The Future of War Is Here

by George Friedman - March 30, 2026

In my book “The Future of War,” which was published in 1996, I wrote that the future of warfare would be based on unmanned aerial vehicles and extreme targeting precision provided by satellite-based intelligence. That future is clearly here; the war in Ukraine suggested as much, and the war in Iran has confirmed it. I am mentioning my book not to take a bow (who would I be kidding?) but to emphasize that the wars of the 20th century, built around ground warfare, manned aircraft and surface vessels, are becoming obsolete the same way cavalries became outdated a century ago. We are still in the process of this evolution, so the past is not yet gone, but the future has arrived.

Drones emerged as viable weapons before Ukraine; the U.S. pioneered them as a military tool in the wars after 9/11. But Ukraine took their use to a whole new level. When Russia invaded Ukraine with massed infantry, armored fighting vehicles and artillery, it should have swept Ukrainian forces away with ease, given its trained, brave soldiers and capable commitment. And Moscow likely would have, had these been the essence of war. Russia should have realized as much, considering it has plenty of satellites and drones. When I wrote “The Future of War,” I assumed unmanned aircraft would guide themselves to targets, release their explosives and return to base. I did not anticipate that the unmanned aerial vehicles would be both aircraft and bomb, as they are in Ukraine. At the time of the invasion, Ukraine had a trained, highly motivated and brave army, albeit a much smaller one than Russia had, and it survived and blocked Russia because of precise intelligence on Russian deployment and movement supplied by U.S. and European satellites. This intelligence allowed it to mass troops and more precisely halt or at least slow the Russian advance. As the war dragged on, intelligence increasingly was used to give drones targeting information. The drones themselves were in effect bombs that could guide themselves to the target. Moscow failed to fully recognize that massed infantry supported by artillery could not defeat precision-guided drones and missiles. The Russian army has since evolved significantly, but the result has been a war that is in many ways frozen, with both sides engaging in massive drone strikes on facilities and very small units engaging in very small battles for very little gain.

The war in Iran is being conducted based on the lessons learned in Ukraine. Had the conflict happened in the past, U.S. Marines would have landed on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz, and the 82nd Airborne Division would have parachuted into the northern areas, pushing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps out of range of the strait and thus opening it. Such a landing now would

not necessarily work. Drones and missiles can range up to several thousand miles, and given the dispersal of drones, the U.S. would have to seize a vast amount of Iranian territory to open the strait.

Washington thus has two options: Initiate a massive land war to seize large parts of Iran (or even all of it) or deploy a massive amount of long-range drones and missiles to strike at Iranian drone bases based on precision satellite intelligence. Importantly, the proliferation of drones does not obviate the need for manned aircraft; the U.S. and Israel still need to conduct airstrikes to destroy IRGC drones and drone production facilities. And even though it appears that Iran has few anti-aircraft systems – that, or its systems have been blinded or crippled – manned missions still cost more lives and money than a well-aimed drone.

The key to this kind of war, as in all wars, is intelligence. But in this case, the intelligence must be precise and extremely timely, as drones, like infantry, can be rapidly repositioned. The intelligence is provided primarily by satellites. The U.S. and Israel have systems to detect and target the Iranians' drone bases, even if they are mobile. It is not clear what Iran's satellite capability is. Tehran does have a satellite program, though I cannot attest to its quality, and there are claims that Russia is providing satellite data in response to the American provision of satellite data to Ukraine. Most of Iran's strikes, however, seem to be targeted at immobile sites, particularly U.S. air bases in the region, and fixed targets in nations seen as potentially hostile to Iran or linked to the U.S.

In the war of drones and missiles, the center of gravity of warfighting is space. Destroy the satellites, and the intelligence needed to fight a mobile war is gone. Drones must have precision and time-sensitive data that only space-based systems can reliably deliver – specifically in low Earth orbit (LEO) where intelligence satellites revolve around Earth in constellations required for constant surveillance. GPS satellites in medium Earth orbit (MEO) provide guidance to the target, just as GPS guides our cars on the road. Thus, he who controls space commands the Earth. But it is important to remember that if the ability of a satellite to transmit data to Earth fails, the satellite is useless.

The battle for space, then, has two possible dimensions: Destroy the satellite itself, or block the transmission of data from the satellite to Earth. If drones depend on precision targeting in real time, that can be provided only from high ground, namely orbital space. This is not the war of our fathers (or even the war many of us are accustomed to). Whereas earlier battles were built around ground warfare, the conflicts in Ukraine and Iran are highly dependent on drones, satellites and mobile warfare. Thus, command of space, which in turn provides for command of the sea and land, is the critical factor. Ukraine and Iran are the proving grounds for space power, just as World War I and II were the proving grounds for the introduction of airpower. Soon enough, space power will determine

air and land power.

This does not mean that the poor bloody infantry is obsolete; it means only that it will no longer be the deciding factor of a war and will therefore suffer far fewer casualties. In fact, civilians may suffer less as well. The saturation bombing of cities to destroy enemy industries could become obsolete, and while civilian casualties will certainly occur, it should not be on the order of, say, World War II.

I may be premature in thinking that this war will be settled without intervention on the ground, but it seems to me that the danger posed to ground forces by satellite-guided drones and missiles has become sufficiently mature as to make conventional ground forces far too vulnerable and far less survivable than before. Of course, wars frequently end with the occupation of the defeated country. Missiles and drones cannot occupy nations, and at some point, if that is the goal, ground forces sometimes will be essential once the enemy has already been profoundly weakened.

Author: George Friedman
Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com

