battlefield, Iran found itself operating alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, also supported by Washington. To strengthen the effectiveness of Iraqi militias, Iran established Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) in June 2014. The PMUs were initially largely composed of Shia militias, as well as Christian, Sunni, and Turkmen forces. To bring these forces under greater control of the central government, the Iraqi government adopted a law in December 2016 that incorporated them into the Iraqi Armed Forces. In a March 2018 decree, PMU fighters received the same benefits as their counterparts in the Ministry of Defence, strengthening the militia's identity. In this way, Iran's influence on Shia elements belonging to these militias, as well as over Iraq, remained unchallenged.

### **The Syrian Crisis and the Implications for Iran**

The possible collapse of Syria in 2011 posed a threat to Iran, with the real risk of losing its only allied state in the region and the consequent loss of the logistical hinterland to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and reach the border with Israel and Jordan. The Syrian Arab Army, like the security structures, was not able to contain the protests in the country as it was structured to maintain a conventional war with Israel and control the other institutional apparatuses. However, the possibility of exploiting air bridges and sending militias combined with the West's failure of the West to contain Iran in the nuclear negotiation phase (JCPOA) allowed Tehran to shape a strategy capable of achieving its goals without questioning its fundamental principles.

However, the employment doctrine was quite different from Iraq in 2003 and 2008. It was not a matter of supporting irregular militias to attack US forces. In Syria, Soleimani needed to strengthen the capacity of a regular army engaged in fighting rebels supported by the Gulf monarchies and, to a lesser extent, the US. In early 2011, Tehran had sent a small group of senior officers of the Quds Force to Syria to assess the situation. Syria's limited military capabilities immediately emerged, as well as the criticality of combat in urban environments. Thanks to the use of Iraqi airspace, Iran was able to start to transfer troops, vehicles, and ammunition, passing a huge number of civilian and military flights as humanitarian aid.

Despite widespread awareness of Iran's growing military involvement in Syria, the international community did not attempt to cut off Iran's air link to Damascus. Extraterritorial exposure of Iran, in terms of troops and means, required an internal narrative to contain the opposition. The media and religious institutions initially disguised or downplayed involvement in Syria, describing the interventions as necessary to protect the Shia community and the important shrines, including Sayeda Zeinab, from the threat of the Sunni militia. The progressive

involvement of hundreds of Quds Force and Hezbollah troops providing intelligence, training, and battlefield support in Syria made this narrative increasingly difficult to sustain.

The evidence of the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in the conflict, first denounced by anti-Assad opposition groups, continued to increase in 2012 and 2013, which is confirmed by the numerous and undeniable obituaries of Lebanese fighters who died in the conflict. The first accounts of the presence of Hezbollah militia operating in Syria date back to August 2011 and were mainly accounts from members of the Syrian opposition. At that stage, the Party of God had not publicly declared its military involvement in Syria alongside Assad's forces. Although Hezbollah had supported the various popular uprisings that had characterised the Arab Spring, the attitude towards what had been happening since March 2011 in Syria was quite different and not understandable in a part of the Arab world. The Party of God began to advance the thesis that there was a project hostile to the axis of resistance (formed by Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran) behind the uprisings against Assad.

In April 2013, the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, publicly stated that what was going on in Syria was a clash between those who wanted the destruction of Syria and those who feared the repercussions of the crisis in the entire area<sup>4</sup>. For the first time, Nasrallah confirmed the presence of Hezbollah's militia in Syria and affirmed the need to fight extremists, Takfiri. The real military objectives of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria were to strengthen the military capabilities of the Assad regime's military capabilities, aiding and training to the Syrian army and then directly fighting the various Syrian opposition groups, and to guarantee the communication routes between Damascus and Libya from rebel incursions. They also aimed to ensure that, if Assad fell, a possible Sunni regime on the border with Lebanon that was hostile to Jabhat al-Muqawamah would not be born<sup>5</sup>. In an interview with Hezbollah's head of international affairs, Sayyed Ammad al-Mussawi, called the military intervention in Syria a pre-emptive war. This occurred in October 2013, and the possibility of an intervention by the international community against Assad, who was accused of ordering the Ghouta chemical attack, had just vanished. On that occasion, the Hezbollah exponent said that the fall of Assad would pave the way for the proliferation of fundamentalist militias and warlords<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the Iranian narrative began to emphasise the

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<sup>4</sup> *Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah in Syria pledge*, BBC, 30 April 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22360351>

<sup>5</sup> Bressan M., Tangherlini L. (2014), *Lebanon in the abyss of the Syrian crisis*, Albe-robello: Poiesis.

<sup>6</sup> Bressan M., 'If Assad falls, Syria will become a new Somalia', in *Panorama.it*, 7 October 2013, <https://www.panorama.it/news/hezbollah-libano-siria-assad-unifil>.

importance of victory against opposition forces, Syria was described as Iran's 35th province, and the conviction spread that if Syria were lost, Tehran could not be defended.

Despite this, in early 2013, Iranian involvement only seemed to slow the inevitable end of Bashar al Assad's regime. It was at this stage that Qassem Soleimani proved decisive in changing the fate of the battlefield by convincing Assad to stabilise the southern and western front rather than dispersing forces across the whole territory. In parallel, the Quds Force was working on a reorganisation of the various Syrian paramilitary forces into a new 50,000-strong unit called the National Defence Forces (NDF). Iran increased the number of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias in Syria (Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Badr, and Kataib Hizbullah). On the diplomatic front, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif embarked on a campaign against US and Sunni support to the Syrian opposition forces. The strategy change imposed by the commander of the Quds Force, General Qassem Suleimani, succeeded in reversing the trend and enabled the recapture of some strategic locations for the regime. Significant for this situation on the ground was the recapture by the regime of Bashar al Assad and his allies in the city of Al-Qusayr.

After a clash and siege that lasted from 19 May to 5 June 2013, Iranian forces, together with Hezbollah and Syrian forces, recaptured the city of Qusayr, which is both an important junction to ensure communication between Damascus and the Syrian coast and a gateway to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. The valley is a key passage for troops and weapons from Syria to Lebanon. With the help of thousands of Hezbollah, Iranian, and Iraqi fighters, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad achieved one of his most important military victories by forcing the withdrawal of opposition forces from the city of al-Qusayr. The city is located in Homs province, an area central to the success of Assad's overall military strategy. Rebel control of al-Qusayr had disrupted the regime's key supply line of the regime from the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and allowed the cross-border movement of weapons to rebels. Control of al-Qusayr secured the lines of communication of the regime from Damascus to the coast<sup>7</sup>. The fall of al-Qusayr thus altered the balance of power on the ground and represented a crucial turning point in the civil war. With the control of al-Qusayr, the regime was able to strengthen its position in Homs province and better position itself to retake areas in the north and east.

Despite the successes, the intensity of the conflict, the low morale of Assad's forces and the need to recall Iraqi forces to Iraq in 2014 after the fall of Mosul to ISIS meant that Iran had to resort to new forces to shore up Syria's hold. Thus, Afghan (Hazari fighters) and Pakistani forces were trained, and then suffered high

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<sup>7</sup> O'Bagy E., 'The fall of Al-Qusayr', in *Institute for the Study of War*, 6 June 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>

losses on the battlefield. At the end of 2014, Iran sent hundreds of militia forces, increasingly sophisticated missiles, and UAVs to Syria; even elements of the Iranian Armed Forces (Artesh) were deployed. The Syrian forces found themselves increasingly operating under Iranian control, and Tehran found itself immersed in a conflict that it could not unilaterally win militarily, but from which withdrawal or defeat would be politically and strategically unacceptable. Moreover, Iran's growing presence in Syria led to a new relationship with Damascus that offered long-term advantages in terms of projection of power that Iran could not afford to lose.

However, 2015 began poorly for Iran and its Syrian allies. Fighting in Aleppo was at a stalemate, the Syrian opposition continued to receive more and more military aid and took control of Idlib. Meanwhile, ISIS advanced to conquer Palmyra, famous for its archaeological UNESCO heritage site. Assad controlled about one-sixth of Syrian territory, the rest controlled by opposition forces, Kurdish militias, and Islamic State militias. For Iran, the balance of the Syrian conflict was also becoming increasingly challenging with the loss of 18 senior officers and more than 400 casualties (including Afghans and Iranians) in the field since 2012. Despite a media campaign aimed at highlighting the successes and the need to protect Shia shrines in Syria, the situation still appeared untenable. The weaknesses of Soleimani's strategy were lack of air support, advanced artillery, missile coordination, and special operations partners.

In July 2015, Soleimani personally went to Moscow to negotiate directly with Putin about Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict. Soleimani, therefore, explained to Russian interlocutors how Assad's defeats could turn into successes with Moscow's support<sup>8</sup>. On 30 September 2015, Russia launched its first bombings in Syria and, in mid-April 2016, launched bombers from the Iranian air base in Hamadan, allowing more autonomy in striking targets in Syria. This was the first time since World War II that a foreign state conducted military operations from Iran. On 26 December 2016, Russia was decisive in the recapture of Aleppo by the government forces of Bashar al-Assad. Although the war continued and its ferocity was unabated, the recapture of Aleppo ensured the survival of Bashar al-Assad's survival.

The conflict in Syria allowed Tehran to test its ballistic missiles against ISIS militia troops (18 June 2017) and Sunni groups hostile to the IRGC (30 September 2018). The two incidents demonstrated the missile capabilities to both Israel and Saudi Arabia. The new capabilities of Iranian ballistic missiles emerged, even

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<sup>8</sup> Bassam L., Perry T., 'How Iran's general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow', in *Reuters*, 6 October 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

in the face of spectacularising by the Iranian media. The potential domestic criticism of Iran's foreign policy was also mitigated by the terrorist attacks on Iranian soil in Ahvaz and Chabahar in 2018, which justified the need for extra-terrorist operations. Although the scale of the losses in troops and resources would eventually be high (more than 2,000 Iranians, not counting militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), the internal opposition never reached a level where Iranian leaders had to consider compromising on objectives, let alone withdrawing from the conflict. Iran's sacrifices had saved an ally, extended its regional power projection, and provided its forces with valuable battlefield experience.

Tehran's forces had also gained significant military experience (particularly in air support of combat operations, through joint operations with Russia. Militarily and politically, Hezbollah, a terrorist organisation for the United States, Israel, the United Kingdom and other states, also had gained more influence in the region through its intervention in Syria. From being a political movement and an armed Lebanese militia, Hezbollah, a *nonstate actor*, had risen to the status of a regional power. The militia forces of the Party of God had conducted military operations together with Assad's Armed Forces, Iranian militias, and Russian forces operating in Syria, which, unlike other Western countries, do not consider them a terrorist organisation. Hezbollah's entry of Hezbollah into the Syrian conflict represented a magnifying of the resilience of the Party of God. The party alienated itself from Lebanon, moving towards a regionalisation process, while at the same time gaining more weight within the country's institutions, even achieving its Christian-Maronite ally Michel Aoun elected to the presidency of Lebanon in 2016. The cohesion of Hezbollah's electoral base in the 2018 parliamentary elections confirmed that the intervention in Syria had by no means alienated the party's internal consensus of the party, but has instead strengthened it, despite the large number of militias killed in battle (approximately 2,500 out of 8,000). Through the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah have:

- acquired new combat skills;
- upgraded their equipment;
- increased the regional role as a state actor.

This was possible in light of the profound differences that were represented by the type of conflict compared to the combat methods used, until the 34-day war in 2006 that was conducted against the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Thus, Hezbollah went from conducting defensive actions, combined with forms of asymmetric warfare, characterising the conflicts with the IDF on Lebanese soil, to operations in Syrian territory, most often unknown and controlled by irregular militias. Additionally, Hezbollah has acquired the ability to conduct military operations with Russian air support and has found itself operating on the Syrian



battlefield alongside Afghan, Iraqi and Pakistani militias and regular armies, such as the Syrian Arab Army and Russian Armed Forces. Parallel to the new methods of employment, Hezbollah has increased its missile capabilities. In fact, it is estimated that Hezbollah is equipped with about 130,000 rockets.

In an analysis published in *Haaretz* in 2016 for the 10th anniversary of the 34-day war, it was pointed out that, in 2006, Hezbollah already had missiles with a range of 100 km capable of striking Haifa and that, over time, it had equipped itself with missiles that had a range of over 700 km. This made them capable of striking the city of Eilat in the Gulf of Aqaba<sup>9</sup>. If the performance of the Israeli antimissile system, Iron Dome, in the 2012, 2014, and 2021 wars in Gaza ensured the ability to shoot down 90% of the rockets, it is estimated that a war against Hezbollah could have more disastrous effects in which, in addition to the ability to intercept more rockets, it will be necessary to evacuate the population and improve, as is already being done, the warning systems and software that can predict with great precision where the rockets will fall. According to Israeli intelligence, in the event of a war on the northern front, the Israeli authorities would be forced to evacuate 78,000 people from about 50 municipalities in the area of at least four kilometres from the Lebanese border. In response to these developments, Israel has carried out more than a hundred attacks in Syria since the beginning of the war. More than two-thirds of these attacks, analysed by the Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), have hit missile targets such as storage depots, transport convoys, and missile batteries. Through these raids, Israel has contained arms transfers, has rejected Hezbollah's efforts and Iranian moves to establish itself in Syria close to the Israeli border<sup>10</sup>.

### **Lessons learnt from Iran's Engagement in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon**

In early 2019, Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon was an established reality, in a region where such a scenario would once have been unthinkable for the region's leaders, including those in Tehran. Iran had achieved much of this using transnational Shia militia, capable of fighting with skill and discipline and simultaneously facing different adversaries on very different battlefields. No country has been as active and perhaps as effective as Iran in regional conflicts in modern times. The list of Iranian actions against regional targets is long: Iranian

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<sup>9</sup> Harel A., Cohen G., "Hezbollah—From terror group to army", *Haaretz*, 12 July 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/st/c/prod/eng/2016/07/lebanon2/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, S.G., 'The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria', in *CSIS Briefs*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-conflict-hezbollah-syria>

personnel and equipment have conducted cyber attacks, naval attacks in the Red Sea, missile launches, and UAV attacks against Saudi Arabia. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Force operations have resulted in hundreds of Israeli airstrikes against Iran-backed militia sites, especially in Syria. Iran has also maintained small ground forces in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. The success of Iran's military doctrine has been based on a number of components:

- constant application of hybrid warfare techniques;
- deployment of senior officers and Al Quds forces;
- financial support, armaments;
- cyberwarfare and infowar;
- militia training;
- deployment of IRGC and Hezbollah nuclei, supply of UAVs, ballistic missiles, unmanned explosive boats;
- involvement of Artesh, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries;
- initial denial of involvement in the conflict followed by gradual admission as losses became undeniable;
- development of local militias on the Hezbollah model with political and security roles;
- exploitation of soft-power potential.

Despite the fronts in which Iran has been involved, Tehran has limited the number of personnel deployed abroad, relying mainly on a few senior staff officers, and specialists. On the contrary, the cost of its interventions abroad, assisting and training thousands of militias, including military supplies, cash, and oil, is more difficult to estimate. According to a study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the costs of interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen would be around \$ 16 billion. The annual financing of Hezbollah would amount to around 700 million dollars, several million of which would be added for the financing of the various Palestinian militias. In 2015, the UN envoy estimated that Iran spent \$6 billion on operations in Syria, although it was not clear how much of this came in cash or oil. These numbers show how the war in Syria represented the most significant expenditure in terms of foreign aid ever incurred by Iran.

### **Fighting conflicts on behalf of others: lessons learnt**

Since 2003, the Quds Force has created, armed, financed, trained, and transported a growing number of Shia (and sometimes also Sunni) militias capable of simultaneously fighting different opponents on different battlefields. Iranian militias—some of which only emerged after 2011—are said to number around 200,000. Iran's control over the operations of these militias varies. In some cases,

Iran only tries to influence their actions (e.g., with elements of the Taliban). In others, its aim is to enable partners with parallel interests (e.g., the Houthis and, to some extent, also Hezbollah). But in many cases, Iran's control has been direct (eg, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria). The Sunni component of this militant movement ( Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Taliban elements) highlight Iran's geological interests. The loyalty of these militias has been sufficient to achieve Iran's regional goals, while the cohesion among Iran's regional opponents has been weaker. The fact that thousands of Arabs fought for years under Iranian command showed that Tehran had partially overcome the traditional Arab–Persian hostility that had impeded its ability to build networks of influence in the region for many years.

Iran's allied militias are also evolving. Iraqi and Lebanese militias have provided Iran with a level of deployment capability abroad that was unthinkable a decade ago, allowing Tehran the opportunity to shirk responsibility for its regional interventions. The relations and partners in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen will allow Iran to maintain its influence on the political development and decision-making of Arab states. The Arab states that are survivors of the Arab Spring perceived Iran's growing role, unopposed internationally, as a threat to their security. This perception, also fuelled by partial disinterest, is of the United States in the region, has determined the choices of both Israel and the Sunni Arab states regarding the containment of Iran. Trump's exit from the JCPOA nuclear deal (2018), as well as the Abraham agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States (2020), and normalisation of the relations between Israel and Bahrain (2020) are a case study for 'balance of power'. Iran's willingness to undertake an assertive foreign policy to exploit the fissures in the international community has allowed the Quds Force to achieve results on the ground. This foreign policy was directed by the Supreme Leader but was dominated by two actors: Major General Soleimani, who coordinated with Iraqi, Russian, and Syrian leaders, and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, who focused on communication with the international community. Iran's interventions have validated an external military doctrine that emphasises hybrid warfare techniques and cooperation with state and substate actors.

Iran has been able to undermine international energy and transport arteries in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and to some extent in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb. A large number of Iranian military personnel have fought long and protracted conflicts over the years in which not only were strategic goals achieved, they were achieved at the expense of the Arab regional powers, Israel and the United States. This confidence is likely to influence Tehran's view of how to handle future conflicts. Iran's clients are well positioned to protect their interests, and the international community has yet to develop a strategy to dismantle

Tehran's militias, although the Trump administration has, through the policy of 'maximum pressure', countered Iranian proxies by killing Soleimani himself (3 January 2020). Tehran's execution of its military doctrine has allowed it to gain unprecedented regional influence during an equally unprecedented phase of conflict. Whether this doctrine can deliver substantial results in peacetime, as it did to some extent in Lebanon, will be tested in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere during the complex reconstruction phase, which is also aggravated by the pandemic emergency. If not, its influence could easily erode at the expense of external powers (the European Union, Russia, China, and the Gulf Monarchies)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Iran's Networks in the Middle East*, Dossier, The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), 2019.

## **15. The privatisation of war as a hybrid instrument: the case of Wagner**

BY MATTEO BRESSAN

The proliferation of nonstate actors in contemporary armed conflicts and post-conflict contexts has become increasingly evident since the end of the Cold War and has shaken the foundations of international humanitarian law and international relations themselves. The main theories of international relations only recognise states as the subjects authorised to legally employ force within their borders, the only ones that can confront each other by resorting to war as a means of dispute resolution, and the only ones entitled to enter into and enforce international treaties. With the end of the bipolar contraposition, a greater privatisation of security functions along with a commercialisation of security has become established. This has also occurred in light of the change in the role of the armed forces from a territorial defence instrument to a projectable device. The advent and massive diffusion of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSC) dates back to the end of the Cold War; it emerged with the American interventions in the early 1990s in the Balkans and continued in Iraq and the era of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). During that time, some 170,000 contractors were deployed alongside US military troops.

The distinguishing traits of PMSCs are the provision of security or military-related services and the organisation of services in a corporate form for profit. Therefore, it follows that PMSCs are legal entities, not natural persons. For this reason, they can easily change their identity by changing their company name or nationality. PMSCs tend to locate themselves where they find the most favourable production environment, both for market reasons and in relation to legal and regulatory elements. What distinguishes PMSCs from mercenaries is, first and foremost, their ability to mobilise thousands of troops, employ expensive materials, and differentiate their services. These, in fact, are not limited to armed activities, such as the protection of personnel or the conduct of entire military campaigns, but extend to advisory and training activities, vehicle and material maintenance, catering or laundry services in conflict areas, satellite surveillance, intelligence, and the employment of interrogation specialists. To these typologies, the political scientist Deborah Avant also added policing and surveillance

activities, which complement the nature and dual actions of PMSCs in both the international (military) and domestic (police and security) arena. This multiplicity of services makes it clear why these companies are defined as both military and security. In 2013, the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries estimated that the PMSC sector would generate a total dimension worth USD 244 billion in 2016; this was estimated to increase in 2019 to between USD 250 billion and 400 billion per year. To get an idea of the extent of the deployment of PMSCs in Iraq from 2002 to 2011, consider that a single contractor held between two-thirds and the total amount of the supply provided to the Department of Defence for about USD 46.5 billion for logistics and support, USD 2.7 billion for fuel supply, and USD 2.4 billion for vehicle maintenance and repair.

As these figures show, this is an ever-expanding sector in which a large number of private security companies, mainly American and British, but also French, Israeli, Russian, and South African, mostly made up of former military professionals, are working alongside international and local governmental armed and security forces.

### **The action of PMCs outside international law**

Currently, international legislation for PMSCs is deficient and lacks specific regulations of binding nature. Although the 1989 UN Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Merchandise considers its deployment 'a violation of international law', no international law prohibits the use of private companies for military and security purposes, such as armed guards, convoy escorts, weapons maintenance, prisoner detention and army training. International Humanitarian Law covers Private Military Companies (PMCs) as well as their employees and staff, but their status changes depending on the context, especially on their level of participation and type of activities in the given conflict. The first question that arises with regard to the participation of PMCs employed in conflicts is whether they are to be considered combatants or civilians. If PMCs are incorporated into the armed forces of one of the parties to the conflict, they are considered combatants. However, to be considered integrated within armed forces, PMCs must be commanded by a person in charge, have remotely recognisable insignia and badges, openly bear arms, and conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war. If, for example, the personnel of a PMC provide logistical and welfare support to one of the parties to the conflict; then, according to Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention, they would benefit from the legal status of prisoner if they were captured. Treatment would be different if PMC personnel were not attached to any of the parties to the conflict. In that case, such personnel would remain civilians and should not be targeted by

attacks. However, this protection would no longer apply in the event that PMC personnel were to be directly engaged in hostilities.

The protection of military bases from attack, intelligence gathering, and weapons use should also be considered as participation in hostile activities. In these cases, PMCs personnel may be attacked, and if taken prisoner, may be prosecuted. Another recurring element in the nature of PMCs is their assimilation to mercenaries. Defined and recognised in international law by Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention, they do not benefit from either combatant or prisoner-of-war status but are nevertheless entitled to a fair trial. Moreover, as already pointed out, the ability of PMCs to change their names to rebuild their image in the face of scandals, failures, and crimes provides them with an element of resilience, making them actors destined to remain present in security issues, both current and future.

A concrete attempt to define the international legal framework within which

The PMSCs operate on the 'Montreux Document'. The result of a 2006 initiative between the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross, this document was finalised on 17 September 2008. Experts and government officials from 17 countries participated in the determination of the Montreux Document along with representatives of the PMSCs themselves. Although it is not binding for the countries that drafted it or for the rest of the international community, the Montreux Document is certainly a first step towards a clear determination of the international legal framework in which PMSCs operate.

The document identifies three different types of state:

- Contracting States: countries that enter into contracts to obtain the services provided by PMSCs;
- Territorial States: states on whose territory PMSCs operate;
- Home States: States of nationality of PMSCs, that is, the states where these companies are registered or have their headquarters.

For each of these categories of states, the first part of the document lists the relevant legal obligations under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This part concludes with a specific list of legal duties concerning PMSCs and their personnel. The second part lists a series of good practices, i.e., 'correct practices' or 'good behaviour' to which you refer states and PMSCs should adhere: the former in concluding service contracts with these companies, the latter in their operations on the ground. These good practices, as specified in the document itself, derive from behaviour that already exists and is put into practice internationally as a consequence of the application of existing regulations on the use of weapons or armed services. The importance of the Montreux document lies in the fact that

it brings together and lists the obligations—already recognised as such by the international community—arising from IHL and international law more generally that apply to states in their relations with PMSCs and to the operation of PMSCs during armed conflicts<sup>1</sup>. To date, the Montreux document has been signed by 51 states (not including Russia), plus some regional organisations, such as the European Union, NATO, and the OSCE. By the very nature of the agreement, there are no non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or private companies. The Montreux Agreement does not constitute a legal constraint but brings together international norms to which states are subject.

The International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers Association of ICoCa, on the other hand, is a code of conduct directly addressed to PMSCs and not to states and is therefore complementary to the Montreux document. The agreement was first signed in 2013 thanks to the interest of multiple stakeholders; today, it has 146 members, including seven states, 100 PMSCs, and 39 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Additionally, there are four member companies and 41 external observers (academics, NGOs, and others). The code aims to regulate the activities of PMSCs and the personnel employed by them. Like the Montreux document, the first part mentions the international standards that must be complied with by PMSCs, and the second part contains operational guidelines on the management and performance of the activities of a security company<sup>2</sup>.

In today's international scenario, Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) continue to be increasingly present in major conflicts and post-conflict areas due to the continuous demand from customers who depend on them for operational capabilities. There are also several reasons why customers employ PMSCs. The first motivation is necessity, as there are no alternative options for their deployment. These situations range from a government that is besieged in its capital by rebel forces to a company committed to defending its personnel, its facilities, or its own vessels in areas where the security provided by public apparatuses is lacking. Again, due to the necessity of the services offered, illegal actors must ensure that they have the means they need to achieve their goals.

The second range of motivations for the use of PMSCs is related to the political benefits that can be reaped through their use. A government can try to maintain consensus towards a military operation through the use of PMSCs: This reduces the levels of mobilisation required by employing private rather than

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<sup>1</sup> Pedrini G. (2009), *Regole internazionali per i contractors: le compagnie private militari e di sicurezza e l'iniziativa del Montreux Document*, Informazioni della Difesa, No. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Private Military Security Companies in the African Context*, IFI Security, 28 November 2020, <https://ifisecurity.com/le-private-military-security-companies-nel-contesto-africa-no/>



public personnel and limits the number of uniformed casualties, which are often difficult for the public to metabolise. Another advantage is the so-called *plausible deniability*: PMSCs make it possible to maintain a low profile and possibly limit the sender's liability. In spite of legal issues, PMSCs enjoy sufficient legitimacy capital to make them engage not only private individuals and states, but also the UN itself.

### **Russian PMCs: An Instrument of hybrid warfare**

Although Russian PMCs have caught the attention of the West in recent years, the use of semi-state forces is not new in Russian history; it dates back to tsarist times with the employment of the Cossacks. The Russian Tsars used semi-state forces to pacify unrest inside and on the borders of Russia, but, in 1919, the Cossacks became a target of Bolshevik terror. Thousands were murdered in the process of 'decosacking'. Those who managed to survive lost the relative degree of autonomy they had enjoyed under the tsars. The Kremlin decided to suppress the Cossack identity, as it did with other minorities. However, the Soviet Union continued to make extensive use of nonstate actors in its military activities. The so-called 'People's Volunteer Guard' operated within the USSR along with Soviet police and abroad in various countries in guerrilla operations that served Moscow's interests. Alongside this type of militia, the USSR also employed 'volunteers' to work alongside regular forces against foreign governments. The PMCs emerged in Russia ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union when, as a consequence of the reduction of the Russian armed forces, several former military personnel found employment in these companies both at home and abroad. Private security companies were legitimised to operate domestically in 1992, when President Boris Yeltsin passed Federal Law No. 2487, and these companies, sometimes called 'volunteer detachments', played an essential role in protecting emerging companies, individuals and oligarchs between 1990 and 2000. It was a deeply uncertain decade, in terms of the rule of law, that characterised post-Soviet Russia. Although predominantly concentrated at home, PSCs started to act as contractors abroad. Thousands of former Soviet soldiers, mainly from the Russian Federation and Ukraine, began their experience as contractors abroad in Africa in the 1990s and 2000s, mainly in the former client states of the USSR, or in those countries subject to sanctions and with poor relations with the West, such as Angola, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. Another nonstate actor operating in post-Soviet Russia, in continuity with the tradition of the USSR, are the Cossacks. Under a law introduced by Vladimir Putin in 2005 concerning the Cossack Russian Services, the Cossacks have seen their role as a paramilitary and counter-insurgency force expanded in

situations such as the operations in Chechnya. Although used for soft-power activities in Slavic countries, such as the Republica Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro, they also participated as auxiliary forces in the conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. In the history of post-Soviet Russia, the category of 'volunteers' has also played the role of an auxiliary non-state force, particularly in Transnistria (1992), Abkhazia (1993) and Yugoslavia, where hundreds of Russian volunteers supported the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic in both 1992 and 1999 in the war in Kosovo. More recently, in 2014, some 3,000 volunteers joined separatist forces in Ukraine. Their role and participation in the Ukrainian conflict left several questions unanswered, starting with the more or less covert coordination of these activities by Moscow and their real and genuine spontaneity.

Regardless of the real motivations, the role of these mercenaries, nationalists, and even adventurers with dubious military capabilities contributed to political propaganda, demonstrating supposed popular support. As Russia's political stability improved in the early 2000s, the private security sector became more regulated. During this period, PSCs were legalised for use abroad and were used to protect Russian state infrastructure, carry out antipiracy and demining missions, and provide security services in Iraq. At that time, the discussion among Russian military analysts about the role of PMCs focused on three aspects:

- the threat posed to Russia by American PMCs and their alleged involvement in the 'coloured revolutions' in Syria, Libya, and on Russia's borders;
- possible gains for Russia;
- the use of PMCs as a means to promote Russian national interests.

In 2012, a former Russian intelligence officer, Aleksandr Kanchukov, pointed out that PMCs had several operational advantages, such as operational capability, accountability, effectiveness, professionalism, and an undeniable financial advantage. PMCs represented a viable alternative to regular armed forces for providing security in unstable areas, rapid solutions to problems, and containment of the armed forces risks. According to this reading, it is much more profitable to sign a contract with a private company to operate the security of an oil or gas company than to send troops and maintain a garrison. Furthermore, in cases where the state did not want to be affiliated with the participation of PMCs or was intending to carry out 'dirty operations', PMCs would be perfect.

These considerations also emerged at higher levels in 2012, when parliamentary Aleksei Mitrofanov asked Putin whether, in light of the estimated business volume of American PMCs of around USD 350 billion, Russia should also engage in this sector. At the time, Putin confirmed the interest and need to examine the issue and emphasised that PMCs were an instrument for the pursuit of na-

tional interests without direct state involvement. Although Russia subsequently profited from these activities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, efforts to legalise PMCs have stalled. Although some PSCs continue to perform demining, personnel protection, and antipiracy services abroad, since 2013, PMCs have focused on promoting Russian interests through some high-risk missions conducted by the Moran Security Group and Wagner.

According to Washington Institute analyst Anna Borshchevskaya, the use of PMCs has grown exponentially under the Putin presidency, compared to Yeltsin's time in office. Since the hybrid conflict in Ukraine in 2014, Russian PMCs, and especially Wagner, have acted, despite their private nature, as a Kremlin force multiplier, extending Moscow's geopolitical reach and interests through arms trafficking, political consultants, military personnel training, and local security forces. One of the many reasons Russia uses such groups is to undermine the ability of its adversaries to make clear and swift decisions. In an interview for *The Inquiry* on the BCC, Columbia University Political Science Professor Kimberly Marten pointed out that PMCs are a component of information warfare (in-fowar), in which Putin's goal is to confuse his opponents and prevent them from reacting in the face of the difficulty of polluting them. The definition of Russian PMCs is also a debated issue in relation to the different ways in which Western PMCs are used. According to Jamestown Foundation researcher Sergei Sukhankin, four categories of companies can be distinguished in Russia, each providing specific services:

Military supply companies that offer their customers tactical support during the war.

- military operations (including direct participation in hostilities);
- military consulting companies that provide assistance to clients on issues related to strategic planning and reform of military forces. They can also train military personnel and provide guidance on the use of new types of weapons;
- military support companies that provide auxiliary functions, for example, in the field of intelligence;
- private security companies [PSCs], dealing with crisis management, risk assessment, security consulting, demining, or training of local law enforcement agencies.

For Russian PMCs, it is impossible to find complete and accessible information about them from open sources, and their functions often overlap in a way that prevents them from fitting into the rigid schematic shown above. Therefore, for this analysis, we will define PMCs as companies managed or composed mainly of Russian personnel operating in most cases on behalf of clients (Russian Federation, other governments or private individuals) that provide tactical sup-

port during military operations (including combat), training of military personnel, and other military support services. Versatile yet cost-effective, PMCs are the ideal tool for a superpower in decline, but eager to pursue its international agenda without exposing itself to excessive risk. They can be used both to stabilise friendly regimes in trouble, as happened in Syria, and as a form of cover for the activities of Russian special forces. In the nonkinetic initial phases of low intensity conflicts, PMCs can also play a protective role for Moscow's strategic assets abroad (Gazprom, Rosneft, Rosatom, Russian Railways, etc.). Unlike Western PMCs (Academi, formerly Blackwater), which are rarely deployed in offensive operations, Russian PMCs preemploy infantry, mechanised infantry, military advisers, armoured troops, and artillery units.

Finally, there are other, lesser-known uses of PMCs that involve promoting Russian nationalism abroad, including in the West, conducting tactical training courses for civilians and international arms sales. Russian PMCs are not entirely independent entities run by professional managers that are clearly distant from governments, as is the case in the UK or the US, but rather are deployed abroad to conduct missions, including high-intensity combat, and pursue objectives largely set by Moscow. Western and Russian sources often refer to Wagner as a PMC, but it does not fit into the widely used definitions despite performing some functions similar to PMCs. It is difficult to consider Wagner a commercial entity operating on the market due to the secrecy surrounding it and its functional origin to serve Putin's needs.

However, there are companies in Russia that can be called PMCs. The RSB-Group and the Moran Security Group, for example, predate Wagner and are, in part, comparable to Western PMCs. The founders of these groups are former employees of the Russian armed forces and security service, while maintaining relations with the state, work mainly on a commercial level. Several key problems arise when analysing Russian PMCs. One is the problem of definition. There is no single internationally recognised term to describe PMCs. The 2001 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Charging of Mercenaries provides a definition of a mercenary, but mercenaries differ from PMCs. Mercenaries only fight for their own gain. PMCs are companies with broader interests, relations with the state, and the ability to build a base with public customers. In some contexts, Russian PMCs fall under the chain of command and control of the Russian Ministry of Defence or the intelligence agencies FSB and GRU. Factors that would corroborate this hypothesis have emerged from Wagner's possession of exclusive GRU equipment. Russian PMCs also tend to coordinate on the battlefield with the host country's forces, as in the Syrian case where Wagner operated with Bashar al Assad's regular forces, but also with various Shia militias, such as the Afghan Liwa al-Fatimiyoun, the Iraqi Shia militias,

Liwa al-Baqir, and the Lebanese Hezbollah<sup>3</sup>.

### **Wagner as a multiplier of Russia's influence**

Russia's best-known Private Military Company (PMC), Wagner, is run by Yevge-niy Prigozhin, nicknamed Vladimir Putin's 'chef'<sup>4</sup>. Understanding Wagner requires an analysis of the figure of Prigozhin and his position within Putin's regiment.

Prigozhin is the main manager of Wagner, although he denies any association with it. His biography does not make him a natural candidate to manage the Kremlin's mercenaries. He has no background in the military or security services, nor does he have decades of personal ties to Putin, a hallmark of the President's circle. After a stint in prison for robbery and fraud in the late Soviet period, Prigozhin established himself as a manager of exclusive restaurants in St. Petersburg. In the mid 2000s, after hosting Putin in his restaurants, Prigozhin insinuated himself into the president's circle, eventually managing the Kremlin's catering, earning him the nickname 'Putin's chef'. Using Wagner and the troll factory to support Putin's ambitious national and geopolitical interests and proving his personal worth, Prigozhin has strengthened his claim to valuable state resources and power. Prigozhin has used his ties to the Kremlin to profit from natural resources in areas where Wagner operates, as was the case in Syria from 2016–2017, when Bashar al-Assad's regime agreed to pay for Wagner's services. Prigozhin and Wagner agreed that Prigozhin's company would benefit from a quarter of the profits from the oil and gas fields it seized on behalf of the Assad regime. When Wagner was subsequently deployed in Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR), the Russian government helped to reach agreements for the rights to potential diamond and gold deposits that would then be exploited by Prigozhin-related companies. These agreements have a minor impact on the Russian economy, but are intended as a reward for Prigozhin, helping him to finance and profit from Wagner in return for supporting the Kremlin's foreign policy ambitions.

Although there have been some tensions between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defence, especially in Syria, Wagner would continue to charge within GRU structures. Wagner cannot exist without Putin's blessing, and Prigozhin probably needs the Kremlin's approval for decisions on the strategic level and how, where, and when Wagner should be deployed. Wagner may have been founded

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<sup>3</sup> Bressan, M., 'Hybrid Warfare and Private Military Companies—The Case of Wagner', *Start Insight*, April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Carrer G., *Prigozhin, perché gli Usa affondano lo "chef" di Putin*, 'Formiche', 23 September 2020, <https://formiche.net/2020/09/prigozhin-perche-gli-usa-affondano-lo-chef-di-putin/>

by a former GRU member, Dmitry Utkin, after playing a decisive role in the Crimean conflict in March 2014 and participating in the insurgency in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Prigozhin, under sanctions by the US Treasury Department, was indicted by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller for his management of the Internet Research Agency, a troll factory used for disinformation campaigns behind Russian interference in the US 2016 presidential election. According to a dossier published by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Wagner, before being deployed abroad, conducted additional activities with the support of Russian military and intelligence agencies in two camps located near the 10th Spetsnaz Special Missions Brigade based in Mol'kino in the Krasnodar region<sup>5</sup>. While the US has partially withdrawn its military forces from parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, Russia has expanded its influence in these and other areas. However, instead of deploying conventional Russian forces, Moscow has turned to special forces, intelligence units, and private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group to pursue its interests. Russia's strategy appears to be simple: undermine the influence of the US to Moscow's advantage by using its own low-profile forces such as PMCs that can perform multiple tasks, from providing security to foreign leaders to training, advising, and assisting security forces. The lack of legal status of the PMCs, which are not recognised by the Russian constitution, is one of the most convenient features to perpetrate hybrid forms of warfare, which can be seen in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine. Technically, PMCs are outlawed under Article 359 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The opacity, if not the grey area, within which the PMCs operate allows Russia to distance itself from actions and crimes that would cause embarrassment, violate international laws, political commitments, and even cause diplomatic incidents, if not outright conflicts, if they were to be blamed on Moscow<sup>6</sup>. Analysts say that since PMCs are not responsible for the actions and crimes, they are not responsible for the crimes they commit. Analysts say that since the Russian government does not officially recognise the existence of mercenaries, it can deny any Russian casualties in the field, thus maintaining a low-profile military presence. Consequently, PMCs provide immunity from international law.

This arrangement has facilitated the Kremlin's denial of its involvement with the PMCs in Syria. Furthermore, the use of private soldiers instead of Russian

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<sup>5</sup> Katz B., Jones S.G., Doxsee C., Harrington N. (2020), *The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies; Id., *Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Stronski, P., *Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 June 2020.

armed forces for small-scale operations abroad offers several advantages, including the fact that the government can use force without risking casualties among regular military forces, which can be politically costly<sup>7</sup>. Moscow's use of PMCs has therefore become increasingly popular in recent years, highlighting lessons learnt from previous experiences and a growing expansionist will combined with the desire to gain economic, geopolitical, and military advantages. Wagner, on the strength of its successes in Ukraine and Syria, is now considered the most important Russian PMC and has spread to African countries (Libya, Mali, Sudan, Central African Republic, Madagascar, and Mozambique) between 2017 and 2020, and to Latin America (Venezuela) since 2017. According to Samuel Ramani of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Russia is consolidating and exporting to Africa a counter-insurgency model that was tested in Syria, which presents authoritarian stability as the most effective solution to counter extremism. On the whole, according to an analysis by Chiara Lovotti and Arturo Varvelli for *Limes*, Russia has recorded significant successes in the Middle East and North Africa, making it an increasingly credible partner and even a reliable mediator<sup>8</sup>. It is specifically the Syrian experience, according to the BBC, that would have been emerging.

I know that Syrian officers earn up to 300,000 roubles per month. Wagner's mercenaries can earn 150,000 roubles (more than 2,000 euros) per month, and that amount can be doubled in the case of quarterly commitments. A co-mercenary can earn up to three times as much. If a mercenary dies, his family receives less than EUR 50,000, a substantial sum in Russia. Pavel Felgenhauer, analyst and editor at *Novaya Gazeta*, told *Euronews* that 'in Russia, there is a huge pool of people willing to fight.' Basically, veterans from the Donbass, where today there is not much fighting and you don't get paid well'. It is more convenient for Russia to have them at the front in Libya than at home because 'they are people with direct combat experience, they do not know how to organise themselves in a peaceful way of life, and they can be a political threat'<sup>9</sup>.

According to *Foreign Policy*, the group was partially disgraced by an incident

<sup>7</sup> *Russia's use of its private military companies*, International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), December 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2020/russias-use-of-its-private-military-companies>.

<sup>8</sup> Lovotti C., Varvelli A., 'Wagner nel deserto: che cosa cercano i russi in Cirenaica', in *Limes*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.limesonline.com/cartaceo/wagner-nel-deserto-che-co-sa-cercano-i-russi-in-cirenaica?prv=true>.

<sup>9</sup> Montalto Monella L., 'Chi sono i mercenari russi del Wagner Group che combattono in Libia con Haftar', *Euronews*, 18 December 2019, <https://it.euronews.com/2019/12/18/chi-sono-i-mercenari-russi-del-wagner-group-che-combattono-in-libia-con-haftar>.

in Syria, the details of which are unclear. The episode is emblematic of the opacity that characterises the relations between the Russian Defence Ministry and Wagner. At that juncture, some Wagner men had attacked a gas plant in the province of Deir Ezzor, which was garrisoned by US special forces. The US warned its Russian counterpart, but the Russian side denied knowing of Wagner's advance. The Pentagon ordered air strikes, which then resulted in heavy losses to Wagner (between 300 and 600 dead). It is unclear why Prigozhin took a risk that could have triggered a direct escalation with the US military, although resource hoarding may have been a factor. What is certain is that, afterward, Prigozhin had to assure the circle that such a mistake would not be repeated<sup>10</sup>.

The incident, which has never been fully confirmed by Moscow, not only increased tensions between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defence, but also seems to have marked a partial decline for the company, which is said to have sought new opportunities and spaces in Africa in the support of local militias and private security contracts<sup>11</sup>.

Wagner's deployment in Africa, before the intervention in Libya, was characterised by carrying out training and support activities for friendly regimes, rather than the pure combat tasks adopted in Ukraine and Syria. Wagner's entry into Africa has allowed Moscow to fill the partial vacuum left by the United States and western countries through political, economic and security accords. In this sense, Russia is emerging as the leading arms seller in Africa; between 2014 and 2018, it supplied 49% of the arms in North Africa and 28% in sub-Saharan Africa; as more African states grapple with insurgencies, more require Russian arms<sup>12</sup>. With suspected or proven operations in up to 30 countries on four continents and an increasingly refined and adaptable operational model, PMCs are likely to play a significant role in Russian strategy soon. However, Moscow's strategic gains to date from the deployment of Wagner in Sudan and the Central African Republic are not obvious. The Kremlin may have gained influence in remote locations for a relatively low price, but its opportunities in Africa are likely to be rather poor compared to the capabilities China has brought to bear through trade and infrastructure agreements.

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<sup>10</sup> Reynolds N. (2019), *Putin's not-so-secret mercenaries: patronage, geopolitics and the Wagner Group*, Carnegie, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>.

<sup>11</sup> Hauer N., "The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army", *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/06/rise-fall-russian-private-army-wagner-syrian-civil-war/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ramani S., *Russia Takes its Syrian Model of Counterinsurgency to Africa*, RUSI Commentary, 9 September 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-takes-its-syrian-model-counterinsurgency-africa>.



Finally, it is not clear what Moscow wants to achieve in the long run from establishing these relations beyond planting its flag in the heart of Africa and rapidly occupying the spaces left by other actors. Such actions, in the long run, may not strengthen President Putin's national and international position.



## 16. Afghanistan 2001-2021: the Taliban conquest and the end of the longest war

BY CLAUDIO BERTOLOTTI

The US commitment to Afghanistan began as a consequence of the attacks of 11 September 2001, which were attributed to the terrorist organisation *al-Qa'ida* operating from Afghan (and also Pakistani) bases. On 12 September 2001, UN Resolution 1368 granted the United States the right to intervene militarily in Afghanistan. The subsequent Resolution 1373 on 28 September 2001 led, on 7 October 2001, to the military operation Enduring Freedom, which ended in November of the same year with the overthrow of the Taliban regime. An occupation policy followed the end of military operations based on the establishment of a transitional government, representative elections with universal suffrage, reintegration of political and religious leaders who had compromised with the past regime, removal of other less flexible ones, and the establishment of new national security forces to control the territory. Militarily, the United States and NATO progressively engaged in a counter-insurgency war aimed at containing the territorial expansion of the Taliban movement and the presence of terrorist groups including *al-Qa'ida* and, as of 2014, the *Islamic State Khorasan*, the Afghan franchise of what was ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

After 20 years of warfare, the attempt to realise the goals of *nationbuilding* in parallel with conducting a counter-insurgency war, Washington made the decision to give up stabilising the country and initiated a total disengagement, which was sanctioned and partially realised at the end of 2012 by President Barack Obama's administration, and was concluded by the administrations of President Donald Trump, who accelerated the final stages of withdrawal to the beginning of 2021, and President Joe Biden. The US withdrawal was followed by the sudden collapse of the Afghan state in the summer of 2021 and ended with the conquest of the capital Kabul on 15 August 2021, and the subsequent proclamation of the Islamic Taliban *Islamic Emirate* on 19 August 2021, which was the 102nd anniversary of Afghanistan's independence from the British Empire.

The engagement of Washington and NATO allies in Afghanistan, which was the longest war ever fought by the United States and the Atlantic Alliance, ended on the night of 30 August 2021, with the departure of the last US soldier, Gene-

ral Chris Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. This departure, marked in the last days by the attempted escape of hundreds of thousands of Afghan citizens via an international airlift, left the country in a state of absolute chaos and with the Taliban free to take revenge on old and new enemies. Most of them were employees of the Kabul administration, former military and police officers, human rights activists, journalists, and magistrates. Individuals were rounded up through house-to-house searches and there were summary shootings and general violence.

### **Evolution of the Taliban phenomenon**

The insurgent phenomenon has never been a compact and unitary reality. Instead, the Taliban movement is said to be composed of about forty different militant groups, some organised into political factions, others based on tribal, ethnic, or geographical affiliations. This gives a sense of the heterogeneous nature of the organisation and the difficulty in estimating how many insurgents have actually been operational on the 'battlefield' over the 20 years of the war. In 2007, military *intelligence* sources estimated between 5,000 and 7,000 militants. However, official Pakistani sources reported about 15,000 militants, including the Pashtun tribal militias<sup>1</sup>. In 2009, however, the Afghan Ministry of Interior estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 fighters were engaged against the central government and international troops<sup>2</sup>. At the beginning of 2021, US *intelligence* estimated that there were around 60,000 operational militants out of approximately 200,000 total elements,<sup>3</sup> mainly located in the eastern and southern regions of Afghanistan, but capable of moving and in many cases 'operate' both militarily and politically administratively (through so-called 'shadow governors') in at least 80% of the territory. In the last months before Kabul's fall, the overall number increased by tens of thousands of fighters, galvanised by the fast-moving offensive that, in just a few weeks, drove the local government representatives and the remaining security forces out of the country's peripheral areas of the country.

Although these numbers have been validated by NATO, they have yet to be verified.

considered as 'approximate' and would not have suffered any setbacks despite the *raids* and direct actions of the United States and NATO itself. In terms of

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<sup>1</sup> The Human Cost, *The consequences of insurgent attacks in Afghanistan*, Human Rights Watch, Vo. 19, No. 6(C), April 2007, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Xinhua, 'The number of Afghan Insurgents Grow Rapidly Since 2006', in *Daily outlook Afghanistan*, 11 October 2009, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Giustozzi, A. (2017), *Afghanistan: Taliban's organisation and structure*, Oslo: Landinfo.

operational capacity, these numbers would be confirmed by the high *turnover* capable of quickly replacing even heavy losses, enlisting new recruits between Pashtun and non-Pashtun communities<sup>4</sup>.

The nature of the Taliban is fluid, variable, and adaptable to different situations, and this characteristic has allowed them to penetrate every district and every village;<sup>5</sup> by 2010, their presence was already registered in all 34 Afghan provinces where, little by little and in different ways, they have imposed a 'shadow government' that can exert a control that is difficult to oppose. In the same year, 80% of Afghanistan was 'garrisoned by the Taliban with a permanent character' and another 17% was 'substantial'.

The Taliban offensive started in 2005 and continued to intensify steadily and inexorably in 2007–2008, leading, despite the military *surge in 2010–2011*, to a progressive reduction of the territory controlled by NATO and coalition forces. To all intents and purposes, be defined as an encirclement manoeuvre of the international armed forces, and the central government has inexorably tightened around Kabul itself<sup>6</sup>.

### Taliban territorial expansion

The operational offensive and territorial expansion of the Taliban have highlighted the limitations of Afghan security forces, which were unable to counter or contain the insurgency on the battlefield; but at the same time, this has highlighted the ability of the insurgent groups to impose themselves well beyond the peripheral and rural areas, as well as through the capacity of negotiations conducted by the Taliban shadow governors and tribal and local relations.

After the end of the Isaf<sup>7</sup> mission at the end of 2014, and the consequent reduction in the foreign military presence that was limited to NATO's Resolute Mission, Afghanistan was left in a chaotic scenario; in particular, the Afghan

<sup>4</sup> Giustozzi, A. (2009), *The Taleban Marches: Herat, Farah, Baghdis, and Ghor*, in *Decoding the New Taleban*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 219-223.

<sup>5</sup> Gilani I. (2010), 'Absence of anvil' leaves room for Taliban', in *Daily Times*, Pakistan, 27 April 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Bertolotti C. (2010), *Shahid. Analisi del terrorismo suicida in Afghanistan*, Milan: FrancoAngeli.

<sup>7</sup> *International Security Assistance Force to Afghanistan* (11 August 2003—31 December 2014). The International Security Assistance Force was tasked with ensuring a secure environment to protect the Afghan Provisional Authority that took office in Kabul on 22 December 2001 following UN Security Council Resolution No. 1386 of 20 December 2001. Initiated as a Multinational Mission, the contingent was NATO-led starting in August 2003.

security forces had to switch to a defensive form of commitment, as they were unable to conduct offensive operations without the coalition. Support of the direct US forces.

In addition, the critical security situation resulting from the territorial and operational expansion of the Taliban has been aggravated by the emergence of *Islamic State-affiliated* groups in Afghanistan.

A combination of internal and external factors defined the new and dynamic scenario in which, from north to south, the Taliban imposed their operations on a large scale, conquering urban areas or peripheral districts as early as 2014, though mainly for short periods. The Taliban and other armed opposition groups were able to impose their command-and-control capacity in 36 districts (8.8% of the territory) populated by at least 2.5 million people at the beginning of 2015, and had gradually extended their control to 104 districts (25.6%) by 2018. These data indicate a growing operational capacity on the part of an insurgent front that has been able to control or influence 65.6% of the country for many years.

The Taliban have thus been able to move successfully on the battlefield for years, striking targets of high symbolic value (conquest of urban areas, occupation of military bases) and obtaining wide publicity through a sought-after process of mass media amplification. In addition, they have demonstrated their ability to pursue their objectives by moving easily on the political and diplomatic levels to acquire more power that can be imposed at the negotiating table, such as in the Doha compromise agreement based on the formal recognition of the Taliban and on a series of unconditional concessions, to obtain *de facto* recognition of what they have won through fighting.

## **The Causes of the Afghan Collapse**

The collapse of the Afghan state and the seizure of Kabul mark the end of *state building* by the US and NATO. What mistakes were made in the management of the Afghan institutional architecture?

There are four main aspects, in chronological order, which cannot fully determine the collapse of the Afghan state individually, but which are decisive when taken together.

The first aspect that has contributed to the state's collapse of the state is its dependence on the international community. The United States and NATO failed in their attempt to create a state apparatus capable of functioning autonomously without external financial contribution; Afghanistan was and still is, a country without a legal economy capable of guaranteeing its survival.

However, the second aspect is the responsibility of the Afghan leadership. For years, the Afghan government was plagued by infighting and endemic corrup-

tion, while government positions and the top echelons of institutions were shared between groups of individuals.

Power was assigned to individuals with little or no training and who abused their positions. This progressively alienated citizens, particularly in the peripheral and rural areas of the country, leading them increasingly to accept the Taliban alternative, even if they did not actively support it.

The third aspect was the handling of the agreement initiated by President Obama in 2012, carried out by President Trump, and implemented without hesitation (although there was every reason to annul it) by President Biden. This was the agreement that first legitimised the Taliban, then excluded the Afghan government; the options that had been agreed upon with the Taliban were then imposed, leaving no room for manoeuvre or options. This result delegitimised the already weak Afghan government in front of the Taliban, as at well as the international and local levels. At the same time, in the face of Western disengagement, Pakistan and other regional actors have been driven by their own national agendas to progressively commit to and support the Taliban. This scenario is further undermined by the continuous struggle between power groups and political personalities that have continuously tried to overrule each other instead of focussing on emergency planning to save the country.

The fourth and final aspect relates to the effect of the withdrawal of US and, less critically, NATO troops. Afghan security forces were strengthened by less than the 300,000 soldiers promised by President Biden in his speech on 16 August 2021 and were unable to substantially operate in an autonomous way. They have suffered many combat losses over the years; around 66,000 soldiers, almost a third of the total force, were killed, and those losses had not been replaced by fresh and trained forces<sup>8</sup>. This operational incapacity was formally certified and known to both the Pentagon and NATO, but a practical solution was never found. Furthermore, given the dependence of Afghan forces' dependence on logistical and air support from foreign forces, the decision to withdraw troops and all contracted maintenance engineers significantly weakened Afghan capabilities and their will to fight. It is conceivable that if the United States and NATO had left the country without an agreement with the Taliban, perhaps the state apparatus would have been more likely to survive, at least for a longer period of time.

The sum of all this, and not the factors taken individually, has resulted not only in the gradual deterioration of the population's trust in the state, but also in the lack of trust in the political class of the armed forces.

The two things—lack of trust and lack of military capacity—led to the sudden

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<sup>8</sup> Bertolotti C. (2019), *Afghanistan contemporaneo. Dentro la guerra più lunga*, Lugano: START InSight ed.

collapse of the state, both from a political point of view, with the flight of various members of the government and from a military point of view, with the disbandment of the Afghan security forces.

In many cases, the army and police fought as long as possible, as in the case of the special operations forces, while in other cases they surrendered weapons and equipment to the Taliban without a fight. This was the great success of the Taliban: exploiting the lack of trust in politics by replacing it as an alternative. To do this, they had, months in advance, set up negotiating tables with mid-level military commanders, who tactically controlled the peripheral areas of Afghanistan. This enabled the domino effect fall of the entire country, until Kabul was taken.

### **The Conquest of Afghanistan: the Taliban advance from Herat to the fall of Kabul**

#### *An achievement that comes from afar*

Between the end of July and the beginning of September 2021, the Taliban carried out a strategic conquest of the country from the periphery to the centre. Conquest that took many years and a significant political and military effort eventually led to the Doha negotiation agreements of 2020 that anticipated and facilitated the collapse of the Afghan state.

A conquest that began in 2005 and was achieved between 2009 and 2018—except for a brief setback in 2011-2012—with a territorial expansion that led the insurgent group to control about 60% of the country, mainly rural and peripheral districts; the increasingly rapid counter-offensive led to a progressive reduction of the territory controlled by ISAF and coalition forces. However, between 2019 and 2020, the progressively consolidated Taliban presence extended to districts close to provincial capitals, effectively placing them in a state of permanent siege. The next phase of the offensive was based on a two-fold action. First, there was a relentless series of direct attacks on police forces and army garrisons; second, there was an effective policy of negotiation dialogue with governors and local military and police commanders. This resulted in the surrender of many district capitals without resistance in the weeks before the seizure of Kabul on 15 August 2021.

With the fall of the districts, the provincial capitals capitulated one after another; the smaller ones tended to accept Taliban advances first, with others requiring intense and tenacious clashes to be seized desperate attempts by the Afghan security forces, even the most important ones: and so, between the end of July and the beginning of August, together with Herat, Kandahar, and Lashkar Gah also fell, with the latter then being recaptured by the Afghan special forces.



The fall of Kandahar, strategically crucial for the international airport used by the Afghan Air Force against the Taliban and one of the main trade centres of the country, sanctioned the conquest of the south and east of the country. With the conquest of Herat, the entire west fell into the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban then turned its attention to the north, with Kunduz and Mazar e-Sharif.

### *The Fall of Provincial Capitals and the Domino Effect*

In August 2021, the Taliban completed a complex, nationwide offensive of encirclement and isolation of the main cities in Afghanistan, and then converged on Kabul through an irrepressible insurgent wave that was increasingly better armed and motivated. Faced with the Taliban's advance, many of Afghanistan's defences had given way; While not totally defeated, the numbers were sufficient to put a chronically weak state at risk of collapse. For this reason, the remaining units of the national army were ordered to converge in the provincial capitals to better defend them and to guarantee—based on the intentions of the general staff—some form of control over the units that were still operational.

By 12 July 2021, 204 districts were already under Taliban control (73 on 1 May), 210 were contested (124), and 70 were controlled by the government (115). Two months later, the Afghan government had lost effective control of 30% of the territory, while the Taliban had tripled the territory they occupied, gaining effective control of 50% of the country, or 85% when including the contested areas where the government in Kabul was no longer able to guarantee the security of its citizens. From all political, military, and social points of view, the situation was severely chaotic. General Austin S. Miller himself, the last commander of the remaining NATO and US military forces, stated that he was very concerned about the rapid fall of districts with high strategic value throughout the country.

Between July and August, the Taliban wave spread through Afghanistan, district by district, and then converged on the provincial capitals, overwhelming them. The strategic scheme used was very effective and did not hide an operative planning activity developed in the preceding months: first, the isolation of the targets, driving government institutions out of the peripheral and rural areas, then the simultaneous convergence of attack columns that struck the defences of urban centres with multiple actions. This was a winning strategy that confused the defensive leaders held by tribal militias and Afghan soldiers, who were thus forced to split off. Stand from one point to another, leaving uncovered and unprotected points, which were then used by the Taliban to penetrate into urban centres, unleashing the chaos that led to their rapid capitulation.

The simultaneous offensives conducted in late July and early August thus destabilised the already tired national security forces and local forms of resistance,

eliminating them one by one. This happened in Kandahar, Ghazni (where there was a high presence of *al-Qa'ida*), Qala-i-Naw in the province of Badghis, and before that, in Zaranj and other cities: 13 provincial capitals and nine provinces fell into the hands of insurgents in a single week.

On 3 August 2021, a wave of explosions hit the *green zone of Kabul*, a fortified area once considered safe. The target of the attack was the Minister of Defence in charge, Bismillah Khan Mohammadi. The minister was not present at the time of the action for which the Taliban later claimed responsibility; he had previously begun to rearm the tribal militias and, in the face of the unstoppable advance of the insurgents, had taken leadership of the national anti-Taliban resistance. His killing would have had a highly symbolic value, with deadly effects on the morale of the troops engaged in defending the provincial capitals that the Taliban had been trying to wrest from the army and police for days.

The attack on Kabul coincided with the fighting that was raging in the suburbs of three large cities in the south and west of Afghanistan: Herat, Lashkar Gah, and Kandahar. On one side, defending the population centres, the exhausted Afghan security forces; on the other side were the Taliban, who were leaving hundreds of dead on the field every day in their attempt to conquer the cities. The Taliban had already conquered half the country within days of the start of their offensive and with heavy losses; their victories included the lucrative border crossings with Iran and Pakistan, but also the border areas with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. They had therefore imposed a *de facto* total isolation of the country.

The first city to fall under Taliban control was Zaranj, the capital of the southwestern province of Nimruz, on 6 August, after the governor and security forces fled. The following day, on 7 August, the Taliban took control of Shibirghan, capital of the northern province of Jawzjan, while on 8 August, the provincial capitals Kunduz, Sar-i-Pul, and Takhar, also in the north, fell; on 9 August, it was the turn of Aybak in Samangan; Farah, capital of the omonth province, and Pul-i-Khumri, in the province of Baghlan, capitulated on 10 August. Then it was the turn of Kandahar, Laskar Gah, and Herat, until a few weeks before the headquarters of the Italian military command in Afghanistan. The three cities were attacked at the same time by the multiple offensive of the Taliban, who, district by district and house by house, progressively approached their targets. Although the Taliban were able to make rapid gains after the US military disengagement that had been initiated a few months earlier, resistance and the dynamic contrast implemented, in particular by the Afghan special forces, supported by the army, the police, and the tribal militias loyal to the old *Mujaheddin*, temporarily slowed down and contained the offensive wave. However, this did not affect the final outcome: the Taliban completed its conquest of all of Afghanistan. The fall of the main provincial capitals—Herat, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar, but also Kunduz

and Mazar-e Sharif and, again, Tarin Kowt, capital of the Uruzgan province, a key city from both a territorial and symbolic point of view—was crucial to the state's hold.

*The (shattered) hope of the Northern Front*

At the end of July 2021, faced with the Taliban's rapid conquest of the Taliban and the equally rapid loss of military capacity by the Afghan state, President Ashraf Ghani tried to find a political solution that would lead to a form of power sharing with the Taliban to avoid the collapse of the state. Meanwhile, he had tried to organise a form of widespread resistance, involving old local 'warlords', including the Uzbek Rashid Dostum, former vice-president of the country, and Tajiks Mohammad Noor and Ismail Khan, to seek help among ethnic groups. These choices indicate that the president himself was aware of the imminent end of his army.

In the short period from their direct involvement to the siege of the large cities, the militia leaders initiated a mobilisation that, in effect, was much more restrained than they and with them, Ghani, had hoped; in some cases, the mobilisation was even insubstantial. The north, which could have been a hope for Taliban containment and the survival of the Afghan State, thus crumbled under the pressure of the Taliban, who, with the conquest of Herat, effectively sanctioned the beginning of the last phase of the war: the brief siege and seizure of Kabul, on 15 August 2021, without a fight, after the hasty flight of many government representatives and President Ghani himself, who left the country without orders or a transfer of power.

Although the dissolution of the Afghan state opened the doors of the country to the insurgent movement, it is true that the territorial expansion of the Taliban does not correspond to their ability to control the districts from which they have driven out government representatives and security forces. This is particularly true for the peripheral districts, which the government has never really controlled. The Taliban did not encounter any obstacles at the district level simply because no one was there to protect them. In contrast, this was the case in provincial capitals, where the psychological effect of their advance and state withdrawal, together with pressure and threats to the families of military commanders, acted as a detonator.

However, an aspect highlights a critical issue that the Taliban must face and resolved by the Taliban: the internal struggle for power, where the political and pragmatic wing led by *mawlawi* Hibatullah Akundzada—represented in Doha by *Mullah* Baradar—is opposed by the military wing, extremist and strongly linked to *al-Qa'ida*, headed by Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is responsible for the worst suicide attacks and complexes carried out in Kabul in the last 15 years. The com-

position of the new Taliban executive includes the downsizing of the pragmatic wing and the advent of hawks linked to the Haqqani group, all of which seem to confirm the terrorism associated with *al-Qa'ida* that has been the *casus belli* of a 20-year war.

## 17. The whole spectrum of knowledge: China and the United States in the Pacific and Beyond

BY STEFANO FELICIAN BECCARI

Not even the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its beginning in Asia, has been able to stabilise an increasingly complex region. A decade after President Obama's speech to the Australian Parliament in 2011, his words echo even louder.

Here is what this region needs to know. As we end today's wars, I have instructed my national security experts to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority. Consequently, reductions in US defence spending will not—I repeat—come at the expense of Asia-Pacific [...] Our enduring interests in the region require a durable presence. The United States is a 'Pacific' power, and we are here to stay<sup>1</sup>.

But in the last 10 years, mirroring the US, its main *competitor*, the People's Republic of China (PRC), has become stronger. A rivalry that for many years was commercial, diplomatic, technological and values-based, which was perhaps played out on the ambiguous terrain of espionage, is today (also) becoming a more conventional, almost 'symmetrical' confrontation, rather than the so-called 'asymmetrical warfare', in which one or more 'conventional' powers were juxtaposed with sub-state actors, i.e., 'terrorists' or insurrectionist groups.

As we have said, the challenge between the two superpowers is played out in parallel in various spheres, but if we take a closer look at the geostrategic dynamics, it is easy to see that the centre of the competition is precisely in the naval dimension, and it is no coincidence that Beijing and Washington's armed forces are now also paying considerable attention to the area. Beijing, with the rapid development of its capabilities, seeks to gain margins of manoeuvre and agility in the Asia Pacific, which it considers its natural neighbourhood; Washington, already strong with an impressive fleet, does not want to remain excluded from a region defined as 'crucial' in American foreign policy (the so-called '*pivot to Asia*'). This dynamic, in concrete terms, unfolds in the waters of the Pacific Ocean and

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, 17 November 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

has its epicentre in the South China Sea, an area in which the PRC would like to maintain ‘full’ control, thus excluding several riparian states that have unresolved territorial and maritime claims with Beijing, or that support freedom of navigation, such as the US.

It follows that, in order to understand the nature of Chinese rearmament, especially naval rearmament, it is necessary to start from the geostrategic context in which the PRC is embedded, its possible *competitors*, and conclude with some reflections on the return of power politics in the confrontation between the US Navy and its ‘new’ rival, the *People’s Liberation Army Navy* (PLAN, the Chinese navy).

### **Fleet time? China’s ‘grey’ naval capabilities in new scenarios**

To understand the projection of Chinese maritime power, some preliminary conditions are needed. It is important to begin not at the PLAN but rather at two other ancillary structures that are even more present than the navy in the complex game being played in the Asia Pacific. However, their deployment, although controlled by Beijing, implies a ‘police’ level of control rather than ‘military’, which limits the response options of other *competitors*, especially if they have limited naval assets at their disposal<sup>2</sup>.

The paramilitary force ‘par excellence’ of the PRC is the Coast Guard, known in English as the *Chinese Coast Guard* or CCG, which in recent years has been at the centre of much controversy not only for its increasingly constant presence in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, but also for its ‘aggressive’ attitude that seems to go far beyond classic ‘policing’ activities. Supported by certain regulatory provisions (which increase the GCC’s ‘defence’ powers and have been promptly criticised by neighbouring states<sup>3</sup>) and by ever-increasing naval assets (some units even have 76 mm cannons), the GCC is now ‘the world’s largest coastguard’ according to *The Diplomat*<sup>4</sup> and even ‘a part of the armed forces’ according to *The Economist*<sup>5</sup>. The strengthening of the GCC’s ambitions and the amount of units at its disposal is therefore, according to many analysts, a clear message of increased Chinese assertiveness in the area.

<sup>2</sup> <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>

<sup>3</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/chinas-coast-guard-law-challenges-rule-based-order/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/chinas-coast-guard-law-challenges-rule-based-order/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/12/03/a-new-law-would-unshackle-chinas-coastguard-far-from-its-coast>

The second paramilitary force involved in China's 'hybrid activities' is the 'maritime militia', namely the *People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia* (PAFMM), which is increasingly present in disputed waters where there are Chinese interests<sup>6</sup>. From a 'Western' point of view, it is difficult to find a comparison for the role of the PAFMM; the CSIS, in a recent report, describes it as 'a force that ostensibly consists of naval units that are involved in fishing, but whose real occupation is to achieve political and military objectives for the PRC'<sup>7</sup>. In essence, the PAFMM 'plays a particularly important role in establishing a *de facto* Chinese presence in disputed areas, challenging the ability of *competitors* to maintain control over disputed areas. These 'grey' operations are designed to 'win without fighting', overwhelming opposing forces with swarms of boats usually supported, in the rear, by GCC units and possibly PLAN ships, depending on the contingency<sup>8</sup>. Most of the PAFMM's units are thus fishing vessels, but they are often armed, have larger tonnages than similar units from other countries, and are more dedicated to 'patrolling' functions than actual fishing. Understanding the options available to the PRC in the complex naval game being played in Asia is essential before moving on to examine the areas of friction in general and the reactions of the various *competitors* in particular.

## Areas of friction

The PRC at the naval level is engaged in theatres that are geographically different but all relevant. With the exception of Taiwan, which is relatively close to the PRC's coastline, many of the maritime disputes that Beijing is involved in are located at considerable distances from China's shores, leading to a number of logistical problems. To be fair, the disputes in which China is involved are not the only ones in the region; on the contrary, looking at a map it is easy to see a set of maritime claims that start from Russia and Japan (Kuril Islands), pass through Korea (Dokdo Islands, disputed between China and Japan), and continue on to include other disputes in which Beijing is also involved. Control and sovereignty over many of these areas have been under dispute for centuries.

Whether the specific dispute being something like the Kuril Islands, where territorial problems resulted from the Second World War, or 'new' disputes that have reemerged in recent years (such as the South China Sea), it makes little dif-

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/04/a-short-history-of-chinas-fishing-militia-and-what.html>

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Research Service, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, DC, December 2021.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/04/a-short-history-of-chinas-fishing-militia-and-what.html>

ference. Increasingly, the various riparian states are aware that their future hinges not only on maritime trade and lines of communication, but also on maintaining their sovereignty in the disputed spaces of the Pacific. This kind of narrative, which often results in the use of history and nationalism as a basis for claiming sovereignty, is now a *leitmotif* that neither governments nor public opinion can relinquish, and thus makes the management of ongoing rivalries more difficult and tense.

There are two main maritime disputes in which Beijing is involved<sup>9</sup>, namely the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea. The Taiwan issue, which has also emerged strongly in recent months, remains open in the background, but this type of rivalry is substantially different in nature and intensity. In the islands of the South China Sea, then, China can exercise direct sovereignty even if it is over very small outcrops; in the Senkaku/Diaoyu it cannot, because the islands are in Japanese hands.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu islands see Chinese claims<sup>10</sup> compared with Nipponese control positions; on top of this dispute are the complex Beijing–Tokyo relations that often rekindle painful memories of the Second World War.

But the real challenge for the PRC lies in the south, in the South China Sea. This is the epicentre of China's naval and other power projection, and may be the place where even the simplest clash would risk degenerating, if left unregulated, into a *casus belli*<sup>11</sup>. The South China Sea is actually also composed of many outcrops that are contested not only by China, but also by other competitors or countries<sup>12</sup>.

However, over all the disputed areas, however, the so-called *Nine Dash Line* (NDL) hovers, which is essentially a theoretical 'line' drawn by Beijing that encompasses the entire South China Sea and, based on disputed historical grounds, would essentially 'incorporate' the entire region under PRC sovereignty<sup>13</sup>. Bei-

<sup>9</sup> The Taiwan issue is excluded here not only for space reasons, but because Beijing's 'criticism' of Taipei is not based on claims to parts of the island, but rather on a genuine question of the 'existence' of the entire Republic of China (or Taiwan).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/tensions-east-china-sea>

<sup>11</sup> There is no shortage of precedents, such as the 1974 naval clash in the Paracels Islands between the then Republic of Vietnam (or 'South Vietnam') and the PRC. The victory of the latter's navy of the latter resulted in substantial control of the outcrops by China, which to this day continues to maintain sovereignty over them: see, for example, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/01/lessons-from-the-battle-of-the-paracel-islands/>

<sup>12</sup> Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and, of course, the PRC; all of these, to varying degrees, have claims to parts, outcrops, or islets of the South China Sea, or claim parts of it as their own territorial waters.

<sup>13</sup> <https://time.com/4412191/nine-dash-line-9-south-china-sea/>



jing's current claims in the area are now far from symbolic, diplomatic notes or mere nationalist rhetoric. Over the years, in fact, the PRC has pursued at least three types of initiatives to consolidate its ambitions.

The first and most obvious is the strengthening of its presence with 'paramilitary' naval units, i.e. the PAFMM ('fishermen') and the GCC; the second is the progressive 'enlargement' of many atolls and outcrops, which have now become real islands, complete with command and control infrastructures, ports, depots and even airports; lastly, the progressive denial of the rights of the other contenders, precisely, by its own 'hybrid' capacity to patrol and impose itself in the disputed spaces. The reinforcement of the Chinese presence in the area passes mainly through the so-called 'grey tactics', which entail 'the deliberate pursuit of political objectives through carefully planned operations; moving cautiously toward targets rather than quickly seeking decisive results; acting to stay below major escalation thresholds to avoid war; and using all instruments of national power, especially non-military and non-kinetic ones'<sup>14</sup>. These types of initiatives 'are implemented with a carefully designed plan, approved and controlled by the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party and the PLA: 'grey' operations are designed to avoid military *escalation* and are strictly controlled by *senior* leaders'<sup>15</sup>. In March 2021, for example, some 200 Chinese naval vessels ('fishing boats') positioned themselves around an atoll controlled by the Philippines, openly violating, according to Manila, its sovereignty<sup>16</sup>. This kind of Chinese ultra-activity means that all surrounding navies need to rapidly increase their capabilities and projection in the disputed areas, which are often far away from their own bases and are rarely able to support their contingents stationed there without regular help from the mainland.

## The Regional Context Fragmented Responses

Chinese naval forces, be they military or paramilitary, move in a continuous way.

I am somewhat fluid for a variety of reasons, both regional and country-specific. At the regional level, one immediately notices the lack of a supranational institution capable of acting as a mediator or at least as a *forum* to deal with disputes related to the disputed spaces. For the other contenders, they present a set of claims that are at least as heterogeneous as their naval capabilities. Therefore,

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/responding-chinas-unending-grey-zone-prodding>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/responding-chi-nas-unending-grey-zone-prodding>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56474847>

this puts a lot of pressure on the limited naval assets available in the states bordering the South China Sea, which must then ‘manage’ a growing Chinese presence with the few means they have at their disposal today.

Some states, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, or the United States, have no direct interest in the matter, but view the increasing ‘militarisation’ of the South China Sea with concern; others, such as Malaysia, Taiwan, Brunei, the Philippines, and Vietnam, on the other hand, are directly involved in disputes over parts of the South China Sea. One premise, however, applies to all of them: up to now, the naval dimension has had little weight in the military dynamics of many of these countries, which are much more attentive to land forces, and which are also often used in an anti-terrorist or anti-separatist function<sup>17</sup>. If, therefore, the PLAN and its ancillary units have been undergoing profound upgrading for years now, many navies of other ASEAN countries suffer from delays and limited workforces that do not favour them at this stage or in this ‘grey’ confrontation. A few cases may better specify the context of this situation.

Vietnam, for example, is the first state to be examined. Despite its apparently ‘good’ relations with Beijing (also favoured by ideological proximity), the Hanoi government of Hanoi has been aware for years of the delicacy of the game in Asia-Pacific, which is essential for a predominantly coastal country. Therefore, in the past decade, the Vietnamese Navy has developed underwater capacity (thanks to six Russian Kilo-class submarines) and strengthened its surface component, including four Russian-made Gepard-class frigates. Alongside these ‘military’ units, Vietnam also deploys a respectable Coast Guard and is planning the creation of a ‘Chinese-style’ ‘militia’, a response that Layton interprets as ‘symmetrical’ to the Chinese<sup>18</sup>. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum is the Philippines. Although they had a strong navy in the postwar period, over time they have neglected their naval capabilities to focus on the land dimension, including the fight against separatism and terrorism. The result is that since the PRC started to increasing its presence in the South China Sea, the Manila Navy found itself in trouble and had to make up for lost time. This has happened with the rapid insertion of some South Korean, Indonesian, and US surface vessels into its fleet, which has somewhat slowed the marginalisation of the Philippine Navy, but does not seem sufficient to guarantee Manila a capacity that is adequate to counter Beijing’s aims and maintain its sovereignty over its own outcrops in the South China Sea.

Even states such as Malaysia and Indonesia, which are geographically distant

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<sup>17</sup> Or because they were more involved in national liberation processes, such as Vietnam until 1975; this reasoning, however, does not apply to the United States, Australia, or Singapore.

<sup>18</sup> Layton P. (2021), *South East Asian Navies: Challenges and Priorities in Maritime Security and Defence*, Mittler Report, pp. 6-10.

from Beijing, are now identified as ‘frontline states’<sup>19</sup> by the IISS *Military Balance 2021*; While this is based on different reasoning and uses different scales of operation, both countries need to strengthen their naval capabilities while innovating their often fragmented (units from different suppliers) or obsolete (Indonesia, for example, still uses units from the former East Germany) surface capabilities. While the regional context thus appears heterogeneous, certain *trends* can be deduced that affect all riparian states, including those that do not have open disputes with the PRC:

- a greater awareness of the security dynamics that affects the South China Sea and a progressive coolness towards Beijing’s actions;
- the need to rapidly strengthen naval and maritime surveillance capabilities;
- the need to create or strengthen underwater capacity;
- the creation (or strengthening) of ‘coastguard’, ‘paramilitary’, or other units similar to the navy, to offer an ‘armed’ but not directly ‘military’ response to Chinese incursions;
- the need to increase forms of cooperation (including industrial cooperation) with neighbouring states or with *partners* outside the region to counterbalance its own weaknesses.

### **The Return of Power Politics and the confrontation with Washington’s navy**

Despite the presence of ‘hybrid’ tactics and the presence of many state actors in the Pacific, the confrontation between the US and China also passes through the naval sector, which is currently a source of considerable concern in Washington. In fact, a recent report by the US Department of Defence acknowledged that the PLAN is by now ‘the largest navy in the world, with 355 surface or underwater units’<sup>20</sup>, compared to the approximately 300 US units. However, beyond the mere numbers, which are more relevant on a symbolic level, what worries Western analysts is the speed with which the PLAN has been able to go from a force with limited coastal ambitions (*green water navy*) to one with capabilities and assets capable of challenging the US supremacy in Asia-Pacific in just three decades (since the 1990s). Furthermore, many analyses continue, the future projection of Chinese ambitions is also worrying, even in the field of shipbuilding and construction, while the United States, despite the forecasts and the higher quality of its technologies, seems less ‘dynamic’ and perhaps less able to ‘stand up’ to this

<sup>19</sup> IISS, *Military Balance 2021*, London, p. 220-221.

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defence, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, Washington, DC, 2020, p. VI.

challenge.

In terms of technology, PLAN has made enormous strides in recent years, defined as ‘prodigious years’ by the IISS<sup>21</sup>; for example, two aircraft carriers, *Liaoning* and *Shandong*, are online and a third, provisionally known as ‘*Type 003*’<sup>22</sup> is being constructed. Then, despite the pandemic, we should consider the recent units of several LHD units (Landing Helicopter Docks), such as the ‘*Type 075*’ or the arrival of the new ‘*Type 055*’ destroyer<sup>23</sup>, which, in addition to renewing the fleet, will increase the PLAN’s power projection of the PLAN. The underwater component should also be modernised; a new ‘*Type 096*’ ballistic missile launcher nuclear submarine (SSBN) is being studied, which will be added to the existing ‘*Type 094*’ SSBNs<sup>24</sup>. The US Navy and the US government are following these developments with concern. According to US defence estimates, the PLAN is likely to have close to 420 units in 2025 and up to 460 in 2030. These time frames are too short to feel safe for Washington, which is aiming to have 355 units in 2035<sup>25</sup>. For the time being, no one doubts the more advanced capabilities of the US Navy compared to the PLAN crews, but it is clear that, in the event of a possible conventional confrontation, even sheer numerical superiority could make itself felt.

Finally, two additional elements seem to work in PLAN’s favour: first, the timing of the new Chinese units. The arrival of models such as the ‘*Type 055*’, or the LHD, which are currently in the development phase, means that PLAN’s fleet will be able to run have relatively up-to-date platforms or, at any rate, platforms with a still very long operational life in the coming years. The US Navy, on the other hand, has the opposite problem because many surface units (such as the *Ticonderoga* or *Arleigh Burke* classes) are now at the end of their operational life, and new units such as the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) or the futuristic Zumwalt class have several problems and are far from the production rates of the new PLAN<sup>26</sup> platforms.

The second element then is the production capacity of Chinese shipyards<sup>27</sup>:

<sup>21</sup> IISS, *Military Balance*, 2020, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/signs-point-chinas-third-aircraft-carrier-launching-soon>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/11/chinas-4th-type-055-destroyer-anshan-%E9%9E%8D%E5%B1%B1-commissioned-with-plan/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/glimpse-chinese-ballistic-missile-submarines>

<sup>25</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/growing-naval-imbalance-between-expanding-chinese-and-aging-us-fleets/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/can-chinas-type-055-destroyers-out-gun-their-american-counterparts-197694>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-opaque-shipyards-should-raise-red-fla->

In the face of increasingly limited capacities in Europe and the United States (among others, with only a few specialised sites), Chinese shipyards, also thanks also to civil orders from western countries, manage to keep civil and military naval production going at the same pace, keeping dozens of production plants in full operation<sup>28</sup>.

Hence, these Chinese initiatives (naval ambitions and enhancement of the PLAN, and perhaps ancillary capabilities) could constitute, at least in the medium term, a mortgage on US naval superiority in pacific Asia, which is crucial not only for trade but also for ensuring access for Washington's military support to allies in the region. With the new capabilities available to Beijing, many analysts reflect that the confrontation between the two navies would begin to approach a 'symmetrical' dimension, in which the US Navy does not automatically prevail. The recent sighting in China of US-like naval simulator for the practice of Beijing's armed forces<sup>29</sup> would confirm the ability of Chinese units to 'stand up' to the US Navy. The US Navy therefore needs to react to this situation not only with a generic increase in platforms, but with a serious reconsideration of its capabilities and the level of ambition it wants to have in peaceful Asia. If, as President Obama said, 'The United States is a Pacific power, we are here to stay', Washington must quickly send 'messages' to the Pacific where its own *status quo* no longer seems so obvious. These 'messages' can only come through new investments in the naval sector.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/10/us-navy-shipbuilding-sea-power-failure-decline-competition-china/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-builds-mockups-us-navy-ships-area-used-missile-target-practice-2021-11-08/>



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