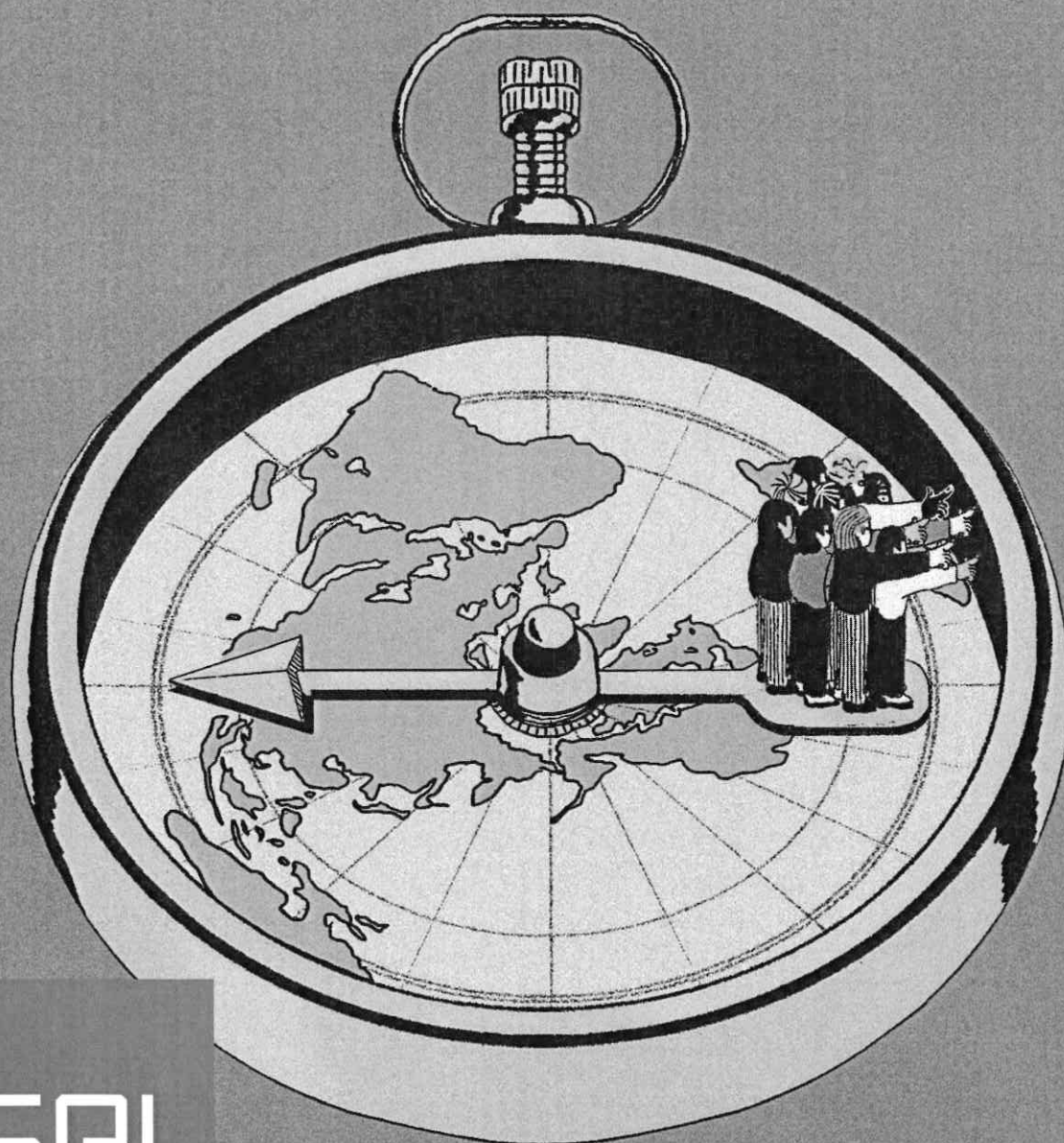


ISPI REPORT 2023

BACK TO THE FUTURE

edited by **Alessandro Colombo** and **Paolo Magri**
conclusion by **Giampiero Massolo**



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ISPI

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3. Are We Heading Back to an Age of Traditional Wars Between Major Powers?

Valter Coralluzzo

In the aftermath of the “five-day war” between Russia and Georgia (8-12 August 2008) – which in practice was a major offensive by Russian armed forces on Georgian territory, in the name of defending the separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, of which Tbilisi was seeking to regain control through military power – Robert Kagan, a leading figure in American neo-conservative circles, observed that the conflict represented no less significant a turning point in recent history than the fall of the Berlin Wall. It marked, he wrote, “the official return of history... to an almost XIX century style of great-power competition, complete with virulent nationalisms, battles for resources, struggles over spheres of influence and territory, and even — though it shocks our XXI century sensibilities — the use of military power to obtain geopolitical objectives”.¹ Furthermore, this confirmed the central thesis of the book that Kagan had just published,² in which he scorned the optimistic and widely cherished illusion that the end of the Cold War had spawned a new international order, characterised by the disappearance of any serious reason for conflict between states. Instead, he argued that those years had been “just a

¹ R. Kagan, “Il pretesto del nazionalismo”, *Corriere della Sera*, 21 August 2008.

² Id., *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, 2008; Italian translation *Il ritorno della storia e la fine dei sogni*, Milan, Mondadori, 2008.

momentary pause in the eternal competition between peoples and nations”³ and that in the decades to come, the traditional geopolitical contest between major powers would return to the fore, in a global context increasingly marked by the perennial clash between democracies and autocracies.

Kagan’s commentary on the “August War” between Russia and Georgia is a perfect fit for the current context. Many features of what can be rightly seen as Europe’s first (albeit underestimated) war of the XXI century are in fact being amplified in the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine, which is generally depicted as a classical, conventional, symmetrical, high-intensity, large-scale conflict between regular armies (albeit backed up by private military groups) striving to conquer territory and positions of advantage by making widespread use of armoured vehicles and heavy artillery: in other words, a conflict that has undoubtedly brought traditional war back to the heart of Europe, in a form that resembles the two world wars in many respects. Public opinion, the media, political decision-makers and various analysts were clearly taken aback: until the very last moment and despite the US’s well-founded forewarnings of an imminent attack by Russia on Ukraine, many denied that such an event could actually happen. For others, however, Russia’s attack came as a surprise only in its form, not its substance, because it could easily be seen as a natural (and hence predictable) step in the development of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy, which had long been focused on the increasingly aggressive and unscrupulous struggle to gain recognition of its status as a major power.

The Decline-of-War Thesis

To fully understand why there is a stubborn refusal to see a war of the type unleashed by Putin’s Russia at dawn on 24 February 2022 as a real possibility – despite the fact that this was no bolt

³ *Ivi*, p. 14.

from the blue, but a sharp escalation of the conflict that had been going on in the Donbass since 2014 – it is worth bearing in mind that all of us, like the Gauls who opposed Caesar, tend to be bound by the logic under which “men willingly believe what they wish”.⁴ It is no coincidence that the cognitive sciences used for the purposes of prediction and strategic decision-making warn of the danger posed by factors (such as beliefs, values and illusions) that act as a filter on the impartial examination of facts, thus undermining our ability to question our beliefs and causing us to fall into cognitive traps (giving credence only to information that confirms our expectations, or fitting incoming information to our existing world-views) that generate a skewed picture of reality. In this case, the Russia-Ukraine conflict seriously calls into question a number of deep-seated beliefs about war, its recent transformations and its future development. Shaped by the lively debate on these issues over recent decades, especially in strategic and international studies, these beliefs are based on two assumptions that have gained broad (but not unanimous) consensus among scholars: firstly that the age of traditional wars between sovereign states is over, and secondly that wars between major powers have been consigned to history. Usually lumped together under the more general and inclusive heading “the decline of war”, these assumptions, which appear to accurately reflect the historical experience of the Cold War and post-bipolar eras, warrant careful consideration.

Over a century has passed since George Gooch, a British historian, wrote: “We can now look forward with something like confidence to the time when war between civilised nations will be as antiquated as the duel”.⁵ The most authoritative conflict datasets give reason to believe that this time has come, which is why, a few years ago, Thomas Barnett claimed that

⁴ J. Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, Book III, 18, 6.

⁵ G.P. Gooch, *History of Our Time, 1885-1911*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1911, pp. 248-249.

“state-on-state war has gone the way of the dinosaur”.⁶ These datasets clearly show that since 1945, despite a large rise in the number of states, the number of classical international wars – i.e. conventional, symmetrical conflicts between sovereign states fought around a military front by regular armies using comparable weapons, tactics and strategies – has fallen so drastically, that such wars have become rare and, in certain parts of the world, a thing of the past. This has spawned the idea of a world of two halves, in which *zones of peace* (within the confines of the Euro-Atlantic security community), benefiting from economic development, political stability and liberal democracy, co-exist with *zones of turmoil* (the rest of the world), where in “strong” states (i.e. states capable of fulfilling their sovereign functions), power politics and the security dilemma dictate the rules of the game, and in “weak” states (i.e. states unable to acquire legitimacy by providing security and other services), civil wars and territorial fragmentation proliferate⁷.

While the two-worlds narrative may look somewhat contrived, the fact remains that the few interstate conflicts fought in recent decades – whether minor conflicts or those classified as full-scale wars on the basis that they have exceeded the conventional threshold of 1,000 deaths in battle per year⁸ – have been geographically confined to peripheral or semi-peripheral areas of the international system. Furthermore, these conflicts have almost invariably involved minor actors. Where they *have* involved the system’s major powers, they have never developed into direct conflicts on the ground between those powers, but only into proxy wars (i.e. wars between minor players each protected by a major power). Alternatively, they have involved indirect, covert, unconventional or hybrid forms

⁶ T.P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map*, New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2004, p. 271.

⁷ M. Singer and A. Wildavski, *The Real World Order. Zones of Peaces, Zones of Turmoil*, Chatham (NJ), Chatham House, 1993.

⁸ Battle-related deaths include military and civilian fatalities caused by traditional battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities and bombardments of all types.

of warfare. In other cases again, they have pitted a major power (perhaps at the head of a broad coalition of states) against a minor power or non-state actors of a criminal or terrorist nature. This latter category takes the name “policing wars”,⁹ by which western countries (first and foremost the United States) have attempted to restore order in nations torn by civil war, destabilise nations deemed to be “rogue states” (to the point of regime change, by playing the Nazi card against the dictator of the day), or counter the activity of criminal or terrorist organisations by military means. Even Mary Kaldor, whose best-known book¹⁰ occasionally appears to stereotype post-bipolar wars as “new wars” – which are basically domestic wars fought in the context of failing states (failing due to the impact of globalisation), by non-state actors in the name of identity politics – has referred to this type of conflict as “spectacle war” and “neo-modern war”¹¹. The former is the remote, hyper-technological, casualty-free form of warfare typical of a “post-heroic” western world¹² whose citizens are no longer willing to sacrifice their lives in war, but get involved in it only as distant spectators (because it is reduced to a kind of virtual simulation attracting a disproportionate amount of media attention). The latter can take the form of a limited interstate war, usually attributable to border disputes; or a counter-insurgency war triggered by the increasing political polarisation of fear and hatred that characterises “new wars”.

Interstate war is becoming rarer, but seeing this as confirmation of its actual or imminent demise may be wishful thinking. The latest evidence, in fact, points to an increase in the frequency and lethality of inter-state conflicts.¹³ There is

⁹ C. Holmqvist, *Policing Wars. On Military Intervention in the Twenty-First Century*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

¹⁰ M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars. Organized violence in a Global Era*, 1999.

¹¹ Id., *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, 2003.

¹² E.N. Luttwak, *Towards Post-Heroic Warfare*, in “Foreign Affairs”, vol. 74, no. 3, 1995

¹³ S. Davies, T. Pettersson, and M. Öberg, “Organized Violence 1989-2021 and

no doubt, however, that many factors militate against recourse to this type of war. Firstly, war has become more destructive and less cost-effective – a classically liberal idea expressed by Norman Angell at the beginning of the XX century.¹⁴ Secondly, the use of force has gradually lost legitimacy and war itself has become a taboo. According to John Mueller, therefore, war is not only “rationally” but also “subconsciously inconceivable”,¹⁵ to the extent that those who still have recourse to it feel obliged to conceal it behind euphemisms such as “peace-enforcing”, “humanitarian intervention” and “international policing operations”, or to restore its legitimacy by opportunistically leveraging the idea of the “just war”.¹⁶ Thirdly, under the current international system, it has become impracticable to pursue territorial conquest, which has always been one of the main objectives of interstate wars but now seems to have been eradicated, because the right to territorial integrity is so rooted in the international political and legal order that it is obvious to anyone that state borders cannot be unilaterally changed and that any attempt to seize territory by force, even if it wins domestic approval, will be considered illegitimate and seriously damaging to the international reputation of a state, its ruling elite or its leader. These factors – alongside others, such as the role played by democratisation, international institutions, the deterrence mechanism and the “benevolent” hegemony of the United States, whose “peacemaking” effect, however, appears to have been diminishing for some time – all play an important role in explaining the decline of the classic interstate war and, even more so, war between major powers. Many commentators, meanwhile, have claimed that major war is a thing of the past,

Drone Warfare”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2022, pp. 593-610.

¹⁴ N. Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, 1910.

¹⁵ J. Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*, New York, Basic Books, 1989, p. 240.

¹⁶ A. Colombo, “La guerra in Ucraina e il trionfo contemporaneo della guerra giusta”, *La fionda*, no. 2, 2022, pp. 28-40.

on the basis that there is virtually no risk of such conflict occurring today or in the foreseeable.¹⁷ But how far is this really true?

There can be no doubt that, since 1945, humankind has enjoyed a “long peace”,¹⁸ which the system of nuclear deterrence based on Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) helped strengthen, by radically and irreversibly changing the rational calculus of the costs and benefits of war and making it “unthinkable”. Let us not forget, however, that history offers other examples of long episodes of peace destined, nonetheless, to end. The Cold War itself can certainly be regarded as a major war, unlike all others in its form but similar in its consequences, because it spawned a new international order built around the hegemony of the United States. The fact that the Cold War came to an end “without a single shot being fired in its main theatre (Europe)”, however, “made it unable to give birth to an actual constitutive peace: as if once again, as always and bitterly, only a bloody victory won on the battlefield could transform the *power* of the hegemon into legitimate *authority*”.¹⁹ To put it another way, if a *true* international order can only be spawned by a major war (which ruthlessly separates victor from vanquished, and dominant from dominated), then “it follows that periods of history without major wars are destined to witness great disorder”.²⁰ And it is an established fact that the end of the

¹⁷ The leading exponent of this school of thought is John Mueller. 20 years after the publication of his best-known book (*Retreat from Doomsday*), he has emphatically reiterated his arguments (J. Mueller, “War has almost ceased to exist: An Assessment”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 124, No. 2, 2009, pp. 297-321). For an opposing opinion, see J.W. Forsyth Jr. and T.E. Griffith Jr., “Through the Glass Darkly: The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War”, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 96-115.

¹⁸ J.L. Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System”, *International Security*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1986, pp. 99-142.

¹⁹ V.E. Parsi, *Il sistema politico globale: da uno a molti*, in Id. (ed.), *Che differenza può fare un giorno*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2003, p. 103.

²⁰ L. Bonanate, *Il futuro della guerra e le guerre del futuro*, in Tullio Gregory (ed.), *XXI secolo*, Roma, Istituto Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, 2009, vol. 3, p. 434.

“short century” marked the beginning of a period of increasing disorder, complexity and unpredictability in international politics. So in a context characterised thus far by the absence of conflict (or even the mere expectation of war) between the system’s major powers, how can we rule out the possibility of a major war becoming at least “conceivable” again?

Like Alessandro Colombo, we could also ask ourselves whether it still makes sense to use the term “major war” solely to describe a war between major powers on a global scale, or whether it should also apply to war between the major powers of each regional system. This changes the picture dramatically: although the prospect of a global war does not seem plausible, “the same is not at all true if we shift the perspective to the level of individual regions, with the sole and usual exception of Europe and America”.²¹ This exception no longer seems to apply, however, in light of what is happening in Ukraine, where a local dyadic conflict (with several, generally overlooked features typical of a civil war) has been transformed (since the attrition of the Russian army made it clear to the Americans that Ukraine was no longer a lost cause but a strategic opportunity to weaken and marginalise Russia) into an anomalous proxy war²² with growing potential for global destabilisation – in other words, a proxy war between Russia, whose claims for status have triggered a kind of anti-Western crusade in the name of multipolarism that seems capable of uniting all the revisionist powers against the existing international order, and the United States, which is committed to defending a world order in which right trumps might (despite having resorted to “might” more than once itself) – not to say a “clash of civilisations” between

²¹ A. Colombo, “Guerra e discontinuità nelle relazioni internazionali. Il dibattito sul declino della guerra e i suoi limiti”, *Rivista italiana di scienza politica*, vol. XLII, no. 3, 2012, pp. 452-453

²² A. Giannuli offers a convincing explanation of why the widespread use of the term “proxy war” to describe the Russia-Ukraine conflict is approximate and inadequate in *Spie in Ucraina*, Milan, Ponte alle Grazie, 2022, pp. 157-158 and 182-185.

the West and the non-West (see statements to this effect by Putin and Kirill I, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church).²³ As Ian Morris points out, at present “any move that carries a risk of open war with the United States still requires a good dose of folly”, but in the future “the possible benefits may look very different to the emerging powers of 2030 and 2040”, and if so, we are likely to face an era that has “much in common with the decade after 1910”.²⁴ This confirms the view of John Mearsheimer, one of the most radical critics of the decline-of-war thesis, who maintains that the end of the Cold War “did not lead to any attenuation in the anarchic structure of the [international] system – if anything it did the opposite – and there is therefore no reason to expect the major powers to behave very differently in the new century from the way they behaved in the previous two centuries”.²⁵

But another issue is also worth raising. It has been said that the Russia-Ukraine conflict marks the return of traditional war to the heart of Europe: but is this conflict really so “traditional” and eccentric compared with the paradigm of “new wars”? The current map of organised violence features a prevalence of conflicts – regardless of whether we call them post-national wars, peoples’ wars, wars of the third kind, hybrid wars, fourth- or fifth-generation wars, post-heroic wars, post-modern wars or simply new wars – fought in a global, multi-dimensional context in which the war’s connection with the Clausewitzian trinity of state, army and people has become decidedly loose, in the sense that these conflicts involve the presence of non-state actors, the blurring of the boundary between battle-space and non-battle space and the coordinated, simultaneous use of a wide range of military and non-military instruments (conventional weapons, irregular tactics, criminal acts, terrorism,

²³ M. Rubboli, *La guerra santa di Putin e Kirill*, Chieti, Edizioni GBU, 2022.

²⁴ I. Morris, *War – What Is It Good For?*, 2014; cited by G. Breccia, *La grande storia della guerra*, Rome, Newton Compton Editori, 2020, pp. 354-355.

²⁵ J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001; Italian translation *La logica di potenza*, Milan, Università Bocconi Editore, 2003, p. 328.

indiscriminate violence, highly sophisticated technology, classic disinformation and propaganda techniques and acts of cyber, communication, psycho-cognitive, economic, commercial and financial war). If “hybrid warfare” is one of the most widely used terms to describe the reality of today’s conflicts, this is because those conflicts do not involve “fighting a single type of war; instead, various categories (or ‘generations’) of wars converge and develop simultaneously”.²⁶

In this respect, the war in Ukraine is no exception. On the one hand, it looks increasingly like countless past wars, characterised by continuous, bloody confrontations that yield no decisive victory to either party, but give rise only to a war of attrition, whose outcome will be determined by the collapse of the government, the economy or the will to fight, in one of the warring countries. On the other hand, the Russia-Ukraine war has other features – including the presence of private and semi-private entities (such as foreign fighters, Wagner Group mercenaries and Chechen *kadyrovcy*), the extension of the battlefield to the whole of Ukrainian society, recourse to a wide range of non-conventional instruments (e.g. the weaponisation of energy), large-scale use of drones and high-tech weapon systems, and the increased importance of the cyber and cognitive domains (hacking and psyops respectively) – which are entirely in line with the aforementioned predominant features of contemporary conflicts. In certain respects, in fact, it could be argued that the Russia-Ukraine conflict (with reference to Ukraine more than Russia) is propelling us towards the future and towards the next and final frontier of contemporary warfare: the war to control the minds of the masses (not transiently or partially, but semi-permanently and totally).

While the Gulf War of 1991 was the first conflict covered in real time by TV cameras, and the Arab Spring saw the first revolutions coordinated on social networks, Ukraine will

²⁶ C. Jean, *La strategia nelle guerre di quinta generazione*, in L. Bozzo (editor), *Studi di strategia*, Milan, EGEA, 2012, p. 59.

certainly be remembered as the first theatre of war in which the sixth dimension of conflict – the cognitive dimension – played an equally (or more) important role as that of the other five dimensions (land, sea, air, outer space and cyberspace), by generating tangible, real-world effects. In fact, the Russia-Ukraine war is “the first conflict fought with weapons that include memes, virtual appeals and advertising-style outputs representing a cross between war propaganda and viral marketing”.²⁷ This unexpectedly and outstandingly effective mix has enabled President Zelensky, the first online wartime leader, to achieve two goals: firstly to generate such a vast “rallying effect” around the Ukrainian flag as to encourage widespread, tenacious civil resistance to Russian aggression; and secondly to awaken the slumbering conscience of an uncertain West, to the point of winning its firm and growing support (diplomatic, political, economic and above all military) for the Ukrainian cause, which in practice reversed an outcome (the rapid capitulation of Kiev) that everyone (first and foremost Putin) had taken for granted. In this respect, “while international relations will be marked by a pre- and post-Ukraine demarcation line, hybrid wars will be marked by a pre- and post-Zelensky demarcation line”.²⁸ Having studied the shrewd and unconstrained way in which Zelensky has leveraged the technological advantage afforded by the strategic use of digital platforms, Zhan Shi, a Chinese analyst, came to describe the Russia-Ukraine war as “the first metaverse war”: a “dispersed, digitised, interconnected and smart” war that is being waged both online and offline and makes “the Russian tactic, with its huge war machine, comparable to that of the Second World War, look clumsy and outdated”.²⁹ But other aspects of the war in Ukraine also appear to be steering us towards a future fraught with risks and unknowns. Let us focus on just two of these. The first relates to

²⁷ E. Pietrobon, *Zelinskij. La storia dell'uomo che ha cambiato (per sempre) il modo di fare la guerra*, Rome, Castelvecchi, 2022, p. 74.

²⁸ *Ivi*, back cover.

²⁹ Z. Shi, “La prima guerra del Metaverso”, *Limes*, no. 4, 2022, p. 201.

the process of democratisation (or apparent democratisation?) unleashed by the systematic use of Open-Source Intelligence resources, which has made the progress of field operations more transparent and made “information that used to be held secretly in the hands of governments, which decided how much of it to disseminate, now largely available to anyone with an internet connection”.³⁰ The second relates to the prominent role played by the aerospace capabilities of private actors such as Elon Musk, who, by granting the Ukrainian armed forces free use of Starlink, the satellite system of SpaceX, a global corporation that he owns, has pushed the process of privatising war to the extreme at which a private citizen can declare de facto war on a nation, by choosing not merely to influence, but to actually determine the outcome of, a conflict between sovereign states.

Conclusion

In light of the processes in international relations that the war in Ukraine has set in motion (or revitalised) – from a worrying re-militarisation of relations between states to a growing bipolarisation of the international system along the lines of democracies versus autocracies, which nonetheless looks difficult to reconcile with the tendency to form self-sufficient regional resource and technology blocs, spawned by the “rethinking” of globalisation that has received a fresh boost from the war – it is likely to be remembered as the real watershed event of the first part of the XXI century. According to Françoise Heisbourg – who as far back as 1997 wrote an ominous essay on the future of war³¹ – the Russia-Ukraine conflict, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the attacks of 11 September 2001, represents “the third major historical watershed event of the past fifty

³⁰ M. Spagnulo, “L’invisibile battaglia spaziale nella guerra d’Ucraina”, *Limes*, no. 7, 2022, p. 223.

³¹ F. Heisbourg, *The Future of War*, 1997; Italian translation *Il futuro della guerra*, Milan, Garzanti, 1999, p. 23.

years”, which posterity will see as the beginning of a new “era of war”.³² Some even think that Putin’s decision to resolve the “Ukrainian question” by force is “rapidly welding together the parts of the creeping *Third World War* denounced by Pope Francis”,³³ bringing the world dangerously close to midnight on the Doomsday Clock – all the more so if Russia’s threat to use nuclear weapons materialises. Attempting to predict how the situation will evolve, either in Ukraine or worldwide, is of course a daunting task: there are too many variables to consider; and too many “black swans” – rare events of immense impact that can only be seen coming with the benefit of hindsight – have taken to the troubled waters of the post-bipolar world. What is certain is that the post-modern illusion cherished for decades by Europe, as a “civil power”, in the belief that neighbouring regions (and eventually the entire international system) could be reshaped and pacified on the basis of its own experience, has been crushed (probably beyond repair) under the overwhelming weight of the security dilemma and the ruthless laws of power politics, which have exposed Europe’s strategic vulnerabilities. As for the future of war, which now “seems more dynamic and chameleon-like than ever before”,³⁴ and the form that any global confrontation between the major powers might take, Colin Gray notes that “it is a perennial vice of unimaginative theorists to sketch out a future that is identical to the present ‘but a bit more so’”, but “it is a parallel mistake to predict a future that shares few points of contact with reality as we know it”.³⁵ So the words written by Edgar Morin a few years ago sound more prescient than ever: “We’re experiencing the beginning of a beginning”, so to understand

³² Id., “La Russia alla perdita dell’impero”, *Aspenia*, no. 99, 2002, pp. 136-137.

³³ V. Ilari, “Perché l’indipendenza economica non impedisce la guerra”, *Domino*, no. 4, 2022, p. 105.

³⁴ M. Evans, “From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War”, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2003, p. 132.

³⁵ C.S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century. Future Warfare*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005, p. 21.

the meaning and direction of the changes taking place, “we must avoid dogmatism, in other words setting our ideas in stone and refusing to measure them against experience”.³⁶ If, however, we cling to the belief that our theories and certainties are beyond question, we risk ending up “like a penguin, drifting out to sea on a melting bed of premises”.³⁷

³⁶ E. Morin, *Penser global. L’homme et son univers*, 2015; Italian translation *Sette lezioni sul pensiero globale*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2016, pp. 113-14.

³⁷ E. Levenson, *The Ambiguity of Change*, 1983; Italian translation *L’ambiguità del cambiamento*, Rome, Astrolabio Ubaldini, 1985, p. 16.