

From Ukraine to Iran: The Déjà vu of Contemporary Conflict

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Abstract

War evolves in appearance but not in essence. From ancient sieges to modern drone strikes, the constants of violence, deception, attrition, and survival remain unchanged. Technology alters the tools—catapults become missiles, coded messages become cyber warfare—but strategies of encirclement, psychological pressure, and alliance building persist. Conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia seem novel due to drones and precision weapons, yet they echo timeless patterns. To mistake innovation for transformation is to ignore history's lessons. Recognising continuity prevents costly, knee-jerk force changes and reminds the world that war remains a contest of wills, fought with whatever means societies possess at that point in time.

Introduction

The major conflicts going on in the world, as of writing this article, are between Russia and Ukraine, in Lebanon and Gaza between Israel and Hezbollah– Hamas, and in the Gulf region between the United States (US)–Israel and Iran, supported symbolically by some Houthis and Iraqi Shia militias. They stood on the head of many assumptions which emerged based upon past conflicts and the 'Rules-based' nature of war imposed by the dominant liberal state post-World War II (WW II). But are these any different from past wars?

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Human beings interpret history through the lens of their own time. What they grew up with feels natural, so they project it backwards for a century or two as the baseline for 'Normal' because of cognitive biases like presentism and generational anchoring.¹ The most vivid and accessible examples of war come from one's own lifetime and recent history. This makes them seem like the default. Each generation tends to view the way wars are waged from their own or their father's or grandfather's generation and this becomes a stable reference point—close enough to be remembered, distant enough to be idealised. Education, media, and national narratives often emphasise continuity with the recent past, reinforcing the idea that current institutions are natural or optimal. The fact is that what counts as normal varies drastically across cultures and centuries. Democracy, monarchy, feudalism, or tribal governance have all been considered natural at different times. Similarly, total war, limited war, insurgency, or a war of narratives have also been considered natural at some point of time.

The Character of Warfare in Current Conflicts

The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran illustrate how warfare's character is evolving through technology, hybrid strategies, and multi-front escalation. Although the rules of war existed informally for many millennia, present-day perspectives often view them as having formally emerged only after the World War I (WW I).

It remains a moot point whether institutional memory should be rooted solely in the experiences of the two World Wars. The naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan had noted that the 1749-58 war between Britain and Spain, in which France joined Spain, was also a 'World War', because it was waged not only in Europe but also in North America and India. To study how the two World Wars were fought in the 20th Century and to then presume that this is how wars are required to be fought in the future would be erroneous.

Post WW II, nuclear weapons brought an entirely different dynamic to wars or conflicts between states. A conflict between two Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) would be logically fought through proxies. Meanwhile, a conflict between an NWS and a Non-Nuclear Weapon State (NNWS) would use different strategy,

where the NNWS state would use asymmetric means to avoid a direct conventional conflict. An NNWS is unlikely to launch a ground offensive to occupy the territory of an NWS. The opposite can be done with impunity but in case the NNWS has an NWS backing it, the NWS attacker will be specific about its aim—and declare it—lest it cross a redline.

How Present Conflicts are Being Fought

While the essence of war—violence, attrition, and the contest of wills—remains constant, these evolving dynamics are shaping the manner in which the conflicts are being fought today. These are dealt with individually below:

- **Ukraine.** This is Europe's largest land war since WW II. Russia's (NWS) stated aims in the have consistently been to prevent Ukraine's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, securing recognition of territories under Russian control, and forcing Kyiv into a negotiated settlement on Moscow's terms. These goals are framed as both military and political objectives, with the Kremlin insisting it will continue fighting until they are achieved.² The key features in this conflict by both sides are the use of drones, precision artillery, cyber operations, and electronic warfare.³ The strategies of attrition, encirclement, and morale-breaking remain central. The conflict has seen classic trench ambush, mechanised manoeuvre, and massive use of artillery on the frontlines. However, once the conflict reached a stalemate, with negotiations in practice, it could be claimed to have witnessed manifestations of the 'New Type of War'.
- **Israel–Gaza.** While the trigger for the current conflict was the Hamas attack of 07 Oct 2023, the simmering pot was waiting to boil over for long. The nature of the conflict between Israel and Hamas (and now Hezbollah)—both Iranian proxies—has been asymmetric warfare, tunnel networks, rocket barrages, and drone attacks. Israel employs precision strikes and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven targeting, while the proxy non-states use guerrilla tactics which mirror age-old insurgencies, adapted to urban density and modern surveillance.

- **Iran.** The nature of the conflict is direct strikes by the US and Israel since 28 Feb 2026, which escalated into a regional war. Iran launched long-range drone and missile strikes, some cyberattacks, and mobilised allied militias (Houthis, Iraqi Shia groups, Hezbollah). Subsequently, as the military impact on Iran increased—including a no-holds-barred attack on its naval vessel IRIS Dena on 04 Mar 2026 in international waters just off the coast of Sri Lanka by a US submarine—it retaliated by taking actions which now impact the global economy. It choked oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz, attacked water desalination plants of Gulf countries in the US camp, and has threatened to damage major internet undersea fibre optic cables in the Gulf and the Red Sea. These are sensitive pressure points in a globalised world, and geography favours Iran in such actions.

Is this a New Form of War?

On 26 Feb 2026, the well-known journalist, author and CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria, in his acclaimed international affairs program called Global Public Square, stated that the conflicts in Ukraine and Iran herald a new era in warfare. In Ukraine, drones and precision artillery have redefined combat, turning every duel into a contest of intelligence and accuracy rather than sheer numbers. In Iran, cheap drones and missiles have exposed the vulnerability of expensive Western defences. Zakaria warned that “Iran has demonstrated that you don’t need to spend billions to challenge the world’s most powerful military—you just need to be clever with cheap technology”.⁴ His take is that the future of warfare is cheap, smart, and hybrid. Cyber, economic, and military domains are now inseparable, and ripple effects extend far beyond battlefields into energy markets, shipping lanes, and global trade.

Emerging Lessons

While Zakaria’s assessment may appear logical, military historians view it with scepticism because of the lessons that emerge.

Lessons in Deterrence. Firstly, credibility matters; Russia’s nuclear threats in Ukraine revealed that deterrence depends on credible red lines. Western powers gradually lifted restrictions on arms deliveries to Ukraine despite intimidation, showing that deterrence fails if threats lack follow through. Secondly, multi domain

deterrence, like Israel's reliance on precision strikes and missile defence, demonstrates deterrence through technological superiority, but Hamas and Hezbollah's persistence proves that deterrence against non state actors is harder to sustain as they have few visibly targetable assets.

Lessons in Coercion. Firstly, states fail to obtain coercion through kinetic means, they resort to economic and psychological coercion. Russia's targeting of Ukrainian infrastructure and Iran's disruption of the Strait of Hormuz shipping highlight coercion beyond battlefield victories—using economic pain and psychological pressure to weaken adversaries. Secondly, coercion through proxies is effective only till open conflict occurs. Iran's use of Hezbollah and Houthis shows how proxies extended coercive reach without direct confrontation for a long time. Israel's no-holds-barred response shows frustration against that such coercion. Attacking civilian infrastructure by both sides, classified as a 'War Crime', has become the new normal.

Lessons in Escalation Management. Firstly, the Western powers have managed to avoid an uncontrolled escalation in Ukraine. They have calibrated weapons deliveries to avoid direct NATO–Russia clashes. This management also emerges from the feeling that the US may not get involved in a European war. Secondly, temporary pauses in Gaza and Ukraine reveal that ceasefires often stabilise front lines but rarely resolve conflicts, underscoring the challenge of managing escalation without achieving peace. Lastly, Iran's direct strikes and proxy mobilisation show how escalation can quickly spread across theatres, requiring adversaries to balance deterrence with restraint to avoid a wider war.

Lessons in Strategic Signalling. Proxies blur the line between local insurgencies and regional struggles, creating layered conflicts that are simultaneously national and transnational. Social media enables strategic signalling through a complex ecosystem where states and their partners wage war indirectly, balancing escalation and restraint, while constantly broadcasting intent to audiences at home, abroad, and across the battlefield. AI enables even mischief makers to add to the fog of war. In such a battlefield milieu, entirely contradictory statements by national leaders can be a part of strategic deception or psychological warfare.

Learning from History

The conflicts at present need a historian-theorist to grasp their implications. The Shahed drones—or Shahed derivative drones—being used extensively in the Ukraine and Iran conflict are no different from the V1 rockets used by Germany or the Kamikaze aircraft by Japan in WW II. They differ only in the increased ranges and precision targeting, which are a result of modern technology.

The 'Assassination' targeting of Iranian and Hezbollah leaders using smart missiles and bombs is no different from the assassination of kings and leaders for regime change, a norm since time immemorial. The difference in the case of Iran was the collateral damage as the so-called 'Precision' weapon used was not as precise as an assassin's knife or a sniper's bullet.

The extensive use of high-speed ballistic missiles to target civilian infrastructure is no different from the use of German V2 rockets of WWII. Primarily made to retaliate for the massed aerial bombing of German cities, they became the only mean for Germany to attack Britain after the Luftwaffe lost its ability.

Towards the same end, from 1944, the Japanese military launched over 9,000 hydrogen balloons with incendiary bombs via the Pacific jet stream to spread fires in the US. This attempt was no different than a step towards long-range drones, or even the 'Mysterious' drones which may have been a prank or peril. They interfered with B-52 bomber operations at the US air base in Louisiana on 09 Mar 2026.

The Japanese balloons were no different from a stratagem used by the Mongols in the Siege of Caffa (1346-47) when they catapulted plague-infected corpses over the walls of the Genoese-held city in Crimea.

Cutting off the source of drinking water of a besieged enemy is a tactic as old as warfare itself. Between 720 and 705 BCE, an Assyrian king in the region of present-day Iran and Iraq, as well as his opponents, used water both as a weapon and as a target by damaging wells, diverting and destroying irrigation canals, and flooding land for offensive and defensive purposes. Hence, little has changed in the present era, when desalination plants are being hit to deny water supply.

The use of machine gun in the WW I was hailed as revolutionary and reshaped tactics—forcing armies into trenches and slaughtering waves of infantry. Yet, over time, militaries adapted this tactic with combined arms, tanks, air forces, and new doctrines. The machine gun became one of the tools among many, folded into the broader logic of war.

The detailed study of wars and conflicts in history provide a sense of *Déjà vu* while reading about the present conflicts, proving that the evolution of conflicts is cyclic. In each cycle, the technology available at that time adds to its speed, intensity, and lethality, giving an illusion of transformation.

War Evolves, not Transforms

The phrase ‘Transformation of War’ became a buzzword in military and strategic circles in the late 1990s and onwards. It was largely tied to debates around ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’. The phrase gained traction as analysts sought to describe how technology, globalisation, and non-state actors were reshaping conflict. Following the global trend, India too began engaging with the transformation of war rhetoric in the early 2000s. But so far, worldwide and in India, transformation is not yet a substantive theory. This is best exemplified by the fact that even in the US, the serious result of the transformation focus, resulting in the setting up of a Transformation and Training Command (T2COM), took place in 2025, more than 25 years after the term was first coined and discussed.

Presently, faster computers, the internet, and AI speed up the evolution of military knowledge. Theorists posit that ‘Transformation’ implies a qualitative leap and not just a faster version of normal evolution. Understanding with an example of a five-year-old child and a 70-year-old man in the present world, the speed with which a five-year-old picks up using the mobile phone for playing games appears to be transformative, while the 70-year-old’s speed to learn the use of applications can be termed as evolution. In essence, they are the same, but what distinguishes evolution from transformation is subjective. While there have been arguments to prove that the T2COM is not a rebranded version of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) as it has been set up in a different place, 2,000 kms away, nothing changes the fact that the TRADOC was disbanded on 26 Sep 2025 and T2COM

was established on 02 Oct 2025, underscoring that it is basically the same thing with some evolution.

The ‘Changing Character of Warfare’ in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran could be best seen as evolution, not transformation. Technology alters the face of conflict, but its heart—power, survival, and legitimacy—remains the same. Recognising this continuity helps avoid overreacting to novelty and ensures that strategies remain grounded in historical lessons. The paradox is clear: every generation believes it is witnessing a revolution in conflicts, yet history shows that revolutions are always absorbed into continuity.

Drones, AI, and space weapons will reshape war in the realm of tactics and the cost of conflict, but the essence of conflicts—politics, endurance, and human will—remains unchanged. Ukraine has already developed a low-cost interceptor drone to counter the Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones (renamed Geran-2 in Russian service). Russia had used swarms of Shaheds and missiles to overwhelm Ukrainian air defences starting Sep 2022. Russia has favoured the Shahed suicide drone and has produced multiple variants of it. As Russians evolve the Iranian drones, Ukrainians come up with their own lower-cost drone interceptors.

Such drone wars are one part of a conflict. They may be able to bring an opponent to the negotiating table, but are unlikely to win a conflict on their own. A quote from the celebrated history of the Korean War by TR Fehrenbach is worth contemplating here:

“Americans in 1950 rediscovered something that since Hiroshima they had forgotten: you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomise it, pulverise it and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilisation, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud”.

Conclusion

Post the traumatic experience in Vietnam, the US has always been chary of putting its young men in the mud overseas. A soldier’s resolve to sacrifice their life is always better in defence of home territory.

The Russians have prevailed in Ukraine in meeting their aim of securing the Russian-speaking areas by putting their young men into the mud. Ukrainians have defended the rest of their territory by putting young men in the mud. In the conflict in West Asia, the Israeli resolve will remain strong for existential reasons; the same may not be true of the US. Bayonets, boots, and blood are required to win the conflict against Iran; bombs and missiles may only get Iran to the negotiating table.

India must learn from current conflicts, but these lessons should also be relevant to its environment. As Stephen P Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta mention in their article, India should not be 'Arming without Aiming'.⁵ Its military should take learning from the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, with direct implications for its security calculus, force modernisation priorities, and preparedness. But evolutionary changes should not be contemplates mirroring someone else. For example, the decentralised command and 'Mosaic' defence of the Iranians, which has given Iran surprising resilience, flies in the face of centralisation through theatre commands. The last word is that what India perceive as transformational could not be so after all, and what the country needs to do to evolve must be relevant to its geography, history, and national interest.

Endnotes

¹ Stephen P Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010).

² Samuel Charap and Krystyna Holynska, "Russia's War Aims in Ukraine: Objective-Setting and the Kremlin's Use of Force Abroad," *RAND Research Paper*, 13 Aug 2024, accessed 30 Mar 2026, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2679-1.html

³ Nandika Chatterjee and Richard Hall, "Zelensky's Drone Diplomacy", *Time*, 06 Apr 2026, accessed 30 Mar 2026, https://www.magzter.com/stories/news/TIME-Magazine/ZELENSKYS-DRONE-DIPLOMACY?srsId=AfmBOoo_LSu1GISEdf11J9qhKtGFU8q2lGXwOprymh1SBwZASTiZrr2v

⁴ TR Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Military History of the Korean War* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

⁵ Fareed Zakaria, "GPS – My Take", *YouTube*, 22 Mar 2026, accessed 31 Mar 2026, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6XRncXkMaXQ3Yb5zhJ1jMc9E1D_zppx