

THE "LAST WAR" SYNDROME – STRATEGIC TRAP OR OPPORTUNITY FOR ADAPTATION?

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Abstract: *The last war syndrome is a concept in strategic studies and military theory that describes the tendency of political and military leaders to prepare for the next conflict on the basis of the experience of the preceding war, mistakenly assuming that the future war will have similar characteristics. This tendency frequently leads to strategic misjudgements, inadequate investment in capabilities, and slow adaptation to new technological and geopolitical realities.*

In a security environment characterized by great-power competition, digital transformation, and the emergence of emerging and disruptive technologies, strategic advantage will not necessarily belong to the actor that has learned the lessons of the previous war best, but to the one capable of anticipating and adapting most rapidly to still-unknown forms of future conflict. This is why, in defence planning, the emphasis is increasingly shifting from preparing for a specific type of war towards developing forces that are flexible, resilient, and capable of evolving rapidly in the face of strategic surprise.

Keywords: *last war syndrome, concept, mistakes, security environment, anticipation, adaptation.*

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Introduction

Military history highlights a recurring vulnerability of defence institutions: the tendency to project future conflict through the lens of the most recent war. In strategic literature, the phenomenon is associated with expressions such as “last war syndrome” or “preparing to fight the last war”. Essentially, the issue is not the simple use of experience, which is indispensable to military learning, but the transformation of contingent lessons into generalizable prescriptions for conflicts involving different adversaries, technologies, political objectives, and constraints.¹

The risk is particularly relevant in a strategic environment characterized by great-power competition, accelerating technological innovation, the proliferation of autonomous systems, artificial intelligence, information and cyber operations, and the expansion of confrontation into

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¹ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 1–24.

domains such as outer space and the electromagnetic spectrum. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has brought high-intensity conventional warfare back to the forefront, while simultaneously demonstrating that it is inseparable from commercial sensors, drones, electronic warfare, digital networks, open-source intelligence, and civilian infrastructure.²

Therefore, the strategic problem is not whether we should learn from recent wars, but how we can prevent learning from one conflict from becoming intellectual dependence on that conflict. The last war syndrome should thus be understood both as a cognitive and organizational trap and as a potential stimulus for adaptation.

1. Conceptual Foundations

The last war syndrome is not a universally standardized doctrinal category. It can, however, be used as an analytical term to describe the excessive dependence of military planning on the experience of the preceding conflict. Colin S. Gray emphasizes the simultaneously enduring and changing character of strategy: certain elements of strategic competition persist, while the concrete character of warfare changes with technology, society, politics, and the operational environment.³

The phenomenon can be analyzed through three interdependent dimensions.

The cognitive dimension concerns the way decision-makers interpret new information through already-established mental frameworks. Experience reduces uncertainty and provides rapid recognition patterns, but it can also generate heuristics, anchoring, availability effects, and selective confirmation of already accepted hypotheses. Daniel Kahneman shows that such mechanisms can influence judgement even when the decision-maker possesses considerable professional competence and experience.⁴

The organizational dimension derives from institutional inertia. Armed forces are complex organizations built around doctrines, command structures, logistical systems, procurement programmes, and military education institutions that develop over long periods. Stability is necessary for coherence and efficiency, but the same stability can slow change when the strategic environment changes rapidly.

The doctrinal dimension emerges when operational experience is converted from a contextual lesson into a model of action regarded as universal. The problem is not the existence of doctrine, but its rigidification.

² U.S. Army, "Adapt, Lead, Win: NCO Lessons from Ukraine", NCO Journal, October 2024, available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/-2024/October/NCO-Lessons-from-Ukraine/>, accessed on August 12, 2026.

³ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, pp. 15–24.

⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Allen Lane, London, 2011, pp. 109–145.

Military innovation precisely requires the ability to transform experience into knowledge without confusing experience with prediction.⁵

2. Lessons from History

The First World War

Before 1914, an important part of European military thought was influenced by the experience of the Napoleonic Wars and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. Rapid mobilization, the offensive, and the search for a rapid operational decision occupied a central place in the planning of the great powers. In practice, the combination of firepower, machine guns, artillery, field fortifications, and the industrial capacity to sustain mobilization produced a war of attrition on a scale that planners had not fully anticipated.

The lesson to be retained is not that the offensive or mobility became irrelevant, but that the relationship between technology, organization, terrain, and industrial capacity radically altered the conditions under which they could be employed.

France and the Maginot Line

The case of French doctrine between the two world wars is one of the best-known examples of incomplete adaptation. The experience of the First World War reinforced the importance of defence in depth, fortifications, and mobilization. The Maginot Line should not, however, be reduced to the caricature of a “line that lost the war”. The strategic problem was broader: the French defence system was designed around assumptions concerning the tempo of operations, likely axes of attack, mobilization, and the employment of allied forces. Germany exploited precisely the gap between these assumptions and its own operational concept, combining armoured forces, aviation, communications, and the concentration of forces to achieve rapid operational effects.⁶

Accordingly, the lesson of the French case is not that fortifications are useless, but that no capability can compensate for a rigid strategic architecture. A military force may possess modern equipment and considerable resources and still be vulnerable if the adversary succeeds in changing the operational paradigm.

⁵ Williamson Murray, “Innovation: Past and Future”, in Williamson Murray, Allan R. Millett (eds.), *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 300–328.

⁶ Williamson Murray, Allan R. Millett (eds.), *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 1–29.

Vietnam

The Vietnam War illustrates another form of the syndrome. The United States possessed considerable technological and military superiority, but encountered difficulties in transforming tactical success into strategic results. Harry G. Summers highlighted the discrepancy between the way operations were conceived and the political nature of the conflict.⁷

The relevant lesson is not the simplistic formula that the United States “won all the battles but lost the war”, but rather that the assessment of military effectiveness must be subordinated to political objectives and the adversary’s strategic logic. Superiority in one domain does not guarantee success if the strategic problem has been defined incorrectly.

Soviet Military Operations in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the Soviet Union encountered an operational environment radically different from the one for which it had primarily structured its forces. Mechanized superiority, firepower, and air-strike capabilities were insufficient to neutralize an adversary that was dispersed, adaptable, and supported by the geographic and social conditions of the theatre of operations.

The Afghan case shows that transferring a doctrine between theatres of operations cannot be achieved by simply replicating procedures. Adaptation must encompass the physical environment, the adversary’s structure, political legitimacy, the population, and the duration of the conflict.

Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001

After 2001, Western forces accumulated extensive operational experience in counterinsurgency, stabilization, force protection, special operations, and human intelligence. This experience was valuable, but it also contributed to directing part of institutional attention towards low-intensity conflicts and non-state adversaries.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, brought air defence, artillery, ammunition, logistics, industrial mobilization, fortifications, dispersion, and mass back to the centre of defence planning. At the same time, the conflict has not eliminated the lessons of the information age: drones, commercial satellites, electronic warfare, digital communications, and information operations have become structural components of the battlefield.⁸

⁷ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, Presidio Press, Novato, 1982, pp. 1–20.

⁸ U.S. Army, “Adapt, Lead, Win: NCO Lessons from Ukraine”, *NCO Journal*, October 2024, available at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/-2024/October/NCO-Lessons-from-Ukraine/>, accessed on August 12, 2026.

3. Ukraine: Genuine Lessons or the Beginning of a New Syndrome?

The Russo-Ukrainian war is a strategic laboratory of exceptional importance. It combines high-intensity conventional warfare with rapid innovation, the use of commercial technologies, electronic warfare, cyber and information operations, and sustained industrial competition.

The conflict confirms the importance of classical elements of military power: concentration of forces, logistics, artillery, air defence, fortifications, reserves, and societal resilience. At the same time, it shows that these elements must be integrated into an operational architecture in which information and the speed of adaptation are becoming increasingly important.⁹

In Ukraine, commercial and military drones have become instruments of reconnaissance, strike, and battle-damage assessment; commercial Earth-observation services have expanded access to information; digital systems have accelerated the sensor–decision–effector cycle; and initiatives such as BRAVE1 have sought to reduce the time between identifying an operational requirement and developing a technological solution.¹⁰

This is precisely where the paradox emerges. If the lessons of Ukraine are treated as universal truths, analysis of the conflict may produce a new last war syndrome. For example, the fact that drones have had a major impact does not mean that all future conflicts will be dominated by the same types of drones. Similarly, the relevance of artillery and armoured forces cannot be extrapolated without taking into account sensor density, electronic warfare, air defence, terrain, the tempo of operations, and ammunition availability.

Ukraine should therefore be treated as a case study and a source of hypotheses, not as a prophecy.

4. Psychological and Organizational Foundations

From a psychological perspective, the last war syndrome is fuelled by the human tendency to reduce uncertainty through analogy. The availability heuristic makes recent, vivid, or heavily mediatized events appear more probable than they actually are; anchoring causes the first relevant information to exert a disproportionate influence on judgement; and confirmation bias favours the selection of information compatible with existing hypotheses.¹¹

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976, pp. 73–124.

¹⁰ . U.S. Army, “Adapt, Lead, Win: NCO Lessons from Ukraine”, op. cit.

¹¹ Daniel Kahneman, op. cit., pp. 109–145.

At the strategic level, these mechanisms can be amplified by institutional success. A doctrine that has produced results in one conflict generates legitimacy, investment, and careers built around it. Consequently, change is no longer merely an intellectual problem; it becomes a problem of resource allocation, authority, and organizational identity.

Graham T. Allison demonstrated, through his analysis of decision-making processes, the importance of organizational routines and institutionalized procedures in explaining governmental behaviour.¹² In the military domain, these may manifest themselves as doctrinal inertia, budgetary inertia, bureaucratic inertia, and educational inertia.

Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett showed that military innovation is not a purely technological process. It entails convergent changes in doctrine, organization, training, leadership, and the use of technology.¹³ From this perspective, an important lesson from Ukraine is that the speed of adaptation can itself become a strategic capability.

5. The Strategic Trap

The last war syndrome becomes a strategic trap when it produces doctrinal rigidity, unbalanced resource allocations, overestimation of a technology, neglect of surprise, and a reduction in intellectual pluralism.

A competent adversary will not reproduce the conditions in which we have prepared to fight. It will seek precisely those courses of action that circumvent our advantages, exploit our vulnerabilities, and force us to fight in an environment for which we have no prepared responses.

In this context, the question is not only “What have we learned?”, but also “What have we failed to learn?” and “Which assumptions have we become incapable of challenging?” Strategy therefore requires a combination of continuity and the permanent contestation of assumptions.

Another vulnerability is the overestimation of predictability. Nassim Nicholas Taleb draws attention to the effect of rare events with disproportionate impact and to the tendency to construct coherent retrospective explanations for events that were not anticipated in the same form.¹⁴ In military affairs, this requires a distinction between anticipating trends and predicting the exact nature of the next war.

6. The Strategic Opportunity

The last war syndrome should not, however, be interpreted only negatively. Operational experience is the principal source of military

¹² Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1971, pp. 67–102.

¹³ Williamson Murray, Allan R. Millett (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 300–328.

¹⁴ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, 2nd ed., Random House, New York, 2010, pp. 1–20.

learning. An organization that fails to extract lessons from recent wars would be as vulnerable as one that absolutizes them.

The key is to institutionalize a process of critical learning. Lessons should be formulated as testable hypotheses, not as axioms. They should be subjected to experimentation, wargaming, red teaming, and alternative scenarios. At the same time, military education should develop the ability to identify the hidden assumptions underlying doctrines and plans.

An adaptive strategic culture should include at least five mechanisms: 1) permanent doctrinal experimentation; 2) prospective analysis and divergent scenarios; 3) institutionalized red teaming; 4) periodic assessment of planning assumptions; and 5) the rapid integration of operational lessons into training, procurement, and doctrine.

In this respect, the value of a military organization is measured not only by its ability to execute validated procedures, but also by its ability to abandon them when the conditions that justified them have disappeared.

7. Implications for Romania

For Romania, the issue is particularly important because its position on NATO's eastern flank requires preparation for deterrence and collective defence in an environment in which the conflict in Ukraine represents both a major source of lessons and a potential source of analytical bias.

Ukraine's experience offers relevant lessons for territorial defence, air and missile defence, the use of unmanned systems, dispersion and infrastructure protection, logistical resilience, reserve mobilization, ammunition production, and civil-military integration. These lessons must, however, be filtered through Romania's geography, force structure, alliances and collective-defence obligations, national infrastructure, and the likely characteristics of a potential theatre of operations.

For Romania, avoiding the last war syndrome therefore means not diminishing the lessons of Ukraine, but avoiding their mechanical extrapolation. Investments should pursue not only high-performance capabilities, but also capabilities that are adaptable, interoperable, and regenerable. At the same time, the transformation process must include emerging technologies, but also redundancy, mass, logistics, air defence, electronic warfare, critical-infrastructure protection, resilient communications, and the ability to operate under conditions of network degradation.

A central objective should be the development of a "culture of constructive challenge": plans, doctrines, and procurement programmes should be periodically evaluated through scenarios that assume current assumptions are wrong. This is one of the most effective ways of transforming uncertainty from a vulnerability into an advantage.

Conclusions

The last war syndrome is one of the persistent vulnerabilities of strategic thought. It emerges when recent experience ceases to be a source of learning and becomes a rigid template for anticipating the future.

History provides sufficient examples to demonstrate this problem: the First World War disproved certain assumptions about short wars; the French case in 1940 demonstrated the limitations of a defensive architecture insufficiently adapted to the operational tempo; Vietnam demonstrated that tactical superiority cannot substitute for politico-strategic coherence; Afghanistan highlighted the limitations of doctrinal transfer between operational environments; and Ukraine simultaneously demonstrates the return of high-intensity warfare and the acceleration of technological innovation.

The fundamental lesson is therefore dialectical: the past must be studied rigorously, but not absolutized. An army that ignores the lessons of the last war is unprepared; an army that prepares exclusively to repeat it may be equally vulnerable.

For Romania and NATO, the strategic objective should be to build an institutional capacity for continuous adaptation. This requires operational lessons to be rapidly transformed into experimentation, training, and innovation, while also being permanently challenged through alternative scenarios. The strategic advantage of the twenty-first century will not necessarily belong to the actor that knows the last war best, but to the actor capable of learning faster than its adversary and adapting its forces before change becomes a constraint.

The true antidote to the last war syndrome is not forgetting the past, but refusing to turn it into the sole guide to the future.



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