

The Fetish of Force: Why Weapons Are Not Just “Instruments” of War

Written by Julien Pomarède

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JULIEN POMARÈDE, OCT 13 2025

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have reignited intense global debates over the role and use of weapons on the battlefield. The articulation between the ‘classic’ (airpower, artillery) and ‘new’ (drones, AI) technologies of war is a central dimension of these discussions. In a recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *War and the Modern Battlefield: Insights from Ukraine and the Middle East*, the chapter on airpower evolution notes that “the tools and tactics used to perform these functions [of air power superiority] are constantly changing, having experienced a particularly rapid evolution on the battlefield in Ukraine” (p. 92). Such statement exemplifies this larger, dominant, and yet largely unquestioned, instrumental conception of weapons in strategic and military discourse, where armaments are routinely framed as ‘tools’ or ‘instruments’ used to achieve political objectives. This framing, rooted in classical strategic thought, especially Clausewitzian theory, treats war as a rational extension of politics by other means. Weapons are the means through which political will is enforced when diplomacy fails. Nevertheless, to call weapons ‘tools’ or even ‘instruments’ is to obscure their unique and irreversible effects. Military weapons are not neutral entities in the hands of rational decision-makers, nor do they passively submit to human will. The capacity of weapons to override human intent arises from a property intrinsic to their design and function: they are designed to kill, to destroy, to terrorize at an industrial scale. A hammer or a wrench does not provoke cycles of retaliation. But missile strikes, artillery rounds, air bombings, automatic fire from machine gun do. Their use does not just ‘serve’ political ends. Weapons generate mass death and destruction, and with it, a cascade of (un)expected consequences that no other ‘tool’ can produce: the hardening of political positions, the rise of vengeance, the escalation of violence.

This is precisely why the ‘instrument’ metaphor is flawed and ideologically biased. More than a metaphor, it embodies a dominant vision of what weapons are. It perpetuates the notion that the ethical and political implications of weapons’ violence structurally depend on how they are used. By continually reaffirming the possibility of control, the ‘tool’ metaphor legitimizes the expansion of military technologies and infrastructures under the guise of strategic necessity. As Elke Schwarz shows in *Death Machines* (2018, chapter 4), this core-concept of control in strategic thinking naturalizes the presence of weapons in political life and sustains the belief that more advanced tools will yield better outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to the normalization, and even the eternalization, of militarization, embedding violence deeper into the structures of governance and technological development.

But if weapons are not simply strategic tools, then what are they? Addressing this question requires moving beyond the conventional frameworks of strategic analysis, which tend to seeing weapons in terms of their intended functions or their operational effectiveness. To engage with the social nature of weapons, we must begin not with what they are designed to achieve, but with what they consistently produce: large-scale destruction. From this perspective, my point is that the reality of weapons in modern warfare is shaped less by coherent strategic reasoning than by a pervasive technological fetishism. More precisely, by a political-military mystification of destruction that the technological power of weapons induces. Contemporary scholarship on war and armaments should more seriously engage with the proposition that the development and deployment of weapons are often driven not by rational strategic calculus, but by a more elemental belief in the inherent value of technologically enhanced violence. This belief manifests as a conviction that increased lethality and destructive capacity are synonymous with military progress and the promise of victory. In this context, brute force is more than a tactical preference, or a perverse effect

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of some conflictual configurations like attrition, but a foundational ideology of modern warfare, that conflates technological advancement with strategic efficacy, regardless of its actual political utility.

In historical terms, the valorisation of brute force has significantly influenced the evolution of warfare since the early twentieth century, showing the depth with which human intent and control has been alienated and subsumed by the modern technological condition. World War I stands as a poignant and emblematic illustration of this modern militaristic fetishism. The dramatic escalation in firepower, particularly through artillery and machine guns, was both a principal cause of the strategic deadlock and the proposed solution to the mass slaughter that characterized the Western Front. Although World War II witnessed a renewed emphasis on maneuver warfare, facilitated by the integration of motorized technology into military operations, this shift did not fundamentally alter the underlying reliance on overwhelming force. As Michael Sherry aptly characterized in his analysis of US strategic bombing, these campaigns represent the “triumphs of technological fanaticism” (*The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, 1987). The systematic targeting and incineration of German and Japanese urban centers during World War II exemplified an approach of maximal destruction against both civilian populations and industrial capacity.

In subsequent conflicts such as the Korean, Indochina and Vietnam Wars, France and the United States largely retained this paradigm. Despite being labelled ‘limited’ or ‘small’ wars during the bipolar era, the scale and intensity of violence deployed were anything but. These engagements were marked by a persistent adherence to a quantitative and technological conception of military power, wherein superiority in firepower and advanced weaponry was presumed to ensure strategic success. The US air campaign in Korea was in pure continuity with the carpet bombings of WWII. As Bruce Cumings has documented (*The Korean War*, 2010, p. 159), American forces dropped more tonnage of bombs on North Korea – 635 000 tons – than in the entire Pacific theater during WWII – 503 000 tons, targeting not only military infrastructure but also dams, factories, and civilian centers. Dozens of cities were partially or nearly-completely razed. The Korean War exemplified the continuous brutal logic of total war, in which technological superiority was wielded for devastation. As I recently demonstrated regarding the two Indochina wars, French and American military practices were shaped by a technocratic vision of efficiency, that prioritized the statistical optimization of weapons’ firepower and operational tempo over political or ethical restraint. This economy of force rendered devastation not only permissible but procedurally necessary, embedding mass violence into the strategic fabric of counterinsurgency and transforming pure brutality into a rationalized feature of military conduct. However, technological escalation failed to yield decisive outcomes. Instead, and as Nick Turse as extensively documented (*Kill everything that moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, 2013), it resulted in prolonged devastation of the Indochinese environment, extensive civilian casualties and war crimes, inflicted through both aerial bombardment and ground operations.

In the late-modern era, the fetish of force as a central organizing principle of warfare continues unabated. Although contemporary conflicts involving Western forces often exhibit greater civil/combatants discrimination and a more reasonable use of firepower than in the twentieth century, the underlying mystification of brutality remains largely unchanged. The protracted counterinsurgency campaigns associated with the War on Terror were predicated on the belief that Western technological superiority could overcome irregular and less-equipped insurgent forces. Consequently, much of the strategic discourse surrounding interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq centred on the optimization and allocation of military resources. This technocentric vision culminated in initiatives such as the troop surge in Afghanistan, which, despite its scale, yielded few substantive outcomes beyond an intensification of military operations in the early 2010s.

More recently, the war in Ukraine has devolved into a war of attrition, wherein strategic success is measured by the relentless accumulation of destruction, manifested through missile strikes, drone warfare, and sustained artillery bombardments targeting both military and civilian infrastructures. The drone’s trajectory is particularly revealing of the unexpected and destructive path that military technology can take. Initially marketed during the War on Terror as instruments of surgical precision and ethical warfare (yet responsible for a significant number of civil casualties), the use of drones has now escalated further. Russia is deploying massive salvos of unmanned aerial systems to bombard Ukrainian cities, transforming what was once framed as a precision tool into a mechanism of indiscriminate attrition and terror.

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Similarly, the war in Gaza exemplifies a stark application of overwhelming force. Airpower and artillery fires have been used at gigantic levels, especially with regards to the very small geographical surface of the war. Full-scale destruction has constituted the explicit orientation of the war. Also, Gaza shows how the fetish of force is now augmented by algorithmic targeting and artificial intelligence. These technologies have been integrated into a military logic that prioritizes efficiency in destruction over discrimination in targeting. And the much-vaunted precision of AI-assisted strikes does not reflect restraint, but rather the accuracy of firepower deployed to fulfill a generalized objective of devastation. The AI promise of precision, in this context, becomes a technical virtue divorced from ethical constraint, serving the fetish of force by accelerating devastation rather than to limit it.

These cases collectively underscore the persistence of a militaristic ethos that equates technological and kinetic dominance with strategic efficacy, at the expense of ethical and political considerations. What links these conflicts, from the trenches of the Great War to the devastation in Gaza, is not a coherent set of strategic rationales, but a persistent belief in the redemptive power of organized violence. Strategy, in the lens of this history of weapons in war, appears less as a guide to political action than as a military-centric attempt to lend coherence to the relentless cascade of firepower that defines modernity. This belief in the redemption of brute force, however, is not only misguided; it is profoundly dangerous. The past 110 years of continuous mass devastation since the beginning of WWI reasonably suggests that the cult of technological superiority in warfare does not resolve instability and suffering but rather deepens and perpetuates them. This historical trajectory suggests that far from being a corrective force, the fetish of force often functions as a catalyst for prolonged violence and systemic destruction.

In this context, resisting the fetish of force requires more than appeals to diplomacy or humanitarian ideals. It demands a scientific and political confrontation with the institutional, cultural, and economic structures that sustain and normalize organized violence. The idea that diplomacy, justice, or human security can simply be ‘foregrounded’ overlooks the entrenched interests and strategic logics that privilege military solutions. To properly think war and prevent it, we must not only rethink weapons, but also the systems of thought and power that render them central to political action. The imperative to resist the fetish of force is further heightened by the immense environmental and health toll of modern warfare. From the contamination of soil and water by explosives to the vast carbon emissions generated by armed operations and weapons production, the ecological footprint of armed conflict and military activity overall is staggering. And the ongoing global remilitarization will only exacerbate the climate catastrophe we are fabricating. The instrumental view of weapons not only naturalizes organized violence but also obscures the long-term environmental degradation it entails. It makes the critique of militarized technological supremacy not just a scientific and political necessity, but an eco-existential one.

About the author:

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