The Illusion of Modern War: Why Technology Cannot Rescue Strategy

Modern war has always been haunted by promises of transformation. At various moments over the past two centuries, observers have insisted with great confidence that the nature of conflict was being irrevocably altered: by railways, telegraphs, long-range artillery, mass conscription, airpower, nuclear weapons, computers, satellites, drones, or, most recently, artificial intelligence. Each new technology has been accompanied by the same assurances — that war as we know it is on the brink of obsolescence, that political violence can be controlled or sanitised, that states need no longer endure the slow grind of attrition, the messy uncertainties of politics, or the stubborn refusal of opponents to behave as models predict. The future, we are told, will bring precision without friction, anticipation without surprise, power without cost.

It is an attractive vision. It is also, as history keeps showing, an illusion. What changes in war is not its nature but its character. The tools with which we kill one another evolve; the political logic that brings war into being does not. This distinction — between the grammar and the logic, the *how* and the *why* — was once well understood, at least among those who read Clausewitz. Yet it has become strangely vague in the modern imagination. The belief that technology can correct political misjudgement or compensate for strategic incoherence has become a recurring feature of Western military behaviour. It is difficult to think of any advanced society that has entered more conflicts with greater enthusiasm, more sophisticated equipment but less clarity about the political objectives of its actions than the Western democracies of the post-Cold War era.

This is not surprising. Technological optimism is woven into the fabric of modern life. It shapes how we work, travel, communicate, heal, and dream. When so much of existence is mediated by screens, sensors, algorithms and networks, it is hardly outlandish to imagine that war — that most ancient of human activities — might be similarly domesticated. And yet the deeper pattern is unmistakable. Political leaders repeatedly assume that new capabilities will produce decisive results; militaries design doctrines around the promise of efficiency; publics are reassured that conflicts will be brief, limited and

casualty-light. Then events intrude, and the old, uncomfortable realities reassert themselves.

The illusion of modern war is therefore not a single error but a recurring pattern of thought. It begins with the belief that war can be controlled; it continues with the hope that technology can reduce political complexity; it ends with the realisation — usually too late, sometimes disastrously so — that war remains stubbornly human, political, and shaped by unpredictable forces. To observe this is not to lapse into acceptance. It is simply to acknowledge that the old distinctions still matter, and that forgetting them tends to result in avoidable catastrophe.

One way to understand the modern illusion is to trace its lineage. The 19th century was the crucible in which industrialisation and military ambition first fused into a coherent ideology of technological salvation. European general staffs, observing the speed with which railways could move men and matériel, convinced themselves that war could be scheduled like a train timetable. The Prussian victory over France in 1870 seemed to confirm this: the rapid mobilisation, the efficient delivery of troops, the swift encirclement at Sedan. War, it seemed, could now be rendered predictable.

But even then, the seeds of the modern delusion were visible. The same railways that delivered armies to the frontier delivered them to industrial slaughter a generation later. If the First World War had a single lesson, it was that technology tends to expand the scale of destruction as quickly as — and often more quickly than — it expands the capacity for control. The machine gun and the heavy artillery piece were remarkable inventions, but they did not make war more decisive; they made it more protracted.

This failure did not eclipse technological optimism. It merely changed its focus. By the 1920s and 1930s, the prophets of airpower — Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell and their disciples — promised that the bomber would revolutionise war. Strategic bombing, they insisted, would bypass armies, devastate morale, and force governments to surrender within days. British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin famously stated, during a 1932 speech to the House of Commons, that ‘The bomber will always get through’. Here, too, the appeal lay in the suggestion that war

could be rendered efficient: quick, decisive, and conducted without the tiresome need to grapple with political nuance or the demands of terrain.

What followed, again, was something quite different. Strategic bombing during the Second World War caused immense suffering but rarely achieved its intended political effects. German morale did not collapse; Japanese resolve did not evaporate; the Soviet Union endured astonishing losses yet continued fighting with a ferocity that confounded all expectations. Even the atomic bomb — the most technologically transformative weapon ever built — did not abolish war. It reframed it, certainly, but did not remove it from the spectrum of human behaviour. The Cold War was shaped by a paradox: weapons so destructive that they could not be used became central to a strategic competition waged through proxies, covert operations, ideological rivalry and conventional force.

If we then fast-forward to the Gulf War in 1991, we can see the modern illusion in its purest form. A technologically unmatched coalition destroyed the Iraqi army in weeks, using precision weapons whose accuracy astonished even the sceptics. The conflict seemed to validate the idea of a 'Revolution in Military Affairs.' War, at last, appeared to be becoming a matter of systems rather than politics, of sensors rather than strategy. It is no coincidence that this period coincided with the high tide of Western liberal confidence. History, after all, was supposed to have ended. Little heed was taken of the weakness of the other side nor, perhaps the will to fight when their regime seen on its last legs. American military analysts had a field day (sic) boasting about how successful their assault had been. The truth was that had it not been a complete walkover, something would have gone very wrong indeed.

Then came Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

The problem starts with The Distinction Modernity Forgot: War vs Warfare: *War* is political: a contest of wills between polities seeking to alter the political balance. *Warfare* is the conduct of that contest: the methods, doctrines, weapons, and techniques. Modernity has tangled the two. Success in warfare — better weapons, quicker kills, superior sensors — is mistaken for

progress in war. But tactical superiority does not translate automatically into political advantage. The United States has enjoyed overwhelming military dominance for decades, yet its record of political outcomes since 1945 is mixed at best. Britain's own experience, from Suez to Helmand, reinforces the point: brilliant tactics cannot rescue incoherent strategy.

In Afghanistan, Western forces mastered the art of tactical engagement but never the political landscape of 40,000 villages, tribal power structures, and competing sovereignties. The problem was not the drone, the rifle, or the patrol; it was the absence of an achievable political objective. Warfare was modern; war was ancient. The West confused the two.

John Reid, was the UK's Defence Secretary at the time of the British deployment to Helmand Province in 2006. At a press conference in Kabul in April 2006, he asserted: 'We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years' time without firing one shot because our mission is to protect the reconstruction'. A statement widely interpreted as a blithe and over-optimistic. But it also shows ignorance about what military force can do 'nd the link with political objectives. And let's recall the rather well warn phrase that 'politics is the art of the possible'. In reality, British troops immediately encountered fierce resistance, and the conflict in Helmand became a major, high-intensity war.

Clausewitz warned that 'the political object is the goal; war is the means.' The illusion of modern war reverses this: the means become the point. When technology becomes the centre of gravity, politics is relegated to an afterthought. The result is warfare without war — activity without purpose.

It's easy to see why this confusion arises. Warfare lends itself to measurement. One can quantify the range of a missile, the speed of a drone, the bandwidth of a satellite link, the lethality of a munition. War, by contrast, resists such measures. How does one measure legitimacy, political will, ideological fervour, or the stability of a social order? These are the things that decide wars, but they are difficult to discuss in Power Points or procurement cycles. They require judgement rather than data, and judgement is a more fragile commodity. It astonishes some Western observers that Russia can tolerate the horrendous losses that the

Russian army has taken since the Ukraine war started. Some sources claim up to a million casualties, with some 250,000 deaths.

In Afghanistan, the Western coalition achieved near-total dominance of the air, the electromagnetic spectrum, and the night. It possessed the best equipment, the best logistics, and the most advanced intelligence apparatus in history. Yet for all of this, it lacked a political objective capable of being translated into Afghan realities. The result was nearly inevitable: tactical success coupled with strategic failure. Warfare was modern; war remained what it had always been — a contest over political authority.

The same was true in Iraq. The initial campaign in 2003 was a triumph of precision, speed and joint operations. But it was a triumph in the service of an illusion. Removing Saddam Hussein was not the same as replacing his regime with something stable. The disbandment of the Iraqi army created a vacuum; the political structure left behind was brittle, contested and infused with sectarian distrust. No drone, no algorithm, no satellite could compensate for that.

Even where warfare is conducted with exquisite technical skill, war's political nature remains sovereign. Wars are not won by destroying equipment but by imposing political will. To confuse the two is to mistake the symptom for the disease.

The modern illusion of war rests on three promises: accuracy, prediction and control. Each is more fragile than it appears. Accuracy is real enough at the tactical level. Modern munitions can strike within a metre of their intended target. But as political scientists have observed repeatedly, the relationship between tactical accuracy and strategic success is weak. Killing a particular insurgent leader may achieve a short-term advantage; it may equally generate a cascade of unintended consequences, from revenge attacks to local destabilisation to the empowerment of rival factions. A precise strike is still a strike; it generates political ripples irrespective of its accuracy. This is particularly true when, some American drone strikes were on the basis of a 'double tap'. Rescue forces would arrive, only to get hit with the second strike.

Prediction is even more problematic. War is a clash of wills, not a meteorological system. Opponents adapt. They deceive. They act on the basis of ideology, fear, misperception, culture, pride, and, occasionally, sheer folly. Algorithms can model patterns, but they cannot model human meaning. An AI that predicts the movement of a battalion cannot predict the resolve of a political community. And it is resolve — not movement — that wins wars.

Control – something all military forces is take very seriously indeed – is the most seductive illusion of all. The West has grown accustomed to the idea that force can be applied selectively, without the messiness of mobilisation. This is why drones have been so politically attractive: they allow leaders to act without risking national casualties. Yet the belief that war can be confined — waged at a distance, by professionals, without the involvement of society — misunderstands the nature of political violence. Even limited actions create reactions. Libya's 'limited' intervention destabilised an entire region. Syria's 'red line' crisis eroded credibility far beyond the Levant. War does not respect the boundaries we draw around it.

The war in Ukraine has exposed many modern illusions. It has reminded Europeans, in particular, that conventional war — the mass movement of armies across borders, the capture and defence of territory, the mobilisation of societies — has not disappeared. It has demonstrated that artillery, logistics and industrial capacity matter as much in 2022 as they did in 1916. And it has underscored the central fact that political will is the ultimate determinant of strategic success.

Ukraine's resilience cannot be explained by technology. The drones and missiles matter, but only because they are embedded in a political project that commands extraordinary national support. Russia's underperformance cannot be explained solely by equipment failures; it reflects deeper problems of morale, corruption, doctrine and political purpose. The war has been a laboratory not of new technologies — though both sides have used them creatively — but of old truths.

It has also revealed the limits of prediction. Many analysts assumed Ukraine would collapse within days; others believed

Russia would liberate the Donbas and then negotiate. Few anticipated a long, grinding war of attrition. Fewer still anticipated the scale of Western support or the resilience of Russian society under sanctions. These misjudgements stem not from a lack of data but from a lack of political understanding. War is not a puzzle to be solved; it is a struggle to be endured.

Why does the illusion persist? The simplest answer is that it is too easy. Technology offers a vision of war without tragedy: a world in which machines take risks, in which politics is an afterthought, in which the uncertainties that once shaped strategy can be eliminated by information. It is a seductive fantasy, especially for societies that prefer not to think about war at all.

But there are deeper reasons. Defence bureaucracies are incentivised to emphasise technological solutions; they justify budgets, drive industrial innovation, and offer a sense of progress. Political leaders find them appealing because they promise results without sacrifice. Journalists find them compelling because they are easier to narrate than the complexities of tribal politics in Helmand or the intricacies of Ukrainian identity. And publics find them reassuring because they imply that the horrors of history may finally be behind us.

The illusion is not simply a misunderstanding; it is a symptom of a deeper cultural preference for technical solutions to political problems. But war has always been the enemy of such preferences. It is political, not technical. It is human, not mechanical. And it is shaped by forces — identity, fear, honour, memory, ambition — that do not yield to algorithms.

If the illusion of modern war is to be dispelled, states must recover the older, harder wisdoms of strategy. At the heart of this is the requirement to define political objectives clearly and realistically. Wars fail when the political goal is incoherent or unachievable. Afghanistan failed not because the West lacked helicopters or night-vision goggles but because it never settled on a political vision capable of being implemented.

Second, states must follow one of the oldest lessons principles of strategy: there must be an alignment of ends, ways and means.

This is easier to say than to do, but the logic is inexorable. Ambitious objectives require commensurate resources and patience. The belief that technology can substitute for political will is the essence of modern delusion.

Third, civil–military dialogue must be honest rather than ritualistic. Militaries are often reluctant to challenge political assumptions; politicians are often too eager to believe optimistic assessments. The result is a mutual evasion of responsibility.

Fourth, strategic education must be broadened rather than narrowed. War is not a purely military activity but a social and political one. To understand it requires immersion in history, political science, economics, anthropology, and psychology. Without such understanding, technology becomes a bright distraction.

Finally, societies must accept that uncertainty is irreducible. The desire for control is understandable; the belief that it can be achieved is misguided. Strategy begins with the acceptance of limits.

The illusion of modern war is not new, but its consequences have become more visible. The collapse of state-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the fragmentation of Libya, the chaos of Syria, and the shock of Ukraine have all revealed the fragility of Western strategic thinking. The assumption that wars can be fought without political effort, without social mobilisation, without historical understanding, is a dangerous one. The belief that technological superiority guarantees strategic success is not merely mistaken; it is a recipe for disaster.

War changes. Its tools evolve. But its essence — the contest of wills — remains. Technology may shape the battlefield, but it cannot decide the peace. It may kill with precision, but it cannot create legitimacy. It may allow us to see further, but it cannot help us see more clearly.

In the end, the illusion of modern war is not about machines at all. It is about us. No device — whether precision-guided, hypersonic, autonomous or algorithmic — can rescue political leaders from their own failures of judgement. Technology can

hasten destruction, but it cannot supply clarity of purpose; it can expand the reach of violence, but it cannot impose restraint; it can perfect the mechanics of warfare, but it cannot alter the logic of war. As long as political objectives remain ill-defined, incoherent, or fantastical, such as Vietnam, Afghanistan , Iraq etc.

Strategy will continue to collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. The enduring lesson is stark: war is not transformed by the sophistication of our tools but by the discipline of our thinking. Until states rediscover the primacy of political judgement — the hard business of setting achievable ends, aligning means, and accepting costs — modern war will remain a delusional charade. Technology is never the answer; strategy either succeeds on political terms, or it does not succeed at all. Recognising this is not hopelessness. It is the beginning of strategic sanity.