

GLOBAL STRATEGIC PULSE



CISSS Journal of Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Studies

January - June 2025 | Volume I, Issue II

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Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine

David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts
(Harper Publisher, 2023, 608)

Reviewed by: Areeba Azhar¹

The book *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*, explores the evolution of military conflict from the end of World War II to the ongoing Ukraine conflict, placing each conflict within a broader historical and strategic context. This evolution serves as a touchstone for the authors, General David Petraeus, former CIA Director and CENTCOM Commander, and Andrew Roberts, a member of the British House of Lords. The authors skillfully demonstrate complex military strategies and technologies, while also maintaining a balance between military history and geopolitical analysis.

The collaboration between the two authors serves to explain and analyse the nature of war, and the evolution of warfare since post-World War II, which has been going on for nearly eight decades. In this over 600-page book, they have concentrated on conflicts involving Western powers, particularly the US. Though wars in Africa, Latin America and Asia are addressed, they receive less in-depth analysis compared to Western-influenced conflicts. The first eight chapters of the book provide a historical overview. Chapter nine focuses on the Russo-Ukraine War and explores its impact on future conflicts. The final chapter synthesises lessons from Ukraine and past wars to speculate on the nature of conflicts in the twenty-first century.

The theme of the book revolves around the strategies and policies of leadership, whether exercised by political or military personnel. The authors believe that leaders must possess four important attributes: (i) ability to grasp the overall strategic situation; (ii) ability to communicate; (iii) ability to implement a plan; and (iv) ability to refine and adapt ‘big ideas’ for applying again in different circumstances (p.9)

Petraeus and Roberts explore the transitional period after the World War II, marked by the apparent decline of ultra-nationalism and the founding of the United Nations (UN). The noble purpose of the establishment of the UN was to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” (p.11) by setting the tone that calls for peace and tolerance in the world. However, the authors provide a detailed analysis of subsequent wars, highlighting how far the regions

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remain from achieving stability. The Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf Wars and Afghanistan conflict, as well as the wars in which the US had limited or no direct involvement: Indo-China, the Arab-Israel Wars, the Balkan Wars in former Yugoslavia and brutal guerrilla wars in African countries such as Angola and Rwanda.

One of the core chapters of the book discusses the consequences of the development of nuclear weapons and their deep impact on global strategy. The Soviet “RDS-1” test in 1949 marked the beginning of the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) era. The authors describe how the development of multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) led to an arms race, leading to strategic arms control and disarmament treaties like the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

The authors have underscored that “long-term, low-intensity bloodletting” has been seen in Kashmir, Myanmar, Gaza, the West Bank, Sudan, Northern Ireland and several other places around the world “where the British had left their empire and resorted to hasty partitions to try to achieve peace” (p.44) They also compare the effective British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya, under General Briggs and Templer, with the unsuccessful French campaign in Algeria and the challenging US involvement in Vietnam. In the context of Kashmir, the authors have referred to historian Sumantra Bose who wrote in 2021 that the Kashmir dispute remains “rife with incendiary ingredients, and represents a clear and present danger to international peace and security in the early twenty-first century” (p.44)

Petraeus and Roberts reiterate the important role of military morale, discipline and training. They argue that “money spent on deterrence is seldom wasted” (p.146) and that the analysis of recent wars shows that nations that are unable to deter adversaries or are unprepared for war experience significantly higher costs both in terms of lives and financial resources.

The most compelling chapters of the book are those on Afghanistan and Iraq, where Petraeus shares his personal experiences and criticises the failures of the West. He correlates the Afghanistan War with the Vietnam War on issues such as support for corrupt practices and lessons of counterinsurgency forgotten after Vietnam War. Petraeus observes that, as the saying goes, “Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan. The failure of the US in Afghanistan had multiple causes and more than its share of fathers. The most critical failure, as is usually the case in lost wars, was one of policy and strategy.” (p.251) He believes that the withdrawal of the US military from

Afghanistan in August 2021 was unnecessary, as the situation could have been controlled with political will. Petraeus questions the necessity of the Iraq war, criticising the lack of a clear strategy behind the invasion, and laments the forgotten lessons of the Vietnam War. He adds that long-term military engagements require bipartisan support.

The authors argue that the distinction between war and peace has blurred. They explain that wars are no longer declared, and having begun proceed according to an unfamiliar template. Modern warfare relies less on large-scale frontal engagements and more on special forces and informational actions.

The most important chapter of the book perhaps relates to the Ukraine conflict. The authors analyse why Russia has been unable to achieve a decisive victory as yet. They also highlight that “Russian leadership not only failed to design a proper campaign to achieve its objectives in Ukraine, it also failed to establish the proper organisational architecture and authorities, not unlike some of the coalition shortcomings of the early months – and years – in Afghanistan after the Taliban were toppled.” (p.348) This persistent challenge transcends political system and underscores a significant weakness in Russia’s ability to act effectively.

In the context of the US support to Ukraine in its ongoing conflict with Russia, the authors opine that without crucial US support, and to a lesser extent assistance from NATO countries, Ukraine will not be able to continue the fight. This foreign aid is important in sustaining Ukraine’s resistance in the conflict.

Petraeus and Roberts indicate trends that will influence future conflicts in the age of hybrid warfare, artificial intelligence, drones, advanced sensors and cyber capabilities. While these technologies are significant, the book emphasises that lessons about future warfare are rooted in historical context rather than new technologies. The key takeaway from the book is that armed forces must be adaptable, well-trained and adequately resourced to deter potential threats in an increasingly dangerous global landscape. This thoroughly researched and well-written book will benefit policymakers, military leaders and people interested in the history of wars and strategic studies.