ITMG 2026

„Concepts of War and Expectations of War: the past and imagined Futures of war(fare)"

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Abstracts

Panel 1: Imagining War

Taming the Natives, Saving the Nation: The narrative construction of future climate wars in the French Army's Red Team project (Prof. Eric Sangar, Sciences Po Lille)

The French Red Team project, formally conceived as a confidential tool for technological innovation within the Ministry of the Armed Forces, also operates as a public communication device that reinforces military claims to political authority. This article analyses the project's Kriegsbilder through one of its earliest and most publicised scenarios, the "P Nation". The scenario imagines a future conflict between France and a decentralised community of climate refugees. Contrary to expectations shaped by the "weaponisation of migration" thesis, migrants are not depicted solely as existential enemies. Textual and visual elements blend threat construction with empathy: climate migrants become violent pirates, yet their violence is tied to displacement, autonomy, and access to vital resources. Military force appears only as temporary defence, while lasting order is achieved through infiltration, negotiation, and persuasion by a former French officer who induces the P Nation to adopt a code of honour. The narrative casts the army as hero protector, combining targeted coercion and cultural mediation to preserve state authority and reintegrate mobile populations, notably through restored citizenship via "P Puces". Drawing on the sociology of future anticipation, the article shows how this Kriegsbild reactualises colonial organisational memories, projecting repertoires of "cultural awareness", persuasion, and coercion onto future climate conflicts to legitimise continued military expertise.

When and Where Will the Third World War Begin, and Will It Be Fought with Nuclear Weapons? Answers from Scholarship and Literature (Oberst Dr. Armin Wagner, ZMSBw)

Since 1945, any conceivable military confrontation between the great powers has carried the possibility that nuclear weapons might also be used. Russian President Putin's nuclear rhetoric since 2022, aimed at deterring the West from providing too much support to Kyiv in the war in Ukraine, has underscored the continuing political relevance of these weapons.

Drawing on selected examples from scholarship and fiction, the presentation asks how the beginning of another world war could be recognized and whether such a war would inevitably be fought with nuclear weapons. Since the turn of the millennium, an academic genre concerned with possible new or future major wars has flourished. Attracting public attention

alongside these scholarly scenarios, ever since John Hackett's "The Third World War" (1978), have been fictional accounts of world war aimed at a broad readership. While Europe was still central to these accounts in the 1980s, more recent narratives have turned to the Indo-Pacific and more often than earlier fiction assume the extensive use of nuclear weapons in a future world war. By contrast, some scholars are regarding such nuclear war scenarios as purely military constructs that give too little consideration to their political plausibility.

Broadly speaking, academic analyses assume that even in a conceivable world war escalation to strategic nuclear war is rather unlikely, despite the "fascination" with it in fiction. The threshold for the tactical or operational use of nuclear weapons is also very high, although such use cannot be ruled out with a similarly high degree of confidence. Limited use of nuclear weapons would not, however, automatically turn a regional war into a world war; conversely, a world war could also be fought entirely with conventional weapons.

Panel 2: Adaptation in the Military

From Air-Land Battle to Multi-Domain Operations: Continuity and Change in Western Concepts of War Between Technological Dependence and "Human Terrain" (Colonel Dr. Frank Hagemann, ZMSBw)

This paper examines the Concepts of Warfare held by Western armed forces, from the Air-Land Battle Doctrine (1982) to Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), which have been in effect for about a decade. The term "Concept of Warfare," entails expectations on how a future war will unfold and what constitutes military success; a doctrine describes the fundamental translation of such a Concept of Warfare into an operational idea. With each new doctrine, the U.S. Armed Forces and NATO sought a response to evolving threats and changing adversaries.

The starting point of the paper is the late phase of the Cold War in the early 1980s. With the Air-Land Battle Doctrine, the U.S. Army addressed the question of how a massive, deeply echeloned attack by the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe could be credibly repelled using conventional means. The article then examines how the debates surrounding the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and Network-Centric Warfare—with their focus on technological superiority and innovation—have shaped operational doctrine since the 1990s.

The experiences of war in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed the limits of technological and organizational control over the battlefield. The Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine of 2006, with its emphasis on the "human terrain," brought human factors, social conditions, and political objectives to the forefront. However, in the light of growing competition among major powers, the United States and NATO since the mid-2010s have returned to large-scale combat operations and developed the MDO concept for this purpose. What is new compared to the Air-Land Battle Doctrine is the expansion of the battlefield into space, into Cyberspace, and the Information Domain.

This article argues that behind the proclaimed breaks between 1982 and 2025 lies a remarkably stable technological and operational Concept of Warfare, which was adapted in each case to a changed strategic situation.

When the Chameleon Fades: Friction, Shock and the Struggle for Military Adaptation
(Alexander Schäbler, independent)

Why do armed forces perceive changes in the character of warfare but struggle to adapt accordingly before it is too late? Imagine a chameleon that retains the colours of a vanished jungle instead of adapting to its environment. This contribution develops institutional military entropy as a model for examining how the connection between observation, orientation, decision, and action within military organisations dissolves on a strategic level during periods of low external stress. Instead, institutional incentives often favour retrograde conservation over progressive adaptation. Focussing on the Bundeswehr throughout the Zeitenwende of 2022 and drawing on several cases of Prussian and German military transformation, this analysis distinguishes between anticipating the next war, adapting under its pressure, and retaining what has been learned. It finds that adaptation, maladaptation, simulated adaptation, and deliberate or inadvertent ignorance may coexist within one force. They are mediated by political will, institutional struggle, and external constraints. They are also heavily shaped by individual decisionmakers. Military entropy is therefore not a law of inevitable decline, but a model of informational conversion failure that can render a fragmented force irrelevant at the decisive point and time. When the chameleon fades, catastrophe dictates history.

Panel 3: Forming Strategy in the Military

Deja-HU: NATO's response to the Russian Invasion of Hungary (1956) and Ukraine (2022)
(Prof. Christopher L. Gunn, Coastal Carolina University)

This paper compares NATO's response during the opening weeks of the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, examining how policymakers understood escalation risks and how those assessments shaped the measures NATO and its members were willing to adopt. The cases are not treated as equivalent: Hungary was a revolution within the Soviet military sphere, whereas Ukraine was an independent state resisting interstate invasion. The comparison identifies a fundamental continuity. In both crises, NATO governments sought to avoid direct military confrontation with Moscow. In 1956, the Alliance's collective role remained principally consultative, diplomatic, informational, and humanitarian. NATO and its members supported United Nations initiatives, humanitarian relief, refugee assistance, and public condemnation of Soviet actions. In 2022, NATO and individual Allies likewise rejected direct intervention while mobilizing a much broader range of assistance, including intelligence sharing, military aid, training, logistics, resilience support, and reinforcement of Allied territory. The paper argues that the principal change between 1956 and 2022 was not NATO's willingness to accept escalation risks, but its ability to support a vulnerable European partner without entering the conflict directly. The central objective of avoiding direct war with Moscow remained remarkably consistent across both crises.

Between Wishful Thinking and Strategic Necessity: The Struggle for Control Over the Narrative and Interpretation of War at the Federal Ministry of Defence in the Early 1990s (Lieutenant Colonel Martin Reese, ZMSBw)

This article examines the debate within the Federal Ministry of Defence (BMVg) in the early 1990s regarding the future concept of warfare for the Bundeswehr. It focuses on the conflict between the Planungsstab (PlSt) under Vice Admiral Ulrich Weisser and the Führungsstab der Streitkräfte (Fü S) under Chief of Defence Klaus Naumann. After the end of the Cold War, the previous notion of a possible major war in Central Europe had become obsolete. At the same time, the Bundeswehr had to develop concepts regarding what kinds of wars and conflicts could be expected in the future and what military capabilities it should hold available for it. The competing concepts of warfare within the Ministry were based on differing expectations regarding Russia's future political and military trajectory and led to divergent views on the resulting security and military challenges. While the PlSt focused on Russia's cooperative development and a concentration on regional crises, the Fü S saw the possibility of a return to a Russian policy of confrontation and advocated maintaining credible deterrence capabilities. These differing expectations regarding future wars were also linked to institutional interests and political directives. The article demonstrates how administrative responsibilities, political directives and competing military assessments of the situation were intertwined and shaped the conceptual scope of action available to the Bundeswehr leadership. The conflict over who held the authority to interpret the concepts of warfare thus illustrates how imagined futures were institutionally negotiated under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure and shaped the conceptual orientation of the Bundeswehr.

Panel 4: Concepts of War

From Conquest to Containment: Evolving Concepts of War on the Afghan Frontier, 1850–1940 (Prof. Arka Chowdhury, Sri Ramkrishna Sarada Vidya Mahapitha)

This paper examines how warfare in Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier of India (NWF) evolved between 1850 and 1940. It argues that, driven by strategic, techno-tactical, and environmental factors, British-Indian military thought gradually shifted from a Eurocentric, conventional battle-oriented paradigm to a more complex and adaptive conception of containment, pacification, and frontier defence. From military intervention and regime change in Afghanistan to securing the 'defence of India' through buffer zones and frontier management, the changing strategic perception of the British Government and the Government of India can be placed at the centre of this transformation. At the same time, technological developments necessitated tactical change. The introduction of breech-loading rifles and other advances in military technology altered the nature of combat, culminating in the introduction of air-policing in the NWF. Finally, the frontier and Afghan landscape limited the success of western military power projection. Consequently, British-Indian forces adopted a fluid approach of waging conventional and unconventional warfare in tandem, preferring a politico-military approach over brute force. This made the frontier a distinctive laboratory for warfare that blended conventional and unconventional forms.

Future War and Next War: Perceptions of Modern Warfare in Latvia, 1920s-1930s (Dr. hist. Karlis Dambitis, National Defence Academy of Latvia)

Latvian military thought in the interwar period developed under the influence of the First World War and the Latvian War of Independence, rapid technological change, and shifting regional geopolitics. Military planners sought to adapt broader transformations in warfare to the Baltic security environment, while limited budgets constrained practical preparations. By the mid-1930s, Latvian military analyses, informed by developments unfolding in Europe, increasingly emphasized motorization, tanks and aviation, which was considered particularly important due to its ability to strike infrastructure and civilian populations far behind the front, posing a particularly significant threat given Latvia's relatively small territory. Faced with potentially superior adversaries, the Army Headquarters emphasized manoeuvre warfare in defence, the effective use of terrain, delaying actions, mobilization, and the use of railways as a means of rapidly concentrating forces. The Soviet Union was regarded as the principal potential adversary, while Germany became an increasing concern during the late 1930s. The Army Headquarters emphasized civil defence, economic mobilization, and patriotic education, reflecting the expectation of an all-encompassing conflict. Latvian military thought reflected an understanding of modern warfare. However, limited resources created a persistent gap between theoretical understanding and practical capabilities, with mobile forces and air defence becoming key priorities.

War without Warfare: China's Gray-Zone Strategy and the Redefinition of Conflict (Prof. Christopher K. Tong, University of Maryland)

Military and policy debates have focused on whether, how, and when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) might seek to take Taiwan by force. This paper argues that China's gray-zone operations do not solely aim to escalate toward war but also function to make conventional warfare less necessary by shaping public expectations about war. War thereby shifts from an event to a condition, as a multidomain campaign to alter how societies imagine their own futures. The first section examines Hong Kong as a model of long-term political control. Drawing on Cantonese-language sources, including the film anthology Ten Years, it analyzes Hong Kong as a laboratory for pacification without warfare. The second examines the hypothetical scenario of a PLA invasion of Taiwan. It focuses on Taiwan's construction of resolve through public opinion data and the discourse surrounding the government-supported television series Zero Day Attack, which dramatizes a PLA blockade and invasion. The final section compares the doctrinal concepts used by the United States, NATO, and China to describe gray-zone strategy. This paper suggests that the PLA's gray-zone operations seek to produce fatigue, psychological adaptation, and expectations of "inevitable" PRC rule without necessarily crossing the threshold into conventional warfare.

Panel 5: Laboratories of War (I): Germany and Great Britain from World War I to the 1930s

Fullers „Plan 1919": Die Vision einer revolutionären Kriegführung (Karsten Richter, Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge)

The armoured vehicle – known as a 'tank' at the time – was one of the weapon systems that brought about groundbreaking changes in the conduct of warfare during the First World War. Following an analysis of the Battle of Cambrai in 1917, the Chief of Staff of the British Tank Corps, J.F.C. Fuller, began to consider developing the armoured forces into an operational branch of the armed forces. These fundamental ideas were supported by General John Capper, the General Director of the Tank Corps at the War Office; Sir Eustace D'Eyncourt, the Chairman of the Landship Committee; and General Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. They recognised the significance and operational potential of this new weapon. It was in this context that the concept of a strategic-scale offensive involving fully mechanised large formations on the Western Front emerged; this was developed by Fuller and became known as 'Plan 1919'.

Prevention vs. Optimization: Total War in the Reich Army High Command's Conceptions of the "War of the Future," 1920–1926 (Lieutenant Colonel Dr. Christian Stachelbeck, ZMSBw)

This paper traces the controversy surrounding a possible future war for the Reichsheer (the ground forces of the Weimar Republic's military) between the Chief of the Army High Command (Chef der Heeresleitung), General Hans von Seeckt, and a small group of senior officers from the Troop Office (Truppenamt) in the Reichswehr Ministry led by Lieutenant Colonel Joachim von Stülpnagel. This controversy exemplified the "central metadiscourse" of the military elites of the interwar period (Markus Pöhlmann) which centered on the question whether to avoid or to optimize for a total "People's War" ("Volkskrieg"). Despite the dichotomy between avoidance and optimization, both Stülpnagel and Seeckt demonstrated common ground and compromises in their thinking. This exemplifies the evolutionary, compromise-oriented learning of an army as an organization shaped by the human factor. This puts into perspective previous dichotomous approaches in research that drew a sharp distinction between Seeckt's and Stülpnagel's conceptions of warfare. The culture of mission-oriented tactics (Auftragstaktik) established within the German Army was largely responsible for this capacity for compromise. This culture was based primarily on the purpose-oriented pragmatism of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder's leadership principles.

Beyond the Military - Demilitarization of war and Civilian Appropriation of Future War (1920s and 1930s) (Dr. Frank Reichherzer, ZMSBw)

In the Weimar Republic, the future was omnipresent. The search for the "new" also shaped the armed forces and conceptions of warfare. The Reichswehr was severely constrained by the Treaty of Versailles and by scarce resources, while military-technological progress appeared contingent and uncertain. Under these conditions, a space of thought detached from immediate reality emerged in which different possible futures could be explored. Yet concrete ideas about the war of the future also took shape beyond the military sphere.

This paper reconstructs the gradual erosion of the military's monopoly over the interpretation and planning of war and examines the conditions under which particular images of future warfare were produced. In the process, bellicist logics, mediated through narratives of future war, became subtly inscribed into civilian structures. The result was not hypermilitarization, but a Bellifizierung of society. Viewed through an agonistic, social-Darwinist lens, war came to be understood as a permanent background condition and as an organizing principle even in peacetime. No direct lessons for the present can be drawn from this historical constellation. Yet a historicizing examination of these "laboratories of the fantastic" offers a valuable perspective for interpreting contemporary notions of the war of the future.

Panel 6: Laboratories of War (II): The American Military Century

Preparing For What War? The US Army in a Time of Transition, 1919-1939 (Dr. des. Alexander Reineke, Ruhr-Universität Bochum)

The interwar years were a period of tremendous debate and glacial change for the US Army. Experiences of the First World War had a lasting impact on the understanding of modern war but so had pre-war notions of war and present-day political, cultural, and sociological realities. Debates and developments took place in staff schools, war colleges, service journals, monographs among an educated officer corps with wide-ranging skills and interests but were also colored by their upbringing, social standing, religion, and personal politics. Intraservice rivalry among the infantry, cavalry, and artillery branches was as common as interservice rivalry with the Navy, but so was cooperation, which led to the creation of several war plans on the one hand and jealous guarding of resources and access on the other. Military thought patterns were explicitly in conversation with contemporary American civilian society. Geopolitical considerations oriented themselves on short-term and (the lack of) long-term political decision-making in Washington and impacted the make-up of the force, their preparations, and internal discussions and considerations.

"A Marvelous Excuse": General William DePuy, Interwar Escapism, and Concepts of War in the U.S. Army, 1973-1976 (Dr. Eric Michael Burke, independent)

Strategic defeat in Vietnam exposed the U.S. Army's difficulty in effectively adapting to politically complex asymmetrical conflicts prominently featuring stability operations. Postwar analysts urged broader doctrine contemplating such challenges as inherent to modern warfare and several officers warned against a growing impulse within the Army's senior ranks for simply trying to avoid deployment to such "limited" missions in the future. General William DePuy, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)'s first commander, embodied that very impulse. Treating Vietnam as an aberration, he instead interpreted the 1973 Yom Kippur War as the preeminent model of "the modern battlefield," and embraced it as a "marvelous excuse" for a conveniently timed Army-wide reorientation away from Vietnam's lessons toward a future conventional land war in Europe. In doing so, he also inadvertently established several

durable institutional structures and cultural norms that ensured his myopic concept of war would ultimately sow the seeds of future strategic struggles in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond.

Continuity in a changing security environment: US armed forces planning (Dr. Philipp Münch, ZMSBw)

It is most commonly assumed that the "9/11" attacks fundamentally changed the US government's assumptions about the most likely future war. Accordingly, non-state actors and sanctuary-providing failed states were considered more prevalent threats than rival state powers. However, declassified pre- and post-„9/11" drafts of key strategy documents from 2001 until 2014, like the National Security Strategy and the Quadrennial Defence Review, reveal strong continuities in the dominant assumptions about a future war. Therefore, this contribution argues that the US defence establishment maintained relatively consistent ideas about how future armed forces should be structured, independently of global security developments. These focused on building relatively small, but high-tech forces, managed according to business principles. The implication is that assumptions about the future of war were guided more strongly by persistent ideological convictions and the societal environment in which these had been growing than by comprehensive assessments of the global security situation.

Panel 7: Legacies of War

The Suez Crisis: Colonial Conflict, the Cold War and the Call to Criminalize Aggressive Warfare (Theresa Whitely, University of Florida)

This presentation explores the controversy of defining aggression during the Cold War through an examination of the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956. Egypt and other non-aligned countries used the language of aggression to condemn British and French operations. Aggression was thus applied to liberal democracies in a truly international arena, and the accusations were launched by non-western states. Notably, Suez influenced UN discussions concerning definitions of aggressive warfare and the Nuremberg legacy. I argue that rhetoric around Suez contributed to the creation of the 1967 United Nations Special Committee on the Question of Defining Aggression, and to the drafting of the 1974 UN Resolution 3314 Definition of Aggression. The crisis marked when the push to define aggression became "international," insofar as it included non-western and colonial powers. Concurrently the United Nations held multiple sessions and conferences to define aggression, influenced by the membership of the same decolonized states. In all, this presentation will show that a comprehensive examination of the Suez Crisis helps us to chart the development of how aggressive warfare was (and was not) defined in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Battlefield of Memory: Cultural Memory as a Filter for Conceptions of Warfare and a Shaper of Military Identity (Dr. Michael Rohschürmann, Kiel Institute for Security Policy)

The paperviews the German conception of warfare not as a rational vision of the future, but as applied history. In Assmann's terms, cultural memory functions as a cognitive and affective filter: it selects, condenses, and frames past experiences, thereby determining what is considered legitimate, heroic or taboo. The sites of remembrance from World War II (Stalingrad, Auschwitz, destroyed cities) have created a binary perception—peace versus the collapse of civilization—which has found its way not only into the cultural perception of war but also into the conception of the Bundeswehr. With the return of conventional interstate wars, the historical ruptures in German military history have left a functional gap regarding role models and a military culture of remembrance that translates between the dual realities of service for individual soldiers. A genuine turning point ("Zeitenwende") must therefore actively preserve its own history of missions abroad (Afghanistan) while also understanding ritual, group cohesion and psychological resilience in an interdisciplinary manner as strategic resources. Military readiness ("Wehrhaftigkeit") does not merely mean procuring of equipment, but also further developing military cultural memory.