

# Humanitarian Challenges of Great Power Conflict: Signs from Ukraine

*Lawrence Freedman*

*Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was little evidence of what a conventional war between the regular forces of peer competitors might look like today. After the total war of the twentieth century, the evolution of precision-guided munitions and drones set up the possibility of a new ideal type of conflict, in which U.S.-NATO coalitions could quickly defeat the regular forces of much weaker opponents, largely from a distance, while avoiding excess loss of civilian life. “Smart” weapons created the perception that when civilians were killed, this was an operational failure. Russia’s approach to war, however, has not put a high priority on avoiding civilian casualties, but has shown that precise weapons could be used deliberately to target civilian infrastructure in ruthless and coercive air campaigns. In this essay, I suggest that the Russia-Ukraine War provides insight into what a major power war would look like. I contrast the two distinct approaches represented by Ukraine, strengthened by NATO weapons and informed by its concepts, and Russia, with its readiness to attack civil society. I focus on the resulting humanitarian disaster in Ukraine, where more than one-quarter of the population has been displaced and where Ukrainians in Russian-occupied territories have reported thousands of instances of war crimes. I conclude by considering the likelihood and potential consequences of Russia’s use of nuclear weapons.*

**A**lthough there have been numerous wars involving the major powers since World War II, some historians have nonetheless described this period as a “long peace,” a term first coined in the 1980s, simply because there has yet to be a World War III.<sup>1</sup> Such a war would be defined less by how much of the world’s landmass was engulfed in conflict, for the end of the European empires means that there would be less chance of the conflict spreading across continents, than the danger to humanity posed by the likelihood that this would be a confrontation between nuclear-armed powers. This possibility, and the desire to avoid it, helps explain the long peace.

World War II was a total war, requiring the complete mobilization of all the economic and social resources of the belligerents, which in turn ensured that their

economies and societies were treated as legitimate targets. Even before the United States detonated atomic bombs above Hiroshima and Nagasaki, attacks on civilian populations during the last year of the war had reached new levels of destructiveness. The Allies' firebombing of Dresden in February 1945 and Tokyo in March 1945 caused unprecedented death tolls. What separated the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not the numbers of civilians killed, but the ease with which it was done, along with the insidious new factor of radioactivity. Coupled with the V-2 missile attacks on London, the first successful long-range guided ballistic missile attacks, they warned of how whole cities, even civilizations, could be obliterated, quickly, efficiently, and from a distance, with little hope of protection.

Although the United States and Soviet Union spent the 1950s thinking up ways to win a nuclear war, with either a disarming first strike or with low-yield nuclear weapons designed for the battlefield, by the mid-1960s, both sides understood they could be destroyed by the other in any nuclear confrontation. The idea of a limited nuclear war seemed preposterous. Any employment of those systems designed to replicate conventional munitions, whether mortars, mines, depth charges, or gravity bombs, would most likely trigger a process of escalation. There was no getting away from the proposition that nuclear war would be the ultimate horror, ending in mutual destruction.

This prospect deterred moves that could lead to such a catastrophe. It became U.S. strategy to underline the risk, demonstrating to the Soviet Union that it was irretrievably vulnerable, even while accepting that the same was true for the United States. There were criteria defining what an assured destruction capability required: 50 percent of industrial capacity and one-third of the population.<sup>2</sup> The argument was not that these numbers were necessary for deterrence purposes, let alone desirable. They were calculated in reference to the point at which extra weapons would cease to make much difference to the amount of destruction caused. Whether this would be reflected in actual targeting policy in the event of a war was another matter. Yet even when U.S. administrations asked for options that offered less than full-blown Armageddon, they were continually disappointed by how large the most limited options appeared.

There are a variety of options available to policy-makers for nuclear employment today, but what purposes they could serve remain unclear. In public discourse, it is taken for granted that a war between great powers would soon involve full-scale nuclear exchanges, which is why the nuclear powers sought to avoid even moderate skirmishing with regular forces. Whether in such circumstances the two sides might look for different options was irrelevant; the effect was to create a fear of escalation.

Even the "limited" wars of Korea and Vietnam resulted in tens of thousands of American casualties and millions of local civilian casualties. And in the protracted civil wars of the last three decades, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to

Syria, deaths have often had less to do with clashes of forces and more to do with the famine, poverty, and disease resulting from social and economic collapse.

The U.S. and NATO-led wars of the digital age have provided a different sort of experience, reflecting efforts to avoid putting regular forces in harm's way and exploiting their advantages in air power to the full. "Smart" weapons have encouraged the view that there is little excuse for widespread casualties and collateral damage. As the "drone wars" have demonstrated, it is now possible to pick very specific targets, even individuals. Against this, it is also apparent (as the Russians demonstrated in Syria) that smart weapons can be used to attack civilians more efficiently. These, however, have been unequal wars, fought by great power forces against much weaker armies and militias.

This leaves much uncertainty about the conduct of a potential war among the great powers: the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the United States, China, and, at least until recently, Russia in a higher league than the United Kingdom and France. They all have nuclear capabilities. Of the other nuclear states, India has the weight to be considered a great power. Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea could play influential roles in any major war, as would other nonnuclear powers, such as Germany and the rest of NATO, while countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia could influence any Indo-Pacific war. There is a consensus view that a third world war would at least involve the United States and China or Russia. This reflects the assumption that if nuclear weapons were *not* involved, and the fighting were confined to conventional forces, a conflict would not escalate to the level of a world war.

A nonnuclear war between major powers is considered unlikely because of the presumption of almost automatic escalation once these powers entered into direct confrontation. There are many reasons to avoid another war between great powers, but the possibility that it could end with nuclear exchanges ranks high among them. Although it is possible that parties in a major war could find ways to avoid nuclear use, or even keep any nuclear use in some ways limited, common prudence warns against testing this hypothesis.

Our distance from the world wars limits our grasp of the form a modern war between great powers could take, and the levels of casualties it would entail. Would the prospect of such a war still have a deterrent effect if there was confidence that there would be no nuclear escalation? Analyses of the likely loss of life in the event of a revived war on the Korean Peninsula alarmed members of the Trump administration, motivating the president's outreach to Kim Jong Un even as the United States updated its plans for "decapitation strikes" against him.<sup>3</sup> The loss of life would have been far worse than any recent conflict, but not unusual compared with the past world wars. Would a revived Korean War start with efforts to contain the violence (as was the case, to a degree, in 1939)? And how long might any restraint last? Does the disconnect between conventional battles and

nuclear exchanges make escalation less likely? By comparison with the middle of the last century, when large air raids over capital cities were still the norm, would it be possible to generate the intensity and passion among the populace to make nuclear use conceivable?

The humanitarian consequences of a nuclear war would far exceed anything previously experienced in warfare. This needs little elaboration. Though I shall return to the nuclear issue later, for the most part, I wish to concentrate on the form such a war might take without the use of nuclear weapons, or at least before the nuclear threshold has been passed.

I consider two contrasting models of warfighting associated with the United States and the Russian Federation, describing how much they diverge, particularly when it comes to the deliberate targeting of civil society. I then consider the conduct of the Russia-Ukraine War beginning on February 24, 2022. This has been the closest we have recently been, in intensity and the type of forces involved, to a war between major powers. Unlike Russia, Ukraine did not enter this war with all the attributes of a great power. Unlike Russia, it does not have a nuclear arsenal (it gave up the arsenal it inherited from the Soviet Union in 1994) and, unlike Russia, it does not deploy its armed forces beyond its borders in support of clients and allies. It is, however, fighting a war with NATO support and, increasingly, weaponry.

## Contrasting Models of Conventional War

Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was remarkably little evidence of what a conventional war between the regular forces of “peer competitors” might look like. Recently, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western armies have defeated much weaker opponents in the conventional stages of war, only to then get bogged down in resilient insurgencies and civil wars. Russia has also waged war against weaker opponents: in Chechnya, starting in 1994 and again in 1999, in Georgia in 2008, in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and then in support of the Syrian government from 2015. The most recent example of a conventional war with relatively modern equipment was the short Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict of September 2020. It was evident from this war that drones were making a difference to contemporary tactics, just as the 1991 Gulf War confirmed what had first been seen in 1972 in Vietnam: that precision-guided munitions created new options for conducting war by enabling accurate targeting of enemy systems from a distance.

Looking back over the available experience, and simplifying somewhat, we find two contrasting types of war. The first, a continuation of the total war of World War II that led to the massive air raids of civilian targets and the introduction of nuclear weapons, assumes the military objective of destroying civil society to remove the enemy’s will and capacity to fight. In the second, a more classical view, the objective of military action is to eliminate the military capabilities of the

enemy, ensuring that fighting is largely confined to regular forces. Here the quality of the eventual political settlement will reflect the extent of the military victory. These are ideal types in that, though they may shape strategy in practice, they will differ according to the nature of the adversary's strategy, the operational conditions, and the wider political context.

For the United States, the second type represents the ideal type of conventional strategy. In this form, conventional warfare would be conducted separate from civil society, with the belligerents gaining advantage through the speed of their decision-making, the quality of their technology, and the professionalism of their tactics. Those working with this framework have been particularly enamored with operational concepts based on outmaneuvering the enemy in battle, avoiding attritional warfare, trading firepower, and so tending toward a conflict in which all casualties, military and civilian, could be reduced. This form came into fashion after the 1991 Gulf War, under the banner of the next "revolution in military affairs." Western countries concentrated on developing technologies for this form, integrating sensors, command networks, and guidance systems that could achieve pinpoint accuracy at extended ranges.

One problem with this model was that it encouraged a view of warfare as the preserve of military professionals, conducted by armed forces with regard for each other but not the political context within which they operate. This added to the challenge of aligning operational practice with political purposes. In practice, the boundaries between the military and civilian spheres were less than clear cut. Even in the 1991 Gulf War, and certainly in U.S. wars since, it has become apparent that military operations, even with the most accurate weapons, could not avoid civilian targets, especially those connected to the infrastructure supporting the enemy's military operations, notably transportation links, but also energy and administration.

This has certainly been true when combatting insurgencies. Enemy militants are often indistinguishable from civilians, and efforts to make the distinction often fail. Considerations of force protection tend to take precedence over civilian casualty avoidance: that is, militaries are quicker to risk civilian lives than those of their own forces. The effort to reduce humanitarian costs through a sharp focus on defeating enemy combatants created narrative issues with the inevitable non-combatant deaths: they implied that they were the result of problems with the decision-making, technology, or tactics, and not just the inherent uncertainties of wars fought "among the people."

The opposing ideal type of conventional warfare, involving the direct targeting of civil society, is less demanding. It requires directing available firepower—artillery, rockets, missiles, aircraft—at large targets without any requirement for precision, although precision can enable attacks on strategically important targets, such as refineries, power stations, railway hubs, government buildings, hospitals, and

schools. The Russians appear to have embraced this ideal type in recent asymmetrical conflicts as well as against Ukraine today.

In the wars against Chechnya to prevent secession, Russian tactics were often quite brutal, and Russia's air strikes flattened the capital, Grozny. In operations beginning in 2015 to support the Syrian government against rebels, Russia not only provided cover to prevent criticism of the Syrians for their use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, but also used air power to make life as difficult as possible for civilians, in order to encourage them to leave. This was the other side of the coin of precision guidance: the same systems that could be used to avoid hitting civilians could also be used to target them effectively. In Aleppo, for example, Russian aircraft deliberately struck hospitals, often using coordinates handed to them through the United Nations so they could *avoid* these buildings.

The Russian ideal type is highly political. It is insensitive to civilian (or for that matter, military) casualties, but ruthless in defeating its opponents. Tellingly, Russia has worked hard on the narratives surrounding any military operations, seeking to demonstrate that the victims deserved all they got, and that Russia is only responding to severe provocations. Putin is widely considered responsible for a "false flag" operation in September 1999, using supposed terrorist attacks against residential accommodation as pretext for the Second Chechen War, which he launched immediately thereafter.

In Ukraine, following the 2013–2014 EuroMaidan protests and the ousting of Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Putin looked for demonstrations of spontaneous support for action against the new government in Kyiv, which he found in Crimea but was equivocal in the Donbas. With Syria, there was less need for justification because he could claim to be acting in support of an established government. Although Russia presented their entrance into the conflict as an anti-ISIS operation, Russia adopted an expansive definition of ISIS to include any anti-Assad group, as, their logic went, they were all objectively supporting the Islamists. This created its own problems of alignment, since Russia's political narratives created objectives that it could not achieve by available operational means.

In addition to humanitarian impact, this model creates problems on its own terms. If there is a strategic purpose to attacking civil society, it is to influence enemy decision-makers to look for ways out of the war to relieve the pain and punishment. But as with any coercive effort, it cannot dictate the target's reaction. Compliance is one possibility; angry, hardened resistance is another. This sort of strategy therefore does not preclude the need for land operations to take control of disputed territory or even to seize control of the enemy's decision-making center. This then creates questions about the interaction between the two efforts. At its simplest, should firepower be directed against targets that would degrade civilian life or that would support land operations?

Russia under Putin has shown a coercive mindset, particularly when using energy and economic measures to encourage other states to be compliant with its wishes. This was, after all, how the Ukrainian crisis began in 2013, when Putin turned the screws on Yanukovich to dissuade him from signing an association agreement with the European Union. This tactic succeeded, except that Ukrainian popular reaction against this decision set in motion the EuroMaidan movement and all that followed. In Chechnya and Georgia, Putin used military pressure to force political settlements. In Syria, Russia's vicious air campaign sought to drive civilians from rebel areas, though it did not contribute troops to this effort. Putin's approach, including in Ukraine in 2014, combined ruthlessness with limited liabilities. So while the attacks on Grozny or Aleppo might have foreshadowed the attacks on Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut in 2022–2023, they were not full tests of a coercive military strategy.

The Western model sought to limit the humanitarian costs of military operations, but was subverted by interactions with civil society. Expectations of opposing forces in combat well away from populated areas will always be unrealistic. This is even more so with “wars among the people,” when regular forces face hostility from sections of the population. Western campaigns have become associated with humanitarian distress, despite the accuracy of the weaponry and the skill with which it is used, because they have occupied territory where their presence is resisted, or they had taken sides in an internal conflict. The Russian model was indifferent to humanitarian costs – in Syria, it pursued them – and had no issue with taking sides. But Putin also sought to limit his exposure. The Syrian Civil War is the deadliest modern conflict the region has known, but Russia confined itself to airpower to avoid getting caught up in any heavy fighting. In Ukraine in 2014, the annexation of Crimea involved little fighting. The situation was different in the Donbas, where Russia sponsored separatist groups, often led by Russians, to undertake a rebellion against a new government in Kyiv.

There will always be limits to how much civilians can be protected from a war being fought where they live, unless of course they flee, which is a natural and frequent response to outbreaks of war. But this does not mean that the differences between the two ideal types are unimportant, most of all in whether civilians would be deliberately targeted in war. The Western model, in line with the Geneva Conventions, attempts to avoid civilian targeting as much as possible; the Russian model agreed in principle but in practice was far more ruthless. It might not matter to those attacked if they were victims of “collateral damage” or deliberate targeting, but the strategic use of firepower to intimidate populations and clear residential areas of hostile populations will inevitably cause much greater humanitarian distress. The Russia-Ukraine War that began in February 2022 provided a striking contrast between the belligerents' military strategies: not so much due to the influence of NATO thinking on Ukrainian practices, but because Ukraine had

every incentive to reduce the harm to their own civilian population, while Russia was inclined to target civilians not only as military strategy but because of its underlying political objectives.

## The Course of the War

Moscow's intention – signaled in Putin's invasion speech of February 24, 2022, when he moved away from the purported threat to Russian-language speakers in the Donbas to the need to “de-Nazify and demilitarize” Kyiv – was to install a puppet government and effectively reincorporate Ukraine into a “Greater Russia.” Belarus, which was already in the process of being turned into a client state, was part of this project. If the war in Ukraine had gone well for Moscow, it is likely that Moldova would also have been overrun. This was therefore a straightforward war of aggression and conquest.

The delusional and destructive view that Ukraine was not a proper state but really a part of old Russia, seized in an illegitimate putsch, shaped Russia's initial war strategy. Russian forces sought to capture or kill President Zelensky in Kyiv on the first day of the war, using a “thunder run” led by paratroopers and agents already in place. This would have precluded what many analysts had assumed to be the best option for Zelensky: to flee and then form a government in exile to mount an insurgency against the Russian occupation.

But Russia's effort failed and Zelensky was able to lead his people from the national capital. Soon it was apparent that not only had Russia failed to meet its initial objectives, but their forces were in trouble. The Ukrainians were outgunned by the Russians but not outfought. They inflicted heavy losses on Russian forces, leading Moscow to abandon its initial objectives, in particular its attempt to seize the capital, Kyiv, and concentrate instead on seizing the Donbas. It took until June for Russia to take Luhansk, but they were unable to capture Donetsk. Ukraine focused its limited counteroffensives close to Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city.

Once it was evident that Ukraine was succeeding in its defensive operations and was starting to push back Russian forces, Western states stepped up their military assistance to Ukraine, providing high-quality, modern weapons (with the exception, so far, of aircraft) that have made the fight closer to equal. The equipment deliveries began with drones and antitank and air-defense systems, but eventually also included artillery and armored vehicles. In June 2022, NATO states began to deliver more advanced weapons systems, notably, artillery that could fire with high accuracy over long ranges. In contrast to the Russian way of waging war, which used firepower to batter enemy defenses and to attack residential buildings and infrastructure, Ukraine, acting more in line with the Western way, concentrated its firepower on ammunition dumps and command posts to degrade Russian capabilities. As Ukraine turned its attention to the port city of Kherson,



seized by Russian forces early in the war, it concentrated on blocking bridges that might have provided Russia with both lines of supply and escape.

Because of these contrasts, the conduct of the war has increasingly resembled a great power conflict. Some Western commentators have described it as a “proxy war.”<sup>4</sup> This chimed with Russian propaganda that presented the war as a defensive and existential conflict with NATO, which was using Ukraine as a puppet. In this way, proxy war is a misleading label, suggesting that Ukraine is fighting to serve a wider Western agenda, and not its own: to survive as a sovereign country.

The conduct of conventional war in Ukraine demonstrated the importance of such factors as logistics and chains of command in determining military effectiveness, as well as terrain, as rivers have affected both offensive and defensive operations. Russia’s nuclear status has also limited what NATO countries have been willing to do in their direct support for Ukraine, as well as what Russia might try against NATO countries supporting Ukraine.

The war has been a humanitarian disaster. After six months of fighting, ten million Ukrainians, or one-quarter of the Ukrainian population, were displaced, with more than six million having left the country. Several cities, notably Mariupol and Kharkiv, along with many towns and villages, were battered by Russian firepower. In places occupied by Russian forces, there have been numerous reported instances of torture, incarceration, and murder of individuals alleged to be working against Russian forces, as well as looting, sexual abuse, and wanton violence and destruction.<sup>5</sup> Where Russia claimed land areas that it expected to hold for the long term, it enforced changes to education, currency, and language, replacing Ukrainian with Russian. Accompanying this, Russia has waged an intense propaganda campaign to demonstrate that particular atrocities against Ukrainians were self-inflicted. While this effort has been largely unsuccessful in the West, it has shaped popular attitudes in Russia and limited the impact of any concerns about Russia’s conduct among the general population. It became a genocidal war, not in the popularly understood meaning of the term as an attempt to exterminate a whole people, but in terms that met the criteria of the 1948 Genocide Convention: “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”<sup>6</sup> Russia did not bother to hide this intent, denying the existence of a separate Ukrainian people and, when given a chance, acting upon this denial.

When humanitarian organizations sought to arrange relief convoys to get civilians out of besieged cities – notably Mariupol, which became a battered symbol of Ukraine’s resistance – Russia toyed with them and subjected the convoys to shelling, forcing them to turn back toward the city. In response to the more than seventy thousand war crimes that have been reported to Ukrainian authorities, Ukraine appointed a special prosecutor who has vowed to investigate each and prosecute as many as the evidence would support. As of February 2023, twenty-five Russians have been convicted of war crimes in local courts.<sup>7</sup> At the same time,

the United Nations Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry to support the international investigation of Russia's crimes. All this, of course, after the basic crime of launching an imperialist war against a neighboring sovereign state. Moscow could claim that particular attacks were false flags, though after a point, the pattern of Russian behavior was too consistent for these claims – always implausible – to ring at all true.

In terms of causing harm to Ukraine, the campaign has been a tragic success. Russia has destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure and shrunk its economy by an estimated 45 percent in 2022.<sup>8</sup> Russia has killed or wounded tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians, displaced millions more, and caused high military casualties on both sides. Yet the Russian effort to eliminate Ukraine as a sovereign nation with a strong identity backfired completely. Russia's attacks on civilian life have brought it no military advantages. Ukraine defended its cities and towns despite the rubble. Russia's claim that it was "liberating" the Donbas became absurd when it was precisely the "most Russian" parts of the country that were harmed the most. After late September, when Putin claimed to have annexed Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, in addition to Crimea, so that they were now forever Russian, this "prize" was devastated and depopulated, with those left (certainly those who had not been living in the separatist enclaves) full of hatred for Russia.

If Russia's war effort has been coercive in intent, it has failed. Russian brutality did not prompt calls for capitulation but reinforced Ukrainian determination to fight on. Evidence from opinion polls in Ukraine has demonstrated a nation no longer divided by regions or language, but convinced that victory against the occupiers was both possible and necessary. Time will tell whether they are right, but the asymmetry of motivation is clearly in Ukraine's favor. On the Russian side, there is evidence of poor morale. And while the Russian military's crimes against the Ukrainian population may reflect incessant anti-Ukrainian propaganda, it also reflects poor discipline, for example, as valuable space on military vehicles was taken up with looted goods.

Russia's war effort was also counterproductive in that it convinced Western countries that they could not let Russia win and therefore had to provide Ukraine not only with weapons for defense against the Russian offensive, but the heavier weapons needed for counterattacks to push Russian forces out of occupied territory. The terrible revelations about Russian war crimes following Russia's abandonment of territory near Kyiv hardened Western opinion and led to pressure to supply still more and better weapons.

One argument for caution in all of this is that, if the Ukrainian counter-offensive succeeds too well, it could lead a desperate Putin to authorize the use of nuclear weapons, possibly starting with a small-yield weapon against troop concentrations. Because Putin made the foolish decision to invade Ukraine, we cannot rule out that he would make an even more foolish decision to launch a nuclear war.

Still, it would be odd to refuse to turn the limited “special military operation” into a full-scale war, but then suddenly move the conflict to a wholly novel level of catastrophe. Russia was able to intensify its efforts after setbacks in September 2022 by a partial mobilization of some three hundred thousand men and by intensifying its attacks on Ukraine’s critical infrastructure, using missiles and drones, without resorting to nuclear weapons. It is not clear what military problem employing nuclear weapons would fix. Further, from the start of the war, Russia has signaled that it would not escalate to a full-scale war with NATO – which could possibly “go nuclear” – unless the forces of NATO countries were directly fighting Russia’s. When launching the war on February 24, 2022, Putin said:

I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history.<sup>9</sup>

NATO has respected this warning and limited its commitments accordingly, even when Kyiv was pleading for NATO to establish a “no-fly zone” to prevent Russian aircrafts from bombing Ukrainian cities.

Some have used this restriction to urge Ukraine to make territorial concessions and focus its defenses on what matters most, despite its success in pushing back the original Russian offensive. But Ukraine was never likely to make such concessions. So if Western countries believe it would be disastrous for European security if Russia gains from its war against Ukraine, not least because of the brutality of its methods, and if Western countries refuse to cross the threshold of sending troops directly into the conflict, then they are obliged to keep supporting Ukraine with weapons and financial support. When a country, even one with nuclear weapons, wages war against a whole people, that choice might be difficult, but in the end it could only go one way.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lawrence Freedman**, an International Honorary Member of the American Academy since 2020, is Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King’s College London. In June 2009, he was appointed to serve as a member of the official inquiry into Britain and the 2003 Iraq War. He was awarded the Commander of the British Empire in 1996. Among his recent books are *Strategy: A History* (2013), *The Future of War: A History* (2017), *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (2019), the fourth edition of *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (with Jeff Michaels, 2019), and *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine* (2022).

## ENDNOTES

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