War. What Is It Still Good For?

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Abstract
States have long employed military force to achieve political results. Of late, however, two of the world's most powerful militaries—Russia and the United States—have found themselves in unexpected quagmires after starting military campaigns expected to result in quick successes. Their struggles offer evidence of the new reality: war is less useful today than it was in the past. There are many reasons for this, but the two most important are technological changes that have democratized access to military power and the high and rising economic costs of war which impose restraint on even wealthy states. However, warfare can still offer positive returns when applied towards three primary aims: the achievement of delimited objectives such as land seizure and limited strikes; the prevention of undesired or unacceptable outcomes; and the extraction of natural, technological, or geostrategic resources. These observations offer warnings to states contemplating future wars or counting on rapid rearmament to provide them security.

Keywords: future of warfare, military interventions, defense industrial base, resource extraction, territorial disputes, preventative war, technological change, Ukraine, Iran.

Writing in the early 19th century, Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that states go to war with one goal in mind: "to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, 1984, p. 75). Alfred Thayer Mahan later described the intent of naval warfare similarly. Its objective, he declared, should be to "drive the enemy's flag from the seas" (Mahan, 1890, p. 138).

In recent years, these types of unambiguous victories and far-reaching conquests have been elusive. When Israel started its war in Gaza after October 2023, for instance, the country's leaders promised to eradicate Hamas and demilitarize the territory (Netanyahu, 2023). Today, more than two years later, Hamas remains armed and in control of parts of Gaza. Similarly, though the U.S. military campaign in Iran in 2026 was intended to impose regime change in Tehran, Operation Epic Fury accomplished little (Trump, 2026b). When Washington accepted a ceasefire, it was Iran that emerged with its negotiating position improved even if it did suffer significant military setbacks.

These and other similar recent military failures raise a simple but troubling question: Has warfare lost its practical value for states seeking to achieve political objectives? Clearly, military power retains its ability to inflict costs and cause destruction. But can it still be used to accomplish political change or to decisively defeat a troublesome adversary?

At the very least, what can be attained using force today appears to be narrower than was true in the past. There are several reasons for new constraints on the utility of military power, but among the most important are changes in technology that have favored weaker actors using asymmetric strategies and the rising economic and industrial challenges of fighting large and lengthy military campaigns even for wealthy states. These new limits may be temporary, or they may be enduring, but either way they have significant implications for political leaders thinking about using military force to achieve priority objectives today and for the foreseeable future.

However, it is far too soon to declare warfare a futile endeavor for states seeking to advance political goals. Despite new challenges, there are at least three ways that states can still productively use war to

advance political aims. First, recent experience suggests that military force remains useful for the achievement of very narrow objectives, including limited land grabs accomplished through short duration military operations and elimination of high value targets. Second, states can continue to use warfare as a preventative tool, stopping or averting undesired outcomes even if they cannot as easily impose far reaching positive change. Finally, states can use military campaigns for extraction, that is, to take control of valuable natural, manufacturing, and geostrategic resources.

With defense budgets rising as countries across the globe increase the size of their armed forces and adopt more militarized foreign policies, the frequency of war is likely to continue to increase despite its new limitations. To avoid falling into costly military quagmires, future political and military leaders will need to have a clear-eyed and realistic understanding of the new boundaries on warfare's potential and a firm grasp on when war can advance their aims and when it will backfire.

WHY WAR'S UTILITY HAS DECLINED

To understand how the utility of warfare is changing, it is necessary to first consider why.

The most obvious driver of change is technology. By disproportionately benefiting weaker powers and in many cases amplifying the benefits of being on the defense, recent technological developments have made it considerably more difficult for even the most powerful militaries to achieve decisive and quick victories.

The advent and rapid evolution of cheap drones and loitering munitions, for instance, has dramatically changed the character of warfare across domains. On the ground, it is now treacherous for armies to seize and hold new territory, as the maneuver warfare of previous eras is nearly impossible when large numbers of drones can saturate the battlespace. Instead of being a sign of military strength and prowess as in the past, concentrations of tanks, heavy weapons, and personnel are now a vulnerability (Baluyevsky and Pukhov, 2026; Admiral and Drake, 2025). Territorial gains occur instead with the use of small groups of soldiers taking advantage of gaps in adversary

lines to rapidly stake out new positions that they hope to build from over time (Kofman, 2026). Drones have also complicated sea and air warfare, posing new threats to advanced aircraft and warships and making complete air and sea control elusive (Pettyjohn and Scharre, 2025; Davis, 2025). Even states with modest military resources can use these new technologies as part of low-cost, asymmetric strategies to fight much stronger adversaries to stalemate, although such tactics bear high casualty rates and may require external assistance.

Drones have defined recent military campaigns, including that in Ukraine, the U.S. war in Iran, and operations by Houthi forces to blockade the Bab el-Mandeb, and help explain why these conflicts slipped into costly stalemates. In the Middle East, Iran used drones to weaken U.S. air defense networks and damage early warning aircraft while also employing the threat of drone and missile fire to effectively close the Strait of Hormuz (Kavanagh, 2026). In Ukraine, drones have dominated the battlefield, forcing both sides to adopt new tactics and at times freezing the frontline, despite Russia's significant military advantages (Watling and Reynolds, 2023). In each of these cases, the low barriers to procuring and producing large numbers of drones have contributed to surprising outcomes. Drones have, for example, allowed Ukraine to stay in the fight longer than expected and contributed to the U.S. decision to accept a ceasefire with Iran in April 2026.

Beyond drones, the proliferation of cheap and precise mass-produced weapons has leveled the battlefield in other ways as well. For example, the rapid spread of simple and cheap but effective missile technologies has enabled weak state and non-state actors to inflict damage on more powerful adversaries in new ways. In the case of Houthi forces in Yemen, for instance, the group's arsenal of cheap missiles and mobile missile launchers allowed it to survive intense U.S. bombing (even after years of Saudi efforts to root out the group using military force) while still keeping the Bab el-Mandeb closed to commercial traffic (Eavis, 2023). Similarly, despite assertions from the Pentagon, Tehran was able to sustain its ability to produce cheap missiles and to strike Israel, U.S., and Gulf state targets—including sensitive and strategically valuable ones like U.S. bases and early

warning radars—even after over a month of punishing airstrikes (DeBree and Toropin, 2026). This complicated and thwarted the plans of U.S. military commanders who were not used to operating in such contested environments. The diffusion of military power has, in other words, eroded U.S. dominance in ways not seen in over 80 years. For other advanced militaries the effect is largely the same, if somewhat less pronounced.

A final notable technological development that complicates the effective use of military power is the growing transparency of war across air, sea, and ground domains. Until recently, the ability to see the battlefield in its entirety was a privilege of more powerful militaries. However, systems like Starlink, technologies like drones, and the widespread availability of high quality opensource intelligence have allowed even weak actors to increase their command and control, battlespace awareness, and defense and targeting capabilities. Ukraine has relied heavily on Starlink, for identifying targets and supporting air defense operations, while using drones to prevent surprise attacks (Radin et al, 2025). Iran has turned to open-source intelligence and commercial satellite data to inform its military operations and targeting of U.S. bases (Johnson, 2026). This new transparency has made surprise attacks and offensive operations more difficult, favoring long wars of attrition with inconclusive outcomes over convincing and clear military victories.

Of course, just as technological change has recently empowered smaller militaries and states operating on the defensive, future developments could swing the pendulum back in the opposite direction. For instance, today, the speed of drone production is far ahead and the cost far below that for counter-drone systems. When this changes or reverses, the role of drones in warfare may be largely neutralized or at least lessened. Maneuver warfare might then make a return. Similarly, over time, major powers with the money to exploit new emerging technologies may find ways to reclaim their military edge. Already major powers are working to develop new exquisite systems, long-range missiles, advanced aircraft, and undersea capabilities that will allow them to overcome or avoid the threat of drones and breakthrough

attritional stalemates in the future. But even as it continues to evolve, warfare seems unlikely to revert entirely to what it was in earlier eras. Some degree of change is likely to be permanent.

In addition to technological changes, new economic and industrial challenges also constrain what can be achieved with military force today. Specifically, the rising economic and industrial cost of war and the growing reliance of states at all levels of military development on scarce and sometimes expensive input parts—semiconductors, critical minerals, and others—make long military campaigns more difficult and less sustainable, at least at high levels of intensity and for extended periods of time.

Modern weapons are more lethal than those of previous eras—more effective, precise, and powerful—but they are also more expensive, especially when considering the most advanced and exquisite ones. During the war in Iran, for instance, the U.S. burned through as much as $1 billion per day for a total of $40 billion over the first 40 days of war (Cancian and Park, 2026; Robertson and Beggin, 2026). Much of this cost was expended munitions, which easily cost between $1 and $12 million each (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). The capabilities required in Ukraine have been less expensive, but not necessarily cheaper in the aggregate, when bought in large quantities. In total, Ukraine has received hundreds of billions of dollars in military aid from the U.S. and the EU over its first four years of war (Trebesch and Nishikawa, 2025).

The high economic costs of war create limits on how long any state can continue a large-scale military operation and on what can be achieved. At some point, even wealthy states face constraints on how many resources they can devote to war, especially as the returns to marginal spending fall. This may not force ceasefire, but it can limit the ability to escalate or expand the war in ways that might increase the chances of success. This is especially significant alongside changes in technology that give weak adversaries greater endurance and contribute to longer wars of attrition.

In Israel, for instance, several years of war have caused economic challenges for the small nation, with the government periodically

moving towards de-escalation simply to let reservists return to their civilian jobs (Wrobel, 2026). In the U.S., the costs of both support to Ukraine and fighting in Iran have been widely unpopular, and concerns about the effect of war in the Middle East on the U.S. economy drove President Donald Trump to take an off-ramp before any of his more ambitious political aims were achieved, effectively forcing restraint on the U.S.. Both Russia and Ukraine may ultimately also be forced to change their military strategies due to economic constraints, even if that point is some ways off for both. States that cannot achieve their aims quickly, in other words, may find that they face a choice between military compromise and economic ruin, even when battling a weak adversary.

The industrial demands of war pose their own limits on the use of military force. War today is as much a test of industrial capacity as it is of battlefield skill (Vershinin, 2022). This has always been true to an extent, but shifting global economic trends and deindustrialization in some parts of the world have created structural barriers to achieving the necessary levels of production that did not exist in the past (National Association of Manufacturers, 2026). Smaller qualified workforce (a problem globally) only makes this challenge harder to solve in the near term (Deloitte & The Manufacturing Institute, 2024). When the U.S. started arming Ukraine, it found that it could not surge defense production like it hoped. The problem was amplified with the start of the war in Iran, and despite extensive political and economic investment no solution has emerged. Although munitions shortages are not a reason the U.S. accepted a ceasefire, concern about the effect of dwindling stockpiles on global deterrence may have been the reason for Trump's avoiding a full-scale conflict. Current estimates suggest it will take years to replace what has been expended, constraining U.S. military ambitions in the near and medium term (Cancian, 2026). Israel's military achievements are also limited by defense materiel, particularly its access to air defense. The EU faces similar problems as it tries to rearm quickly while also supplying weapons to Ukraine.

Finally, in addition to production capacity, there is also the pressure created by scarcity of key inputs. As the U.S. considers the best way

to ramp up its production of missiles and other key weapons, it faces possible shortages of critical minerals that may place a cap on how quickly it can replenish stockpiles. This may force it to scale back future military campaigns (Payne Institute for Public Policy, 2026; Dayen, 2026). For other countries, especially those under U.S. sanctions, it is access to key technologies like advanced semiconductors that create the most severe constraint on defense production and, therefore, on military ambitions (Boulègue, 2025). Together, the effect of these input shortages is like that of war's high costs—it makes it much harder for even wealthy states to sustain large-scale military campaigns indefinitely (although they may still try for ideological reasons).

Economic and industrial constraints on warfare are likely to create hard limits on what states can achieve using military force and are likely to remain in place for some time. States across regions are looking to ramp up defense industrial production to overcome these limits but their progress has been mixed, casting doubts on whether they will be successful in the end. As noted above, global shortages of necessary labor, critical minerals, and other inputs may not be surmountable. For some states, including the U.S., high debt to GDP ratios make traditional ways of funding war increasingly risky. And in many places growing public discontent with the social sacrifices required to fund future wars will hamper reindustrialization. The U.S. hopes that massive investments in its defense industrial base will remove economic constraints on warfare but after at least a decade of trying, its effectiveness has been limited (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers, 2026; Clark, 2024). Europe is making a similar push, but its halting progress and lack of true political will give us reason to be skeptical (Mejino-Lopez and Wolff, 2024).

We should, of course, be careful not to overindex on the experience in Ukraine or Iran or other recent wars. Recent technological and economic trends observed in these conflicts may not create perpetual binding constraints on what can be reasonably accomplished using military power. Warfare will continue to evolve, and states will adapt over time. But, in the near term, states will be left to grapple with the barriers created by new technology and economic dynamics. And even

if the character of future war will not be static, it is also unlikely to revert entirely to what it was in the past.

WHEN WAR STILL WORKS

Even with constraints, however, war as a lever of state power can accomplish goals that other means cannot. For this reason, military force will continue to be appealing despite its downsides.

First, military force is still a powerful tool for achieving limited and narrowly defined objectives, including elimination of high value targets and quick annexation of small pieces of territory. Such military moves can also rapidly shift bargaining dynamics in ongoing diplomatic negotiations and so may have utility beyond their near-term tangible gains. There are several recent examples worth considering.

The U.S. under President Trump has been a frequent employer of military force towards such limited aims, including in Latin America and the Middle East. The U.S. kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and the U.S.-Israeli assassination of multiple layers of Iranian officials including the Supreme Leader are two examples of successful leadership decapitation (Taub, 2026). Although we could question the practical political effects of such operations, in both cases the U.S. military was able to effectively eliminate targets deemed threats to the U.S. or its allies. In Venezuela, this was enough to force Maduro's associates to bend to U.S. demands. The U.S. bombing of Iran's nuclear program in June 2025 is another instance in which a limited application of military force successfully removed a perceived threat to the U.S., in this case setting back Iran's nuclear program, at least temporarily. Trump hoped the narrow win would earn him Iranian concessions in negotiations, but this has so far failed.

Other states have also been able to use military force to achieve narrow aims, including annexation of contested territory. Importantly, in some cases, states have been successful in achieving narrow goals not despite but because of new technological advances, such as drones, electronic warfare, and other hybrid capabilities. In other words, the same technologies that make it difficult for states to achieve expansive political goals may facilitate their achievement of more

limited aims if used intentionally to create and exploit time limited military advantages, especially those that can be used as leverage at the bargaining table.

Azerbaijan's successful military campaigns in 2020 and 2023, for instance, allowed the country to forcibly seize contested territory lost in previous conflicts, but these operations were successful because Baku kept its objectives narrow. In 2020, during what became known as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan combined its conventional air superiority with advanced drone capabilities to destroy Armenian air defenses and maneuver units, clearing the way for its own forces to seize much disputed territory and the leverage to the rest at the negotiating table (Shaikh, Shaan, and Wes Rumbaugh, 2020). Notably, Azerbaijan's tactics and success foreshadowed the type of combat that would come to characterize the military conflict in Ukraine several years later—small groups of fighters penetrating adversary defenses, supported by short- and mid-range drones that partially replaced traditional artillery and heavy weapons. Rather than relying only or primarily on heavy forces to reclaim land, Azerbaijan's offensive made use of highly trained special forces personnel who were able to infiltrate Armenia's defenses more easily and more cheaply, and without exposing its own maneuver forces (Postma, 2021).

Azerbaijan kept its campaign focused and limited, concentrated on a narrow slice of territory. It also emphasized speed, with a short duration that allowed it to conclude the conflict before Armenian forces had time to adapt, reconstitute, or develop drone or counter-drone capabilities of its own. Even when Armenia's military effectively collapsed, Baku did not expand the scope of its objectives right away. Instead, it waited until 2023, when it reclaimed the remaining contested territory in a quick additional offensive, made easier and attainable using the consolidated positions that it built during the 2020 campaign (Landgraf and Seferian, 2024).

An interesting counterfactual is what might have happened if Azerbaijan's military had not stopped where it did in 2020 but expanded its ambitions trying to push farther into Armenian territory. Of course, it is impossible to know for sure, but other recent conflicts

would warn of the risk of diminishing returns and the likelihood that Armenia's military would eventually catch up technologically over time (likely with external assistance) slowing or halting Azerbaijan's progress over time.

Lest this seem unlikely given Azerbaijan's rapid success it is worth considering the experience of Israel in Lebanon in 2024 and 2026. After dealing Hezbollah significant military setbacks in 2024 including significantly expanding its territorial buffer zone in southern Lebanon, Israel resumed its military campaign in 2026 alongside the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran seeking to expand its territorial control. However, its ground operations were less successful and more treacherous this time, in part because Hezbollah's remaining cadre of fighters had gained new military capabilities including fiber optic drones that they used to impose substantial costs and disrupt the progress of Israeli military forces (The Guardian, 2026). As in other cases discussed here, as Israel's goals became more expansive and its ambitions greedier, its military watched its advantages disappear.

Russia's successful 'reincorporation' of Crimea is a final important example of a limited scope military campaign that was effective because it maintained narrow aims. In Crimea, Russian operations focused on a defined piece of territory and used hybrid tactics to quickly seize control of Crimea's government buildings and communication hubs (Kofman et al., 2017). It thus preempted any sort of asymmetric military response and skirted the economic and industrial costs of modern warfare by accomplishing its objectives quickly (this is one of the appeals of such hybrid tactics, evidenced today across Europe and Asia). In a matter of weeks, in fact, Russian authorities had de facto control of the territory. Contrast this with the current military campaign in Ukraine which initially had more expansive political goals but could not overcome the technological and economic requirements of achieving them. Now, that war has settled into stalemate and what Moscow is likely to achieve is far less than initially intended.

The second achievable goal for states looking to use military force to advance political objectives is prevention. While even powerful militaries increasingly struggle to impose positive political change,

war can still be used to prevent undesired outcomes temporarily or permanently. The logic of preventative war is, of course, not new. States fearing that a rival may soon become too strong to challenge have often leaned on military action, not to preempt an imminent threat, but to stop one from emerging in the first place. This is what American political scientist Graham Allison has called the Thucydides Trap, a concept he applies with concern to the U.S.-China relationship (Allison, 2017). Sparta's attack on Athens in the Peloponnesian War (even if by some accounts Athens goaded its adversary into battle) is the classic example of such a war, launched by Sparta fearful that the Athenian empire would soon be so militarily powerful as to be untouchable (Thucydides, 1972).

Even with new economic challenges and technology-driven democratization of military power, war continues to serve a preventative function and is likely to continue to do so. This should not be surprising, as the bar to destroy is much lower than that to create. Even if there are barriers to decisive defeats, advanced militaries can typically leverage greater firepower, advanced aircraft, and deeper stockpiles to degrade weaker adversaries enough to avert outcomes that they cannot tolerate. For the U.S., Operation Midnight Hammer in June 2025 was a preventative campaign aimed at debilitating Iran's nuclear enrichment capabilities and setting back its progress towards a nuclear weapon (Trump, 2025). It was successful in this aim. Operation Epic Fury, in contrast, aimed not just to destroy but also to alter the fundamental political reality in Iran (Golden, 2026). Expectations for a quick U.S. victory underestimated the ways in which technology and economics now complicate efforts to impose political transformation through military force. After Iran's surprisingly effective defensive attacks on U.S. military infrastructure and recognizing the high costs of an extended war, Washington gave up its attempt to enact political change and reverted to preventative goals, including weakening Iran's conventional military capabilities and thwarting its ability to project military power outside its borders (The White House, 2026). To the extent that there was a threat to begin with (this is debatable), Washington has had better luck with these preventative aims.

A better example of a military campaign that achieved preventative success while falling short of more expansive outcomes is the conflict in Ukraine. While Russia's special military operation is deemed a failure by many in Europe, this is only true if success is defined as total control of Ukraine. As a means of prevention, the military campaign in Ukraine has had more positive results. Most importantly, the ongoing conflict has likely already ruled out certain futures for Ukraine. Not only did it avert results that would have crossed Moscow's long-time redlines, such as Ukraine's membership in NATO (which was unlikely but is now off the table) and the future presence of U.S. or European military force inside Ukraine (which was assured and now seems unlikely, at least in large numbers), but it also built a territorial buffer that offers some protection no matter what the shape of Ukraine's future military capabilities might be (Sutherland, 2025), though of course the security provided by territorial buffers can be undermined by long-range drones and missiles. It is possible that a smaller, more limited military operation could have achieved these preventative aims at a much lower cost to Russia's economy and society. But it is not clear that war could be avoided entirely, given the U.S. and Europe's refusal to discuss NATO's encroachment through diplomatic channels. Preventative war in this case accomplished what negotiations could not.

The August 2008 Russo-Georgian War offers another example of preventive success, despite being criticized for tactical and operational shortcomings and despite an ambiguous, inconclusive outcome. As in Ukraine, Moscow's primary accomplishment in this conflict was halting the institutionalization of Georgia's Western alignment, including progress towards NATO or EU accession (Coffey and Mrachek, 2020). For this outcome, far-reaching territorial gains or political change in Tbilisi were unnecessary. All that was required to achieve Russia's preventative aim was partial success, something attainable despite technological constraints on Russia's military operation.

Once Russian forces penetrated deep into Georgia proper, they were able to provide military cover for South Ossetia and Abkhazia to break away from Georgian control, without formal territorial claims. (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011; Vendil Pallin and Westerlund, 2009).

The existence of unsettled territorial disputes served as a sufficient obstacle to Georgia's accession in either case. In addition, the final settlement accepted permanent Russian presence and influence in South Ossetia and Abkahzia, thus offering additional insurance against the expansion of an American or European military footprint farther eastward (Chincharadze and Goodson, 2024; Nichol, 2008).

The final accessible goal for states looking to exploit military power is access to scarce resources. Resource extraction has always been a driver of war and today is no different. But there are two novel dimensions: the types of resources pursued and the geopolitical significance of those resources. First, states are no longer only after physical resources such as gold or oil but also access to technology and its inputs (such as rare earths) and to manufacturing capacity. As the costs of using military power and its technological requirements rise, the appeal of using military force to seize key inputs also increases. Second, today states are interested in claiming anything that can serve as a chokepoint that offers leverage or advantages over a rival. This could include territory, scarce resources, technology, waterways, or airspace—a list that implies the potential for many new military flashpoints.

Unlike past U.S. presidents, Trump has been quite explicit about resource extraction as an aim of war. After the attack on Venezuela, for instance, Trump could not stop talking about the country's oil wealth and wasted no time extracting it or, according to some of his cabinet officials, other resources such as gold (Trump, 2026a). His goal was not only monetary reward but U.S. control of scarce energy resources in high demand by other (rival) states. He has discussed taking Iran's oil almost as frequently (Xinhua, 2026). And if he ends up using military force to seize or expand U.S. access in Greenland, the country's resources will be a major motivator, including its critical minerals and position along key trade routes, sea lines of communication, and maritime chokepoints (NPR, 2026).

The focus on resource extraction is not surprising from a transactional president motivated by wealth. But other states have also been able to use warfare for resource extraction, to augment their income or advance their strategic position. Though Russia's

main motivation for its military operation in Ukraine may not have been resources, Russia has captured key critical mineral mines, including lithium, graphite, and coal. These resources are lucrative in themselves but also important are certain types of high-tech manufacturing that can benefit Russia's economy or be leverage for future business deals (Kozlowska and O'Grady, 2022). Russia could profit from the strong manufacturing potential of the territories it now occupies, after the war. In fact, while there are many reasons why Russia has made control of the rest of Donetsk a condition for ending the war, the additional natural and economic resources in this region are not irrelevant. 'Reincorporation' of Crimea similarly offered extractive benefits, including prime access to important sea routes, oil and gas reserves, and critical minerals (Bugriy, 2014).

There are other resource driven wars ongoing in the Middle East and Africa. Israel has been unapologetic in its exploitation of resources seized over the course of its many wars. It has taken control of gas reserves in Lebanon and Gaza, exploited rich farmland in the West Bank, and taken water and energy resources from Syria and elsewhere (Gomez, 2026; Ahmed, 2024; UN News, 2026). Further afield, the UAE has used its role in the war in Sudan to seize much of the country's gold and to exploit its farmland. Meanwhile, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have used the ongoing conflict in Yemen to take control of much of the country's energy resources and oil profits (Ardemagni, 2026; Al-Khatib, 2021).

It is hard to find a war that does not involve resource extraction at least at some level, and this is unlikely to change. Scarcity may increase the frequency with which seizing resources becomes an important wartime aim. In some cases, the territory that must be seized to claim resources is too vast and in other cases, too difficult to control for successful extraction and exploitation of resources. But, when this is possible, it serves as a consolation prize for states that try and fail to achieve broader political goals.

WARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

Even as its utility narrows, war can still accomplish goals that are out of reach using other levers of statecraft. As a result, political leaders

of all kinds will continue to view miliary power as essential, and use of military force as a sometimes necessary and strategically valuable option—and they will be right.

The fact that what can be achieved using military means is now more limited is significant, however. Political leaders that fail to understand how the utility of military force has changed over time are likely to end up in high cost and low return wars that leave them weaker over the long-term. On the other hand, those who understand the specific value of military power and both the benefits and risks of new technologies in today's world will have many advantages. They will be able to use targeted military operations to accomplish narrow territorial goals, prevent outcomes that cross their red lines in a cost-effective way, improve their leverage in economic or political negotiations, and augment their wealth and in some cases geostrategic advantages. Importantly, a world in which the utility of military power is limited will not be a more peaceful world, but a more cutthroat and violent one. Able to achieve mostly predatory and destructive aims, when wars do occur, they are likely to be more brutal, more disruptive, and more punitive for their victims—without much hope of a better post-war reality.

These lessons are important for all states, but they are especially relevant for today's major powers—China, Russia, and the U.S. With far more military capacity than their neighbors, these states are perhaps most likely to turn quickly to the use of force to achieve their aims and most likely to be too ambitious about the goals they set, overestimating the reach of their military power and underestimating its constraints. As military power diffuses more widely and the costs of modern war rise, the consequences of such mistakes will multiply. For the U.S., this is a perennial problem, exemplified by the fact that Washington has attacked seven states in the past year alone and slipped into an unnecessary military conflict in Iran that most deem a strategic failure. In the past, the U.S. had enough military power to survive such errors. But the consequences of U.S. mistakes are rapidly rising as the challenges of warfare become more pernicious and the world becomes more multipolar.

The recent experiences of the U.S. and of Russia offer a warning for China (the only major power not involved in a major war) as it considers the potential for a high-risk war over the fate of Taiwan. Although China seeks peaceful reunification with Taiwan, it has not ruled out the use of force (Taiwan Affairs Office, 2022). China can, almost certainly, use overwhelming military power to prevent Taiwan's independence, using devastating airstrikes to incapacitate the island. It can likely seize Taiwan's outlying islands without too much trouble. It could also blockade Taiwan and cut it off from vital resources to force political capitulation. But even China may face limits on what it can achieve using military power alone. If it cannot win quickly through an offensive campaign, it too might find itself trapped in a military quagmire. Successful reunification will require a political settlement at some point, in other words. Beijing seems to intuit this, which is why it has continued to push for political accommodation rather than war (Channel News Asia, 2026). If this continues, a war over the island may be less likely than many predict.

The growing constraints on what war can achieve also offer two important lessons for states that are currently militarizing, like most of Europe and Asia, in preparation for future conflict. First, states in Europe and Asia focused on rearming should understand the boundaries of what they can achieve using military power and its risks. While military power is necessary, it alone is not enough to guarantee their security. In a world in which military force is most useful in limited land and resource grabs, targeted strikes, and preventative wars, massive military buildups can be a double-edged sword—increasing the risk of conflict with adversaries who perceive a growing threat or who see dialogue as useless, rather than offering protection. For Europe, the best bulwark against future aggression may not be unconstrained military buildup but rather a degree of political accommodation and a security architecture that includes Russia and ultimately makes preventative wars and buffer zones unnecessary. The same is likely true in Asia.

Second, for now, states in Europe and Asia, including those on NATO's front line or close to China, should have more confidence

in their security. The conflicts in Ukraine and Iran have shown the equalizing effect of new technologies on today's warfare and what can be achieved using asymmetric capabilities. They thus have every reason to be optimistic about their ability to protect themselves and to deter and avoid conflict with their much larger neighbors. This will require intentional policy choices, however, and an end to narratives about the inevitability of perpetual war.

Despite these warnings, as states continue to invest in their military capabilities, the appeal of war may rise. States that keep their use of force limited and focused, aimed at prevention and leverage, may end up significantly better off. But states that fail to understand how warfare has changed and continue to seek decisive outcomes and far-reaching political ambitions using military power are likely to find themselves worse off: entangled, depleted, and facing no good options.

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