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WAR AND POWER

Who Wins Wars – and Why

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Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

First published 2025
001

Set in 12/14.75pt Bembo Book MT Pro
by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–74403–1
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–74418–5

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To the people of Ukraine.
You have had to endure the worst depredations of war because
of a basic inability in others to understand power

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Introduction: The Failure

'I need ammunition, not a ride.'[1] When Volodymyr Zelensky reportedly said this on 25 February 2022, he was speaking with a US government official who was offering to have the Ukrainian president spirited out of his country. While most people have focused on Zelensky's bravery and defiance in the face of the full-scale Russian invasion,* what has been missed is that Zelensky was also offering a stunning rebuke to the US government's vision of war and power. That the offer of a US emergency evacuation was being made to Zelensky speaks volumes about how the US government understood the power balance between Ukraine and Russia, and how the US believed a conventional war between the two was bound to play out. On the other hand, faced with the reality of the Russian Army attacking all around the Ukrainian border, Zelensky was convinced Ukraine could fight – and fight well.

In the US government's mind, Russia was and had been for many years a great power with a modernized and technologically advanced military that was a peer or 'near peer' to America's own.[2] Ukraine, in comparison, was a much weaker state – riddled by corruption and a divided identity – which would be able to offer only limited resistance to mighty Russia. As such, the result of a war, to the US government, seemed certain. In a matter of days, the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, would be enveloped and Ukrainian conventional resistance devastated, if not completely ended.[3] If Zelensky were not evacuated immediately, the US government judged, he would be imminently overrun by the fast-moving, awesomely powerful Russian military.

This is no overstatement. In closed-door briefings to Congress in early February 2022, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, made deeply pessimistic claims about the ability

* From now on, the Russian full-scale invasion of 24 February 2022 will be referred to for the sake of clarity as the Russian invasion. This is no way detracts from the fact that the original Russian invasion of Ukraine was in 2014.

of Ukraine to resist a Russian attack. The senior military adviser to the President of the United States, with the resources of the Pentagon at his fingertips, Milley asserted that if the Russians launched an invasion, Kyiv could fall in only seventy-two hours.[4] With more than 100,000 Russian troops massed on the border of Ukraine, Milley judged that the Russians had the firepower and military capabilities to undertake modern 'combined arms' warfare against their Ukrainian target.[5] Indeed, the Russian advantage was considered so great that, even though it was the Russians that would be doing the attacking, Milley estimated that Ukraine would suffer almost four times as many battle deaths. He stated that, should a major Russian invasion occur, the Ukrainians would suffer 15,000 battle deaths in comparison to a Russian total of 4,000.[6] In short, Ukraine would be overwhelmed.

This view was also shared widely in the analytic community that was advising the US government. It's worth stepping back here and pondering the importance of these views of Russia's military strength and the war it would be able to wage. For years it was argued by the supposedly most knowledgeable experts on the Russian state and military that Russia was a 'great power' with battle-tested and devastating forces. As Samuel Charap, one of the leading analysts of the Russian military for the Rand Corporation – arguably the US government's most important strategic studies think tank – described the situation, Russia was so strong that the west should not even bother to arm Ukraine:

> Russia has the ability to carry out a large-scale joint offensive operation involving tens of thousands of personnel, thousands of armored vehicles, and hundreds of combat aircraft. It would likely begin with devastating air and missile strikes from land, air, and naval forces, striking deep into Ukraine to attack headquarters, airfields, and logistics points. Ukrainian forces would begin the conflict nearly surrounded from the very start, with Russian forces arrayed along the eastern border, naval and amphibious forces threatening from the Black Sea in the south, and the potential (increasingly real) for additional Russian forces to deploy into Belarus and threaten from the north, where the border is less than 65 miles from Kyiv itself.[7]

As Charap and his co-author argued, US weapons could 'do nothing' to change the basic flaws in the Ukrainian military, nor did they

represent a threat large enough to deter Russia. As such, it would be best to leave Ukraine to accept its doomed fate and throw itself on the mercy of Putin's Russia. This was no one-off. It was a vision of Russian power and Ukrainian weakness that had been used for years to argue against providing Ukraine with modern weaponry – on the assumption that Ukrainian conventional resistance against the great power of Russia and its military was doomed.[8]

In speaking this way, Charap and others were parroting (without properly interrogating) the great power paradigm that has been in wide-scale operation since the nineteenth century.[9] Even more unfortunately, Charap and other analysts who believed Russia would conquer Ukraine easily argued publicly for strict limitations on weapons to be sent to Ukraine.[10] It was part and parcel of why Ukraine was so short of advanced weapons when the Russians invaded, and has arguably resulted in the limitation of what Ukraine has been sent since. This has led to the unnecessary deaths of tens of thousands of Ukrainians (and Russians), and shaped a war that could have been over far more quickly. It should have been the nail in the coffin of a concept that never made much sense to begin with. Sadly, the idea of great powers, probably because of its deceptive ease, has lived on. But we need to drop the whole phrase entirely – before it gets even more people needlessly killed in wars that cannot be won by non-existent 'great' powers.

The Dangers of Great Power Thinking

The notion of there being great powers residing in some upper tier of puissance, lording it over normal states, is usually first seen as emerging out of the post-Napoleonic European world – the time period that this book will cover.* It is the German historian Leopold von Ranke who is said to have first coined the phrase in print, in 1833.[11] To him a great power was one that could 'maintain itself against all others, even when they are united'.[12] Right away a problem should have been seen in this

* Though there will be reference to occasional events from Napoleon's time and earlier, the core of this book will run from the origins of World War I in the late nineteenth century to today.

analysis – by Ranke's standard there had not been a real great power, at least in Europe and arguably around the world, for millennia. Certainly Napoleon's brief period of European continental domination – which lasted from approximately 1804, when he had himself crowned Emperor of France, until his 1812 invasion of Russia – showed that even France at its high point could not stand against all others. For all the success of French armies, Napoleon was incapable of competing with Britain on a global stage – if anything, he was losing power and territory around the world while he ruled much of Europe.

It should be noted that the same year he became emperor, 1804, Napoleon was forced to sell the vast Louisiana Territory to the United States – losing France the bulk of its overseas empire. A year later, Napoleon's fleet would be decimated by the Royal Navy at the Battle of Trafalgar, destroying France as a credible global maritime power and allowing Britain to extend its own overseas empire. In other words, Napoleon's ability to stand 'against all others' applied only to land armies and only to the continent of Europe. It might have seemed that Napoleon was supremely powerful to a land-based, Eurocentric scholar such as Ranke (who was born in Saxony and spent most of his career in Berlin), but that was more about his individual perception than anything else.

Sadly, in the almost two centuries since Ranke coined this inadequate phrase, things have got even worse. Indeed, the threshold for being a 'great power' has been regularly redefined, muddied and even lowered, to such a degree that by 2022 an economically weak and politically corrupt system★ such as Vladimir Putin's Russia was widely hailed as one. The foundational problem of the great power paradigm was and remains the fact that the criteria for membership in the great power club are unclear. Even the phrase 'great power' has meant vastly different things depending on when and where it is used – which means ultimately it has meant everything and nothing.

★ The word 'system' appears regularly in this book. For clarity's sake, when you see 'system' on its own, it is normally referring to a weapons system and can cover anything from the most advanced missiles such as the Patriot anti-air system to small arms. When weapons systems or logistics systems, etc., are operated together, that will be referred to as a 'complex operation'. Other uses of the word 'system' will have a prefix such as 'political' or 'economic' to specify what is being referred to.

In the mid-nineteenth century, there was some discussion of the great powers who were and supposedly would go on to dominate the globe. A number of nineteenth-century geopolitical thinkers, including Alexis de Tocqueville and Charles Brandon Boynton, believed that the fate of the world was to be decided by the USA and Russia (in the case of the former) or those two plus the British and French (according to the latter).[13] In the run-up to World War I, Europe was often said to be divided between its five 'great powers', all empires, who supposedly dominated its fate. They were Britain, Germany, France, Russia and Austria-Hungary.[14] Yet, none of them, except for possibly Britain, would have been able to stand against all the others. Austria-Hungary, for instance, with its relatively undeveloped economy, inefficient political system, and society that was divided into many groups with different identities, was even incapable of functioning as an independent power.

World War I also showed that no power could really stand alone in Europe, but that all powers had strengths and weaknesses that made comparison all but impossible – and it was their differences that mattered more than anything else. At the top of the power table were Britain and Germany, the two largest economies in Europe, who produced the largest amount of war materiel and headed their different alliances. Both had to provide massive assistance to their allies in terms of finance and war materiel (France, Russia and later Italy in the case of Britain; and Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire in the case of Germany). However, the military power the British and Germans generated was very different, and this meant that comparing them was highly subjective. While both created large armies and navies, the British remained dominant at sea, winning a long maritime struggle with the Germans, while the German Army remained the most powerful on the continent – able to hold the Allies at bay until being overwhelmed in 1918.

Of course, by the end of the war neither of the most powerful states in Europe was the most powerful state in the world. Between 1914 and 1918 the United States had interjected itself into the equation, and with an economy that towered over that of any European state (or indeed combination of European states) and no immediate military threat on its own borders, the US represented a different class of power. For the rest of the twentieth century and the first two decades

of the twenty-first it maintained a position *almost* as a Rankean great power. Even then, as the US would show repeatedly, being able to 'stand alone' against any combination of possible enemies was very different from being able to impose yourself on them – or even win wars against much smaller powers.

However, the limits that even the US would show have made little difference in the great power discussion. Often, great powers are grouped together based on their supposed military success. Writing at the end of the interwar period, E. H. Carr – the British historian, diplomat and leading international relations theorist – claimed that a state's 'recognition as a Great Power is normally the reward of fighting a successful large-scale war'. He then mentioned Germany in the Franco-Prussian War and Japan after the Russo-Japanese War, which should set alarm bells ringing.[15] Both were limited, state-on-state wars, confined in their geographic location and very short in duration. If that was the great power threshold, it would hardly be an exclusive club, and it would be very different from one composed only of powers able to stand against all others.

The results of World War II only reinforced the idea that the great power paradigm was meaningless. Both Germany and Britain had maintained their positions as the economic leaders of Europe and their relative military strengths, which meant that neither was able to existentially threaten the other (Germany dominated the European landmass from 1940, but the British were able to secure command of the sea and air in the North Atlantic). Moreover, in Asia, Japan showed just how ephemeral great power status really was. At first, it had seemed a real force, capable of conquering much of China and the South Pacific – and then winning a series of naval engagements against the United States and the British Empire. However, once the US fully mobilized its economic and technological resources, Japan was shown to be completely out of its depth and was ground down to impotence by the US, using only about half of its resources. The USSR, on the other hand, while a significant power (though its relative strength has been greatly overstated), had to receive massive amounts of aid during the war.[16] Indeed, I believe that the extreme overrating of the USSR's contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany (the Soviet Union both engaged and destroyed much less of German production than people realized) gave false impetus to the great power

idea – which contributed to the extreme overrating of Russian power before 24 February 2022. The USSR never possessed the full range of power that the US did, but instead of understanding that, people seemed obsessed with the scale of casualties that the Soviets suffered and created an idea of Soviet power, which was often directly referenced as a reason why Russia was a great power.[17]

The reality was that the US, which was a power still in its own league when World War II started, only grew in relative strength during the conflict. Possessor of approximately half the world's production by 1945 (with so much money it really did not know what to do with it), and also with the most powerful armed forces in the world and the only working atomic bomb, the US had reached a global power status that was arguably unmatched in human history. Yet, even then, at the height of its power, with the world seemingly at its feet, the ability of the US to achieve clearly stated goals at the end of the war, in countries that it thought were of vital interest, such as China, was shown to be shockingly weaker than expected. So, there was certainly no one standard of great power in World War II that might help us understand the power relationship between the states involved, and nor could the greatest of the so-called great powers in many centuries – the United States – achieve many of its goals.

The fact that the great power paradigm was basically useless between 1914 and 1945 did not stop the phrase from exploding in usage after World War II. Arguably the greatest push behind this was the growth of 'realist' thinking on international relations, which grew in the interwar years and then spread widely afterwards. Realism itself mutated into different forms, including structural realism, neorealism, defensive realism and offensive realism. Regardless of the type of realist someone might claim to be, all realists believed that power relationships defined the international system. That being said, realists of all stripes tended to be either extraordinarily broad in their understanding of power or far too fixated on military variables – such as Carr. The best example of the former is Hans Morgenthau, one of the 'founding fathers' of realism – or what is sometimes called 'classical realism'.[18]

Morgenthau argued that every state's national interest drives it on a similar course to maximize its power in relation to others. He contrasted his supposedly hard-headed vision of power with, for instance,

lawyers who want to see state actions through a prism of legality or ethicists who want to use moral tests.[19] This might have seemed tough and honest, but then Morgenthau made classical realism impossible to actually use by saying that power is made up of almost every variable imaginable (with one glaring oversight). For Morgenthau, national power was affected by geography, access to natural resources, industrial capacity, and military preparedness. Of course, 'military preparedness' itself is a broad term, and Morgenthau considered technological sophistication, leadership quality and the size of a state's armed forces as matters of importance. However, this was just the start. He also argued that population size, national character (defined quite broadly), national morale, the quality of a state's diplomacy and the quality of its government needed to be considered when discussing how powerful a nation was.[20] It's hard to think of a factor that Morgenthau overlooked – except for a vitally important one, the policy choices of individual leaders, which realists tended to maddeningly, and erroneously, downgrade from then on.

Morgenthau's realist notion of power is both determinative and includes so many categories as to be meaningless as a tool of comparison. As a test, try to compare two states using all of Morgenthau's categories and then make a useful judgement of the balance between them. I've tried it a few times, and have never made it work. However, the basic impracticality of Morgenthau's great power understanding did not stop realists, and later neorealists, from making sweeping claims that they understood how power works. In practice, however, the normal realist tendency was to err towards a simplistic understanding of power, saying relatively little beyond that it had something to do with military power.[21]

The offensive realists – such as John Mearsheimer, who played a major role in the academic, and public, discussion of Russian and Ukrainian power before 24 February 2022 – have often fallen back on this. In his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer gives a non-quantifiable, military-based definition of what makes for a great power: 'To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world.'[22] I defy anyone to define 'serious fight' in a sensible way, and 'all-out conventional war' seems to be a deliberately obscure tautology.

That such a vague formulation could be accepted by offensive realists should call into question their whole idea of what makes a great power. Still, in the run-up to the Russian invasion, Mearsheimer – along with Stephen Walt and others – proceeded to blithely label Russia as a great power and Ukraine as not. This reveals one of the general weaknesses in realist thought, and one that is a major problem for offensive realists in particular: even though they have a very weak definition of 'great power', they have turned the phrase into a self-fulfilling prophecy. It did not matter that there was no commonly accepted notion of a great power; as long as Russia was labelled one and Ukraine was not, that gave the former's claims of interest the greater legitimacy. Basically, in the great power world, the great powers are subjects, and the lesser powers are objects with which the great powers can toy. As Stephen Walt said in a piece in *Foreign Policy*, released only a month before the invasion, lesser power Ukraine was an object of great power Russia's interest – with all that entailed. 'Unpleasant as it may be, the United States and its allies need to recognize that Ukraine's geopolitical alignment is a vital interest for Russia – one it is willing to use force to defend – and this is not because Putin happens to be a ruthless autocrat with a nostalgic fondness for the old Soviet past. Great powers are never indifferent to the geostrategic forces arrayed on their borders.'[23]

It's fascinating that, after a century of seeing supposedly smaller powers getting their way against supposedly great ones, an international relations scholar would speak in such a way. Great powers have regularly had countries on their borders redefine their alignments and even flout the greater power's apparent dominance. From Ireland breaking away from the United Kingdom, to Vietnam regularly defying China (and even besting China in a war in 1979), to Mexico openly flouting US desires at times, these less powerful neighbour states have shown that they are far more than subjects of interest.

And this indicates maybe the greatest problem with the realist conception of power. If you build a supposedly hard-headed school around the overriding importance of power, particularly military power, then it is a major drawback if you don't understand war and power. The fact that realists see both as an immutable phenomenon, regardless of regime or leader, reveals one of the flaws in their outlook. They

discount the roles of regimes and leaders in determining how military power is both assembled and used. As Mearsheimer has said, echoing Walt's claim about Putin's supposedly minor role in the decision to invade Ukraine, realism 'is a theory that basically says states care about the balance of power above all else. States want to make sure that they have as much power relative to other great powers as possible. It's a theory that pays little attention to individuals and pays little attention to domestic politics.'[24]

In fact, the opposite is true – leadership and political structure play a massive role in how power is accumulated in peace and employed in war. Over the last two centuries it certainly has mattered who has ruled a country, and within what political or governmental system that person has operated. No German leader *had* to invade Poland in 1939, but Adolf Hitler did (over the doubts of other senior Nazi leaders). On the other hand, Franklin Roosevelt had a very keen interest in having US power interjected forcefully into Europe to stop Hitler, particularly after the German Army conquered France in May–June 1940. However, even then, the very popular American president had to manoeuvre within a political system that constrained his wishes. Roosevelt had to wait until Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Hitler declared war on the US before he was allowed to go to full-scale war against the Nazis.

It's arguably impossible to look at any of the larger powers in the two world wars and not see that it was a combination of the personalities of the different leaders and how each was moderated (or not) by the political system in which they operated that determined when each nation not only entered each war, but also on which side.* Italy, which had been allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary when World War I started, left that alliance and joined the Allies a few months later, when the two leading Italian politicians of the day – the prime minister Antonio Salandra and foreign minister Sidney Sonnino, operating with almost no oversight – engaged with horse trading between the

* This is the subject of my book: *The Strategists: Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini and Hitler – How War Made Them and How They Made War*. All five of the famous grand strategists had very personal experiences of war early in their lives, primarily in the years 1914–21. These experiences helped shape their individual strategic outlooks, which strongly influenced their policy choices in World War II.

British and Germans about what each would promise Italy. In Japan in 1941, on the other hand, the civilian leadership had been so emasculated by a political system that allowed them no control over the Japanese armed forces that, even though many were sceptical, they gave up and followed the military as the latter pushed the country into war by, foolishly, attacking the United States.

Certainly, it did matter that Vladimir Putin was a dictator/autocrat who had constructed a political system that fed him the information he wanted to hear which confirmed his prejudices towards Ukraine and suppressed any doubts about his decision to invade. On 22 February 2022, in a very public moment broadcast on Russian (and later global) television, Putin humiliated supposedly very senior and powerful members of his state who had doubts about the invasion of Ukraine that he was about to unleash.[25] He was determined to have his invasion.

Not surprisingly, considering how much realists and others have misunderstood power, they, like General Milley, misunderstood how the Russian invasion of Ukraine would proceed. Take, for instance, Michael Kofman, one of the most well-known analysts of the Russian military, who spent the years before 2022 arguing constantly that Russia was a great power that represented a direct military challenge to the US.[26] Just before Putin launched the invasion, Kofman prophesied that it would be an overwhelming and amazingly fast operation, which would see Russia seize more than two-thirds of Ukraine and end the war in just a few 'weeks'.[27] And Kofman's prediction of Russian conventional victory in only weeks seemed remarkably slow in comparison to some other analysts. Rob Lee, a senior analyst of the Russian military at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, stated to the *New York Times* that Russia would achieve victory in such a short time period that it would make the Russian military one of the greatest forces in world history. He claimed just before the invasion that the Russian military could 'devastate the Ukrainian military in the east really quickly, within the first 30–40 minutes', and also stated confidently that if the Russians committed their conventional forces, they could win the war in just a few days.[28]

While these errors of war understanding were particularly egregious, there have been other mistakes in the past. This idea of the short, clinical and decisive war is one of the enduring myths of strategic studies, even though it has been shown to be regularly false. For

the past 200 years, states have often gone to war with confident predictions that the war will be decided quickly in decisive battle – or in one common phrase, that it will be over by Christmas. When World War I started, many on both sides believed that Europe was in for a short war, and that the opening engagements would determine the outcome. At one point Germany was said to have gone to war in August 1914 governed by a 'short-war illusion' and that any conflict would be over by Christmas.[29] Even those who challenge that notion argue that German generals who believed the war would be longer, still held that it would last between six months and two years.[30] Today in the US, the push to believe in the short-war idea remains strong – and is arguably a major flaw as the US approaches the idea of war in the Indo-Pacific region.[31]

One of the reasons for such a flawed understanding of war is the focus on wars being decided by decisive battles or large military engagements. This 'battle' idea of war is widespread, though repeatedly shown to be deficient. Both world wars were in their early stages dominated by this notion. In August 1914, when the alliances went to war, the different states enacted plans that they had previously worked out and which would, they thought, result in a military victory that would win the war. The Germans had their well-known Schlieffen Plan, which involved concentrating almost all their force against the French to try to knock France out of the war quickly, before turning to confront Russia. In exchange, the French had their also well-known Plan XVII, which involved attacks directly over the French border into Alsace and Lorraine. The Russians, meanwhile, started assembling their large armed forces under Mobilization Plan 19, to invade eastern Germany. Each one of these plans failed.

A different kind of decisive battle idea appeared early in World War II. Adolf Hitler certainly thought he had won a decisive battle when the German Army conquered France in only two months, in May–June 1940. He started pushing to redesign Berlin as a gaudier, grotesque imperial capital, and believed that he had determined the course of European history for generations. However, by the end of 1941, the Germans found themselves confronted by an alliance that dwarfed them economically, and soon militarily. Just over three years after that, Hitler's empire would be a few blasted streets in central Berlin, and his only option was to put a bullet either through his temple or up through his mouth – depending on the telling.

This idea that military engagement is what decides war would bedevil far greater powers than Nazi Germany. In the 1960s, the supposed superpower United States found itself at war with a relatively tiny North Vietnam, an economically undeveloped, much smaller power by any metric. Yet the insertion of US ground forces, beginning in the 1960s, began a process of more and more troops appearing, always with the premise that the next increase of military force would allow the United States to win the war. Eventually the US deployed more than half a million troops and some of the most advanced military equipment in the world, and yet it made no difference – the US still lost. It won every battle but lost the war.

The US in Vietnam might be the best example, but it is certainly not the only one, that illustrates how you need to look far deeper at the process of war beyond war-gaming what happens when armies meet in the field. Though the US almost always prevailed when its military forces engaged the North Vietnamese in battle, after more than a decade of commitment the US lost the war. This was down to a combination of military variables, including morale and commitment, and larger leadership and societal factors that shaped the American political response.

The pre-24 February 2022 analysis of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine reads eerily like the precisely written war plans of 1914. The Russian Army was supposed to work efficiently and methodically through phases of war, from an initial and devastating air-power and precision strike phase, to a fast-moving and overwhelming ground attack led by armoured columns with plentiful artillery, to a mopping-up phase when the Russians were to destroy Ukrainian conventional resistance. Everything was supposed to run like clockwork, with the Ukrainians having limited ability to alter their own fate.

In such a clinical view of war, there is little time to discuss the huge problems that normally arise once war breaks out. These can be divided into what might be called 'the systemic' and 'the human'. The human concerns how individuals are prepared (and prepare themselves) for war. This can involve how well trained they are to undertake the operations that will be expected of them. Often, whether it be the Russian Army before the invasion of Ukraine or the Italian Army before World War II, the performance of soldiers in set-piece manoeuvres – even choreographed parades – has been

considered indicative of their ability to execute in war. The same goes for morale.

The systemic involves the complex operations needed for a military to be effective. In the case of modern war, arguably the most important are air power (for which in Ukraine it was assumed that the Russians could easily undertake complex operations) and logistics (which was almost entirely ignored). Such assumptions were quite common in the past, but it is interesting to see how they were even more exaggerated when it came to Russia and Ukraine. Going into World War II, for instance, it was widely assumed that modern strategic air power (bombers) would be able to get through to destroy vital targets of the enemy – be they whole cities or specific factories. The 'bomber will always get through' maxim (first uttered by the UK prime minister Stanley Baldwin in 1932) was widely shared and repeated in different forms by people as different as Walt Disney and Benito Mussolini.[32] However, as the war showed, running an efficient strategic bombing campaign was perhaps the most difficult complex operation of the war. It took until 1944 before the western Allies were able to bomb Germany and have the strategic effect desired – and by that point it was the most complex and expensive campaign that the Allies were waging anywhere in the globe.[33] The situation for logistics is the opposite. Hardly mentioned in detail before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, logistics have often been ignored in the study of war, because of the obsession with battle. It might be that the study of production and deployment has less appeal in general to notions of combat and life-and-death human struggle, but regardless it is a major oversight in how we generally understand war and prepare for future conflicts.

This idea of war developing efficiently as planned was one of the most frustrating things about the pre-24 February 2022 analysis. War almost always leads to breakdowns and failures, and ends up going down unexpected (and far longer and bloodier) roads. When in January 2022 I argued against abandoning Ukraine to its supposed fate, I said that Russia was not a great power and should not be deferred to, but also that if Putin were foolish enough to undertake a full-scale invasion, it would more than likely be a disaster for Russia:

> If we have relearned any lesson over the last two decades it is that military operations are expensive, usually counterproductive, and with the

> constant possibility of going disastrously wrong for the richest and most advanced economies – let alone weak ones. Certainly Russian military deployments over the last 20 years, from Georgia to Syria, have revealed significant shortcomings. If Russia were actually stupid enough to attack Ukraine, it would tax their military in a way not seen since the Cold War ended.[34]

Wars go off the rails because they are extremely complex and difficult interactions that end up taxing militaries, economies, governments and societies, from the beginnings of the productive process all the way to the battlefields. They are not decided on the battlefield; rather, the battlefield reveals the state of the powers involved. The cause and effect that people normally assume between battles and wars needs to be reversed. Battles don't cause the war to end a certain way; they reveal how a war is developing.

Understanding War and Power

Understanding war and power in such a way that the catastrophic errors made before and since the Russian invasion of Ukraine are not repeated is not just an analytic matter. Overhanging everything in the world today is the possibility that the two most powerful nations (along with their allies) are confronting the very real possibility of war. The United States and China, easily the two largest economies in the world with the two most powerful militaries, stand poised and armed in the western Pacific. The result of a war between them would be a catastrophe far greater than the one we have seen in Ukraine.

This book has been written with the possibility of such a war very much in mind. What it aims to do is provide a methodology of sorts, or an analytical framework, through which to understand war and power. This methodology will not produce one answer, such as *the United States is definitely more powerful*, or *China will definitely win a long war*. Instead, what it will provide is a way of judging how the power of these countries can be compared, and what questions will be important if they ever do go to war.

The first five chapters address what needs to be considered when assessing the power of a state – which boils down to the foundation of

power and how that foundation is shaped. For a state to have power, it must have economic/technological strength. It needs not only to make 'stuff', but also to make the most complex and advanced stuff in large amounts. It must also have the economic capacity to maintain and recreate a significant mass of this stuff, and the ability to finance all of this efficiently. You cannot fake economic/technological capabilities, nor make them up quickly on the spot. Normally the greatest disaster that can befall a state is to take on a strategic burden that its economic/technological base cannot sustain.

However, just being economically and technologically powerful is not enough, as post-1945 Japan and Germany can attest. Here we get into the shaping variables. First, the political leadership of a state has an enormous influence on how economic/technological power can be used (or abused). One of the great fallacies of international relations is that there is some abstractly understood national interest to which all leaderships aspire. It is more accurate to say that national interest is determined by political leaderships and reflects their prejudices and policies. These can be wildly divergent, ranging from hyper-aggressive and genocidal – such as with Adolf Hitler – to more passive or domestically focused.

Of course, leaders don't operate in a vacuum. Another whole set of shaping variables includes a state's society and its political structure. Certain societies at different times will applaud war, while others will oppose entering a conflict. Certain political structures will place limitations on what a leader can do; others will allow leaders practically untrammelled opportunities to act. Society and political structure also interact and shape power in areas such as morale and corruption. There is also no easy categorization here. Democracies can have certain advantages in terms of flexibility and creativity, and yet we are also seeing right now how vulnerable democratic societies are to outside penetration.

If the foundational element of national power is economic/technological strength, which is shaped by leadership, society and political structure, there are two important tests for that power: what kind of military does it create, and what kind of international relationships does it produce? A military must always be understood as a product of the factors above, not some sort of physical end in and of itself. The Russian military has punched well below its weight in Ukraine, and at

times in the twentieth century too, because its shaping variables have tended towards corruption and a lack of efficiency. On the other hand, the US military of World War II reflected the personal views of the US leadership (Franklin Roosevelt's obsession with sea and air power) combined with the technological and mass productions provided by the nation's economy. Don't look so much at the number of tanks in an army, but rather at the elements that create those tanks.

Beyond a nation's military, its international relationships play a massive role in the exercise of its power and influence. Another of the failures of the great power paradigm is its focus on the nation state as an individual actor. However, even the most powerful states are far more limited than people often realize. They all work with and indeed need allies to ensure their security and buttress their influence in peace and war. Often, international politics is presented as oppositional, and states are defined by their supposed enemies. Actually, a state is more easily judged by its friendships, and the skilful operation of those friendships can amplify national power significantly. On the other hand, the creation of weak international relationships can hobble even the strongest of powers.

After looking at power, the next five chapters will look at how power operates in war. In other words, what are the key variables that need to be considered in assessing what determines the course of a war once a state gets involved in one? The disconnection between assumed and real power becomes exposed when a state goes to war, and assumptions face the test of reality that only a conventional war can present. To understand the test of war, it is crucial to start with the process of war-fighting, which is very different from the process of battle-fighting. War is a test of various systems in a multitude of different ways; it is not a test of armies, and certainly not something that is determined by supposedly decisive battles.

These systems run from the highly advanced and technological to the very human. Complex operations involve the operation of many different weapons, sensors, and even means of transport in concert with each other, for maximum impact. They are not determined by weapons per se, but by the operations of weapons systems in constant combination, where speed, reliability and technological sophistication all influence the outcome. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, no complex systems have been as important as those needed to operate

air power and logistics. The ability of a state to provide for its military in order to apply air power effectively and supply itself through logistical systems separates the truly powerful from the imposters.

A key element in the success of complex operations and all other elements of war-fighting is human influence. It's easy to count tanks; it's much harder to assess how well those operating the tanks have been prepared for combat, and whether those operating the tanks really want to operate them in combat. Militaries (at least for now) still must be controlled by human beings, and often it is their learned skills and continuing ability to take risks that determine the course of wars. Of course, human abilities need to be backed up by constant operational sustainment. When the myth of the short, decisive war collapses, as it usually does, what is left is a long-term struggle to constantly regenerate – and even grow – military force as it is being destroyed in combat. The military equipment with which a country starts a war is normally eaten up in short order, and the war becomes a desperate test to make, repair and recreate military force.

Finally, even more so than in peace, alliances often determine the outcome of a war even for the most powerful states. Allies play an enormous role in providing aid, and can even take over a significant amount of the fighting burden. The two world wars were decided by alliances acting in concert, not individual states fighting their own wars. Or, to put it more bluntly, the states that acted most like individual actors – such as Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan in World War II – were doomed when faced with the Allies, who were willing to act far more cooperatively. In other words, those states that try to act like individual great powers, like Germany in both world wars, ended up defeated; while those nations that were able to work in larger coalitions – such as Britain – had their victory parades.

The importance of alliances also underlines one of the purposes of this book, which is to explain the different elements, beyond military forces, that make up a country's power and help determine how it will perform in war. Returning to the start of this introduction, the more complex nature of power means we should dispense with the phrase 'great power', as very few powers are great, and those that are not considered 'great' are often surprisingly successful at achieving their strategic goals. Correspondingly, rarely if ever have 'great powers' won wars on their own. What is far more sensible is to understand

power as a construction in which a number of different elements play a role. The economic/technological strength of a power can be shaped by leadership, society and political structure – and can be reinforced by alliances. A 'full spectrum' power has elements of strength in all these areas.

Hopefully we won't have to worry soon about which of the two most powerful states on the earth today will have a victory parade or not. A war between the US and China would far eclipse any conflict we have seen – other than the world wars – in terms of its potential to kill and destroy, and it has the possibility of surpassing even them. And yet, it must be understood that a war between them is a very real possibility. This book will end by using the methodology outlined on war and power to assess what would matter if these two states (and their allies, of course) end up at war. Perhaps, just perhaps, a proper understanding of the limited nature of power and the disastrous consequences unleashed by the decision to go to war might lead states and leaders to think twice before making a fateful decision.