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CDRC Digest Team:

Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, Ph.D (Executive Director)
Amb. Kasahun Dender (Deputy Executive Director)
Wegene Mengistu (Senior Researcher)
Yidnekachew Mitiku Ph.D (Senior Researcher)

Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation
Ethio-China Friendship Avenue
Medina Tower 5th floor
Tel: +251 11 470 0370/73
Fax: +251 11 470 0359
Email: cdrc@cdrcethiopia.com
http://www.cdrcethiopia.org

The Changing Nature of Warfare: Insights from a High-Level CDRC Dialogue

Executive Summary

The high-level lecture delivered by William Reno at the Centre for Dialogue, Research, and Cooperation (CDRC) provided a comprehensive and empirically grounded analysis of the changing character of warfare, using Ukraine as a central case study. The discussion highlighted that contemporary conflict is being fundamentally reshaped by the convergence of technological innovation, organizational adaptation, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Ukraine's resistance against Russia exemplifies a new model of warfare characterized by decentralized command structures, extensive use of low-cost but highly effective technologies—particularly drones—and the rapid integration of real-time data into battlefield decision-making. These developments have compressed operational timelines, empowered lower-level units, and blurred traditional distinctions between tactical and strategic levels of war.

A central theme of the lecture was the inversion of the traditional cost structure of warfare. Offensive capabilities have become increasingly affordable and scalable, while defensive systems are more complex and expensive, thereby challenging long-standing assumptions about deterrence and battlefield dominance.

This shift is not limited to Ukraine but reflects a broader global trend, as seen in the asymmetric strategies employed by Iran and the potential adaptations by Russia. At the same time, the lecture underscored the growing fragmentation of strategic coherence—both within states, particularly in U.S. foreign policy decision-making, and across the international system. Conflicts are becoming more protracted, less predictable, and increasingly interconnected, with regional confrontations carrying global implications.

Beyond the battlefield, the discussion extended to great-power competition, the future of the liberal international order, and emerging technological risks. Questions surrounding U.S. credibility, the evolving Russia–China–U.S. triangle, and the strategic uncertainty surrounding Taiwan highlighted the fragility of existing security assumptions. The centrality of critical technologies—especially semiconductor production dominated by TSMC—further underscored the deepening link between geopolitics and global economic stability. Overall, the lecture framed Ukraine not as an isolated conflict but as a microcosm of a broader transformation in the nature of war and international order.

Key Takeaways

A primary takeaway from the discussion is that warfare is becoming increasingly data-driven, decentralized, and innovation-intensive. The integration of drone technology, real-time intelligence, and digital command systems has created a battlespace where information dominance is as critical as firepower. This transformation enables tactical units to operate with unprecedented autonomy, but also introduces new challenges in coordination, scalability, and doctrinal coherence. The Ukrainian experience demonstrates that success in modern warfare depends not only on technological acquisition but on the ability to continuously adapt and integrate innovations into organizational structures and operational practices.

A second key insight is the growing dominance of asymmetric warfare as a strategic paradigm. States facing stronger adversaries are prioritizing agility, dispersion, and cost-efficiency over conventional mass and firepower. This has led to the widespread adoption of tactics that exploit the vulnerabilities of

high-cost systems, reinforcing the principle that "cheap can defeat expensive." However, this dynamic also generates a cycle of rapid adaptation, where each innovation is met with countermeasures, making technological superiority inherently temporary. As a result, the capacity for sustained learning and adaptation becomes a decisive factor in long-term conflict outcomes.

Another important takeaway concerns the erosion of strategic clarity and the increasing fragmentation of global governance. The lecture highlighted how inconsistencies in U.S. foreign policy, coupled with competing institutional actors, create ambiguity for allies and adversaries alike. This fragmentation is mirrored at the systemic level, where the liberal international order is undergoing a process of transformation rather than outright collapse. Multipolarity, regional assertiveness, and technological competition are reshaping the rules of engagement, making the international system more fluid, contested, and less predictable.

The discussion also emphasized the strategic implications of prolonged and expanding conflicts. Wars that were initially expected to be short and decisive are becoming protracted and open-ended, as seen in Ukraine. At the same time, the expansion of conflict theaters—particularly in the case of Iran's broader regional signaling—illustrates how localized confrontations can acquire global significance. This interconnectedness increases the risk of miscalculation and escalation, especially in an environment marked by great-power rivalry and technological disruption.

Finally, the growing importance of emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing—was identified as a defining feature of future warfare. These technologies not only enhance operational capabilities but also reshape strategic decision-making, potentially lowering the threshold for conflict while increasing the risks of unintended escalation. Control over critical technological infrastructure, such as semiconductor production, is becoming a central component of geopolitical competition, further blurring the boundaries between economic and military domains.

Details

On 27 March 2026, the Centre for Dialogue, Research, and Cooperation (CDRC) convened a high-level lecture by William Reno, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, on the theme "The Changing Character of Warfare in a New Global Order: Lessons from Ukraine." The event brought together diplomats, senior military commanders, policy professionals, academics, and researchers, creating a rare platform for cross-sectoral dialogue. Drawing on firsthand observations from areas proximate to active conflict zones in Ukraine, Professor Reno provided a grounded and empirically rich account of how contemporary warfare is being reshaped in real time. His reflections moved beyond battlefield description to situate Ukraine's experience within a wider comparative framework, particularly highlighting parallels with asymmetric strategies employed by Iran in its confrontations with the United States and Israel. In doing so, the lecture bridged tactical innovation and systemic transformation, offering participants both granular insights and strategic foresight.

Evolution of Ukrainian Resistance

Professor Reno emphasized that Ukraine's resistance against Russia has evolved along two deeply interconnected axes: technological innovation and organizational restructuring. These dimensions are not merely reactive adjustments but constitute a broader transformation in how modern wars are fought under conditions of asymmetry.

On the technological front, Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, particularly in its extensive and innovative use of drones. From night-operating systems to so-called "vampire" drones and increasingly autonomous platforms, Ukrainian forces have redefined the tactical utility of relatively low-cost technologies. These systems have enabled precision targeting of high-value assets, including elements of Russia's Black Sea fleet, thereby challenging long-standing assumptions about the dominance of capital-intensive military platforms. What emerges is a clear operationalization of the principle of "cheap defeating expensive," where cost asymmetry

becomes a strategic equalizer. Equally important is Ukraine's ability to repurpose legacy systems—modifying older equipment for new battlefield roles—which reflects not only ingenuity but also a broader doctrine of resource maximization under constraint. This approach underscores a critical lesson: innovation in warfare is not solely dependent on cutting-edge technology, but on the capacity to creatively integrate available tools into evolving operational concepts.

Parallel to these technological shifts, Ukraine has undertaken significant organizational restructuring. Faced with Russia's superior firepower and numerical advantage, Ukrainian forces have adopted a decentralized and flexible command structure. Operational theaters such as Kharkiv, Donbas, and Zaporizhzhia function with a high degree of autonomy, allowing for context-specific tactics tailored to localized battlefield conditions. This decentralization enhances resilience by dispersing risk and complicating adversary targeting, effectively denying Russia the opportunity for rapid, decisive breakthroughs. However, Reno underscored that such adaptability comes with inherent trade-offs. Decentralized operations strain logistical coordination, complicate command cohesion, and place sustained pressure on manpower and resource distribution.

The Ukrainian case thus illustrates a broader tension in modern warfare: the balance between flexibility and control, innovation and coherence.

Asymmetric Warfare and Strategic Parallels

A central analytical thread in Reno's lecture was the growing prominence of asymmetric warfare as a defining feature of the contemporary strategic environment. Increasingly, states confronting militarily superior adversaries are abandoning attempts at conventional parity in favor of strategies that prioritize agility, dispersion, and innovation. Ukraine's use of long-range drone strikes against Russian ammunition depots and logistical hubs exemplifies this shift, demonstrating how relatively inexpensive tools can achieve effects once reserved for high-cost missile systems.

Reno drew a compelling parallel with Iran's evolving military doctrine. In its confrontations with the United States and Israel, Iran has systematically cultivated asymmetric capabilities—ranging from proxy networks to missile and drone technologies—that offset its conventional limitations. This convergence suggests a broader pattern: asymmetric warfare is no longer the preserve of non-state actors, but a strategic choice increasingly adopted by states themselves. It reflects a recalibration of power, where effectiveness is measured not by scale alone but by adaptability and cost-efficiency.

Importantly, Reno noted that this dynamic is not static. As U.S. and NATO support for Ukraine intensifies, Russia may itself deepen its reliance on asymmetric responses, including cyber operations, hybrid tactics, and indirect forms of escalation. This recursive adaptation introduces a layer of unpredictability into the conflict, as each side continuously adjusts to the other's innovations. The result is a fluid and evolving battlespace in which traditional metrics of power—such as troop numbers or heavy equipment—are increasingly insufficient to predict outcomes.

Diplomacy and the Fragmented U.S. Foreign Policy Machinery

Beyond the battlefield, Reno turned attention to the diplomatic dimension, highlighting the growing fragmentation of U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Rather than a unified strategic center, the U.S. system is characterized by multiple, sometimes competing, nodes of authority. This diffusion creates ambiguity for both allies and adversaries, complicating efforts to interpret signals and anticipate policy direction.

For actors such as Ukraine and Iran, this fragmentation poses a strategic dilemma: identifying where real decision-making power resides within Washington becomes an uncertain exercise. Inconsistent messaging from the executive branch, coupled with the varying levels of experience among key negotiators, further amplifies this uncertainty. Reno suggested that such institutional incoherence may reflect deeper

structural dynamics within the U.S. political system—often described, albeit controversially, in terms of a "deep state." Regardless of terminology, the practical implication is clear: diplomatic engagement with the United States increasingly requires navigating a complex and sometimes opaque policy landscape.

This internal fragmentation intersects with external military developments in consequential ways. While the U.S. remains a central actor in shaping the strategic environment, perceived inconsistencies in its diplomatic posture may embolden adversaries or complicate alliance coordination. The evolving global order, therefore, is not only a function of shifting power balances but also of changing patterns of governance within key states.

The situation reflects a growing perception that contemporary conflicts are drifting beyond the bounds of coherent strategic control, driven in part by weak coordination and the absence of clearly articulated end-states. In both Ukraine (by Russia) and the confrontation involving Iran, the gap between declared objectives and actual implementation has widened. Policy execution appears fragmented, with limited "trickle-down" coherence from strategic intent to operational conduct.

This disconnect not only reduces effectiveness but also creates space for escalation dynamics that are reactive rather than planned. As a result, conflicts that were initially framed as limited or time-bound risk evolving into open-ended engagements with unclear termination points.

In the case of Iran, the expansion of target sets beyond immediate theaters of confrontation into the wider Gulf signals a deliberate broadening of the battlespace. This reflects a shift from localized deterrence to regional—and potentially global—signaling. By threatening maritime routes, energy infrastructure, and strategic chokepoints, Iran is effectively internationalizing the conflict environment. Such a move increases the systemic stakes, as disruptions in the Gulf have direct implications for global trade, energy security, and the stability of interconnected regions, including the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. What emerges is not merely an escalation in intensity, but a transformation in scope—where regional conflicts acquire global consequences.

The temporal dimension of these conflicts further reinforces this pattern of strategic drift. The notion of a short, decisive campaign—such as a "three-day war"—has proven increasingly illusory. Instead, conflicts are extending in duration, as evidenced by the protracted war in Ukraine, now entering its fifth year. This persistence reflects not only battlefield stalemate but also the structural conditions of modern warfare, where external support, domestic resilience, and adaptive tactics enable belligerents to sustain prolonged engagement. War, in this sense, is no longer a finite episode but an evolving process, often lacking clear thresholds for victory or resolution.

Taken together, these trends point to a deeper transformation in the logic of warfare. The erosion of strategic coherence, the expansion of conflict theaters, the prolongation of engagements, and the inversion of cost dynamics all suggest that war is becoming less predictable, less controllable, and more diffuse. For policymakers, this raises urgent questions about how to restore strategic clarity, recalibrate deterrence, and manage escalation in an environment where traditional frameworks are increasingly inadequate.

An Intensely Data-Driven Battlespace

The war in Ukraine has evolved into an intensely data-driven battlespace in which the ability to generate, process, and act upon real-time information is as decisive as traditional firepower. Situational awareness—especially early warning—has become the backbone of operational effectiveness. Modern software ecosystems now integrate live drone feeds, geospatial intelligence, battlefield analytics, and command-and-control functions into unified platforms that enable rapid coordination of movement and fires. This fusion of sensing, analysis, and execution has compressed decision-making cycles, allowing smaller units to act with a level of precision and responsiveness previously reserved for higher echelons. In effect,

the battlefield has become a networked environment where data flows are as critical as supply lines.

This transformation has, in turn, driven significant organizational innovation. Ukrainian forces have had to adapt not only tactically but institutionally, incorporating new technologies and workflows at an accelerated pace. However, the integration of advanced systems is constrained by concerns over technology leakage. High-end military equipment is often delivered without the most current software updates or technical documentation, due to fears that sensitive information could be captured or transferred to adversaries. This creates a paradox: while technology is central to battlefield effectiveness, restrictions on its full deployment limit its operational potential. As a result, Ukraine has increasingly relied on improvisation and indigenous adaptation, including the expanded use of heavy-payload drones as substitutes for more expensive and less accessible ballistic missile systems, particularly in targeting ammunition depots and logistical hubs.

At the same time, resource constraints remain acute. Western assistance, while still significant, is increasingly mismatched with the scale and evolving nature of battlefield requirements. This gap has forced Ukraine to prioritize cost-effective solutions, reinforcing the shift toward drone-centric operations. Yet even here, adaptation is iterative. Defensive countermeasures—such as the widespread use of protective netting over bunkers and critical positions—have reduced the effectiveness of low-cost drone strikes. This has created a dynamic cycle of measure and countermeasure, where innovation on one side is quickly met with adaptation on the other. The implication is clear: technological advantage is fleeting, and sustained effectiveness depends on continuous innovation rather than static superiority.

Force Structure Considerations

These technological and operational shifts have profound implications for force structure. The contemporary battlefield in Ukraine is characterized by radical dispersion, low force mass, and degraded communication environments. In such conditions, the quality, adaptability, and initiative of individual soldiers and small units become decisive factors. Technology enables a high degree of tactical integration at the squad and platoon levels, where real-time data can be directly translated into immediate action. However, scaling this integration upward—to brigade and operational-level decision-making—remains a significant challenge. The complexity of coordinating dispersed units, each operating with partial autonomy, places immense strain on command structures and communication networks.

Another defining feature of this war environment is the integration of non-traditional actors into the military ecosystem. Technology firms, data analysts, call centers, and hybrid non-governmental organizations are increasingly embedded in the war effort, contributing to intelligence processing, logistics coordination, and even operational planning. This blurring of civilian and military roles reflects a broader transformation in how wars are fought, where innovation often originates outside formal defense institutions.

To sustain effectiveness under these conditions, there is a pressing need to institutionalize learning without stifling adaptability. Ukraine's experience highlights the importance of creating a "learning military"—one capable of rapidly capturing lessons from the front, disseminating them across units, and integrating them into evolving doctrine. However, this must be done in a way that preserves the bottom-up innovation that has been a hallmark of Ukrainian resistance. The challenge lies in balancing standardization with flexibility: developing coherent doctrine and force structures while maintaining the agility that decentralized operations require.

Implications for the Ukrainian Way of War

The Ukrainian "way of war" is increasingly defined by denial, attrition, and cost asymmetry. Rather than seeking decisive breakthroughs through massed offensives, Ukrainian forces have focused on denying mobility to the adversary and imposing

sustained costs over time. This has resulted in a form of attritional warfare in which the objective is less about rapid territorial gains and more about exhausting the rival's capacity and will to fight.

A central feature of this approach is the inversion of cost dynamics. Relatively inexpensive systems—particularly drones—are being used to destroy high-value targets, from armored vehicles to naval assets. This trend has challenged traditional assumptions about the relationship between cost and capability. Notably, long-range and maritime drone operations have reportedly inflicted significant damage on elements of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, illustrating how innovative applications of low-cost technology can disrupt even strategically significant assets. In this context, the search for "breakout innovation" becomes critical: incremental improvements are often insufficient in a rapidly evolving battlespace, and qualitative leaps in capability can yield disproportionate effects.

Ukraine has effectively developed a distinct model of "combined arms, Ukraine-style," in which technological innovation is not simply an enabler but a structuring force that reshapes how battlefield resources are distributed and employed across all levels of war. Unlike traditional combined arms doctrine—where coordination between armor, infantry, artillery, and airpower is centrally orchestrated—Ukraine's approach is increasingly networked, decentralized, and data-driven. Technologies such as drones, real-time surveillance systems, and digital command platforms are integrated into operations from the brigade level down to battalions, companies, platoons, and even small squads. This has compressed the distance between sensing and shooting, allowing tactical units to independently generate and exploit battlefield intelligence. As a result, combined arms operations are no longer exclusively the domain of higher command structures but are being executed dynamically at multiple echelons, often in parallel rather than in strict hierarchy.

This transformation has had a profound impact on tactics and resource allocation. Battlefield assets—particularly scarce and high-value ones—are distributed in ways that maximize flexibility and responsiveness rather than mass and concentration. For example, instead of relying on large-scale artillery barrages directed from centralized command, smaller units can call upon precision fires enabled by drone reconnaissance and digital targeting. Similarly, the integration of electronic warfare, reconnaissance, and strike capabilities at lower levels has created a more fluid and adaptive battlespace. However, this diffusion of capability also introduces complexity. Coordinating effects across dispersed units, avoiding duplication of effort, and maintaining coherence in operational intent become significantly more challenging. In this sense, technological empowerment at the tactical level must be balanced against the enduring need for strategic alignment.

Organizational challenges therefore remain central to Ukraine's evolving way of war. The rapid incorporation of new technologies and tactics has outpaced the development of formal structures and processes in some areas. Units often innovate in real time, adapting to immediate battlefield conditions, but these innovations are not always systematically captured, evaluated, or disseminated. This creates a risk of fragmentation, where different units develop divergent practices that may not be interoperable or scalable. Moreover, the strain of prolonged conflict—combined with personnel turnover and uneven access to equipment—complicates efforts to standardize practices across the force. The challenge is not merely to innovate, but to institutionalize innovation without undermining the flexibility that made it possible in the first place.

This raises two critical questions for Ukraine's military development: how to translate battlefield adaptation into doctrine, and how to embed these lessons within systematic training frameworks. On doctrine, the task is to codify emerging practices into coherent operational concepts that can guide future engagements. This does not mean rigid standardization, but rather the articulation of principles that can be adapted to different situations. Ukraine's experience suggests the need for a doctrine that emphasizes decentralization, rapid decision-making, integration of civilian and military technologies, and the continuous interplay between offense and defense in a data-rich

environment. Such a doctrine must remain iterative—constantly updated to reflect new technologies and adversary adaptations—rather than fixed in traditional paradigms.

Equally important is the development of systematic training efforts that can translate doctrinal insights into practical capability. Training systems must be redesigned to reflect the realities of a dispersed, technology-intensive battlefield. This includes not only technical proficiency in operating advanced systems but also cognitive skills such as decision-making under uncertainty, cross-unit coordination, and adaptive problem-solving. Simulation, real-time data integration, and after-action review processes can play a crucial role in accelerating learning cycles. At the same time, training must bridge the gap between frontline innovation and institutional practice—ensuring that lessons learned in combat are rapidly incorporated into curricula and disseminated across units.

Ultimately, Ukraine's challenge is to sustain a dynamic equilibrium between innovation and institutionalization. Its success thus far has been driven by adaptability, improvisation, and decentralized initiative. The next phase will depend on its ability to transform these strengths into enduring organizational capabilities—embedding them in doctrine and training systems that can scale across the force without sacrificing the agility that defines its approach to modern warfare.

Implications for the American Way of War

The lessons emerging from Ukraine also carry profound implications for the United States and its traditional approach to warfare. One of the most significant approaches is the changing character of the air domain. For over seven decades, the United States has operated with a high degree of air superiority in its military engagements. However, the proliferation of affordable air defense systems, drones, and electronic warfare capabilities is eroding this advantage. The prospect of contested or even denied airspace is no longer hypothetical but increasingly likely in future conflicts. This necessitates a fundamental rethinking of conventional air power, including the roles of manned aircraft, unmanned systems, and integrated defense networks.

Relatedly, the concept of the "air littoral"—the zone where air, land, and maritime domains intersect—is being redefined. Drone swarms, loitering munitions, and hybrid platforms blur traditional domain boundaries, creating new operational challenges and opportunities. Yet adaptation within the U.S. system is hindered by structural and institutional constraints. Incrementalism in planning—favoring gradual adjustments over transformative change—limits responsiveness to rapidly evolving threats. More critically, the defense acquisition system is widely seen as ill-suited to the pace of modern technological innovation. Lengthy approval processes, bureaucratic inertia, and rigid procurement models impede the integration of emerging technologies, particularly those advanced in the civilian sector.

The "curse" of defense bureaucracy is not merely anecdotal but systemic. Delays in approving research initiatives, cumbersome travel and reporting requirements, and fragmented institutional responsibilities all contribute to a lag between insight and implementation. While access to the battlefield for observation may be relatively straightforward, translating findings into actionable policy or capability development remains a slow and often frustrating process. This disconnect undermines the ability of the U.S. to learn and adapt at the speed required by contemporary conflict.

Diffusion, Escalation, and Future Risks

Finally, the Ukraine war illustrates the rapid diffusion of tactics and technologies beyond the immediate theater of conflict. The use of drones in proximity to civilian infrastructure, including incidents around European airports, underscores how military innovations can spill over into non-military contexts. This diffusion lowers the barrier to entry for a wide range of actors, increasing the potential for asymmetric threats.

At the same time, the possibility of asymmetric responses by Russia to increased U.S. or NATO

support for Ukraine adds another layer of uncertainty. Such responses may not be confined to the battlefield but could include cyber operations, hybrid tactics, or indirect actions in other regions. The result is a security environment characterized by interconnected risks, where local military developments have global repercussions.

In sum, the Ukraine conflict reveals a fundamental transformation in the nature of warfare—one driven by data, shaped by innovation, and constrained by institutional adaptation. It challenges established doctrines, exposes structural weaknesses, and underscores the need for continuous learning in an era where the pace of change is itself a strategic variable.

Interactive Discussion and Broader Reflections

The question-and-answer session that followed the lecture expanded the analytical scope, bringing into focus several cross-cutting issues that resonate beyond the Ukraine conflict.

One prominent theme was the shifting cost relationship between offense and defense. Reno observed that defensive systems—such as advanced missile interceptors and integrated air defense networks—are becoming increasingly expensive and complex to maintain. In contrast, offensive tools like drones and precision-guided munitions are relatively affordable and adaptable.

This inversion challenges the long-standing assumption that defense holds a structural advantage. Instead, states may find themselves locked in economically unsustainable defense postures, particularly when facing adversaries capable of continuous low-cost innovation. The strategic implication is profound: deterrence itself may need to be rethought in an era where the cost curve favors the attacker.

The most consequential aspect therefore is the inversion of the traditional cost structure of warfare. The declining cost of offensive capabilities—particularly drones, loitering munitions, and precision-guided systems—has fundamentally altered the offense-defense balance. Attack has become increasingly accessible, scalable, and adaptable, while effective defense requires costly, layered, and technologically sophisticated systems. This reversal undermines long-standing assumptions that defense holds a natural advantage and that deterrence can be maintained through superior protective capacity. Instead, states now face the prospect of defending against a continuous stream of low-cost threats, a dynamic that is economically and operationally difficult to sustain.

Another line of inquiry addressed the future of the liberal international order. Participants questioned whether the erosion of established norms, the rise of multipolarity, and the assertiveness of non-Western powers signal a fundamental transformation of the global system. Reno framed the Ukraine war as a critical test case for the resilience of collective defense mechanisms and rule-based institutions. Rather than predicting outright decline, he suggested that the liberal order is undergoing a process of adaptation—one that will require accommodating diversity and contestation rather than presuming universality.

Regarding success and failure for parties to the conflict, for Russia, the need to demonstrate tangible success is indeed central. In the absence of a decisive military victory, the creation of a politically defensible outcome becomes critical for regime legitimacy. This is where territorial control functions not only as a military gain but as a narrative asset. A "face-saving" mechanism—such as consolidating control over occupied areas, institutionalizing them under provisional arrangements, and deferring final status through long-term referenda—fits within a familiar repertoire of strategic ambiguity. By stretching the timeline (e.g., decades), Russia could aim to normalize facts on the ground, reshape demographics, and gradually embed these regions into its political and administrative orbit. In this sense, time itself becomes a strategic tool, allowing de facto control to evolve into de jure claims.

However, this approach is not without constraints. Long-term occupation carries economic, military,

and political costs, while international non-recognition limits full integration. Moreover, such "frozen-but-not-frozen" arrangements can remain sources of instability rather than durable solutions. Russia's challenge, therefore, is not only to seize territory but to convert control into legitimacy—something that has historically proven difficult under sustained external pressure.

For Ukraine, the situation is more complex than a straightforward acceptance of territorial loss based on demographic composition. While some contested regions have significant Russian-speaking populations, Ukrainian statehood since 2014 has increasingly been defined in civic—not purely ethnic—terms. Politically, any formal concession of territory is highly constrained by domestic opinion, wartime sacrifice, and constitutional commitments. Even if, at a practical level, Kyiv prioritizes consolidating what it can effectively govern, outright acceptance of loss would carry profound internal legitimacy costs. Thus, Ukraine may operate in a space between de facto pragmatism and de jure non-recognition—maintaining claims while adapting to realities on the ground.

On NATO, limited accession prospects reflects a real tension. Membership requires consensus, and concerns among some European states about escalation risks, war entanglement, and bilateral disputes complicate Ukraine's path. While countries like Poland have been among Ukraine's strongest supporters militarily and politically, others—such as Hungary—have raised objections on political and minority rights grounds. No doubt, the recent loss by Viktor Orbán in the national election is bound to affect Hungary's future stance. More broadly, the structural issue is that admitting a country in active or unresolved conflict would fundamentally alter NATO's risk calculus. As a result, Ukraine's security future may evolve through intermediate arrangements—bilateral guarantees, long-term military assistance, and partial integration—rather than full membership in the near term.

The European Union track presents a different dynamic. Unlike NATO, the European Union operates through gradual integration, conditionality, and staged accession. Ukraine's interest in EU membership is both economic and symbolic: access to markets, reconstruction funds, and institutional anchoring, alongside the political narrative that the war yielded a European future. However, "selective" or phased integration is more plausible than rapid full membership. Issues of governance reform, economic absorption capacity, and enlargement fatigue within the EU will shape this trajectory. In practice, Ukraine may gain access to specific sectors—trade, infrastructure, energy—before achieving full institutional inclusion.

Stepping back, what emerges is not a clean resolution but a layered equilibrium. Russia seeks a minimally acceptable victory it can institutionalize over time; Ukraine seeks to preserve sovereignty and legitimacy while securing external support and long-term integration with Europe. Between these positions lies a likely outcome characterized by ambiguity: contested territories, partial alignments, and unresolved status questions. This is less a definitive end to the conflict than a reconfiguration into a prolonged geopolitical condition—where war, politics, and diplomacy remain intertwined over the long term.

The discussion also touched on the risk of a wider global conflict. While Reno cautioned against deterministic narratives of an impending third world war, he acknowledged that the convergence of great-power rivalry, proxy dynamics, and rapid technological change creates an environment where miscalculation is increasingly plausible. The war in Ukraine thus serves as both a localized confrontation and a lens through which systemic risks can be examined.

A central concern raised was the question of who is ultimately "running the show" in Iran. This reflects the complexity of Iran's political system, where authority is distributed across overlapping institutions, including the office of the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and elected bodies. This layered structure complicates external assessments of intent and decision-making coherence. For outside actors, uncertainty about where ultimate authority lies increases the risk of miscalculation, particularly in

crisis situations. It also reinforces the perception that Iran's strategic behavior is resilient under pressure, as different institutional actors can absorb and adapt to external shocks.

The issue of whether Donald Trump could unilaterally "stop the war" was met with skepticism. Reno underscored that even if such claims were made, their credibility would be limited both domestically and internationally. Contemporary conflicts—especially those involving multiple state and non-state actors—are no longer susceptible to decisive, top-down political interventions. In the Gulf context, regional actors may interpret Iran's demonstrated resilience under bombardment not as a deterrent, but as a reason to sustain or even intensify pressure. This creates a counterintuitive dynamic: rather than enabling de-escalation, perceived endurance can harden threat perceptions among rivals, prompting them to seek continued U.S. engagement to further weaken Iran. In this sense, U.S. policy is not solely determined in Washington but is also shaped by the threat perceptions and strategic preferences of its regional partners, among which perhaps the role and the options preferred by Israel might be decisive.

This feeds into a broader recalibration of U.S. strategic priorities. The suggestion that Washington may no longer view Russia as its principal long-term threat, and might instead prefer to keep Moscow strategically "closer," reflects a classic balance-of-power logic. In a system increasingly defined by great-power competition, the United States may seek to prevent deeper alignment between Russia and China, even if this requires a more flexible posture toward Moscow.

The triangular dynamic between the United States, Russia, and China was therefore a key axis of the discussion. Within this context, the question of Taiwan emerged as a critical flashpoint. The assumption that the United States would automatically intervene militarily in defense of Taiwan was treated with caution. While U.S. policy has long relied on strategic ambiguity, the credibility of that commitment is increasingly debated. The feasibility of large-scale intervention—given the risks of escalation, logistical challenges, and domestic political constraints—remains uncertain. This ambiguity may shape Beijing's calculations, potentially lowering the perceived costs of attempting incorporation under favorable conditions.

However, the key variable is not only whether China acts, but how Taiwan resists. Taiwan's strategy is likely to mirror broader trends in asymmetric defense: dispersal, resilience, and the use of cost-effective technologies to complicate invasion scenarios. Yet beyond the military dimension lies a critical global concern—the island's centrality to the semiconductor industry. TSMC, as the world's leading producer of advanced chips, sits at the core of global supply chains. Control over, disruption of, or destruction of this industrial base would have far-reaching consequences for the global economy, technological innovation, and military capabilities worldwide.

This raises the provocative question discussed during the session: whether, in an extreme scenario, Taiwan or its partners might consider a form of "self-denial" strategy—ensuring that critical semiconductor infrastructure does not fall into adversarial hands. While speculative, such a scenario underscores the degree to which technology has become inseparable from geopolitics. The fate of Taiwan is therefore not only a territorial or political issue but a decisive factor in the future distribution of technological power.

These debates tie back to the broader question of the liberal international order. The uncertainty surrounding U.S. commitments, the rise of alternative power centers, and the increasing role of regional actors all point to a system in transition. Rather than a clear collapse, what is emerging is a more fragmented and contested order, where norms are unevenly applied and power is more diffusely distributed. In this environment, credibility, adaptability, and control over critical technologies may matter more than formal alliances or institutional frameworks alone.

The discussion highlighted a world in which strategic clarity is diminishing, while interdependence and risk are deepening. The key

challenge for policymakers is not only to anticipate individual crises but to understand how these interconnected dynamics—regional conflicts, great-power rivalry, and technological competition—combine to reshape the very logic of global order.

Finally, the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in warfare generated significant debate. Reno highlighted how AI is beginning to reshape decision-making across multiple domains, from tactical targeting and logistics to strategic planning. On one hand, AI-enabled systems promise greater precision and operational efficiency, potentially reducing human casualties. On the other hand, their opacity and speed introduce new risks, including unintended escalation and reduced human oversight. A key concern is that the perceived advantages of AI could lower the political threshold for initiating conflict, even as uncertainties about system behavior might simultaneously encourage caution. This duality captures the broader tension at the heart of technological transformation in warfare: innovation expands capability while simultaneously complicating control.

Conclusion

Taken together, Professor Reno's lecture and the ensuing discussion underscored a central insight: the character of warfare is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the interplay of technology, organizational adaptation, and shifting geopolitical structures. The Ukraine conflict is not an isolated case but a revealing microcosm of these broader dynamics. For policymakers and analysts—particularly in regions such as the Horn of Africa—the lessons are both cautionary and instructive. Future conflicts are likely to be shaped less by sheer military mass and more by agility, innovation, and the ability to operate effectively under conditions of uncertainty and constraint.

The CDRC high-level talk underscored that the character of warfare is undergoing a profound and multidimensional transformation. The Ukraine conflict reveals a shift away from traditional models of massed, hierarchical warfare toward a more fluid, decentralized, and technology-driven paradigm. This transformation is not merely tactical but structural, affecting how states organize their militaries, develop doctrine, and pursue strategic objectives. At the same time, the broader geopolitical environment is becoming increasingly complex, with overlapping conflicts, fragmented decision-making, and intensifying great-power competition contributing to a sense of strategic uncertainty.

For policymakers and analysts, the implications are both urgent and far-reaching. Restoring strategic coherence, adapting institutional frameworks, and investing in continuous learning will be essential to navigating this new landscape. Equally important is the need to rethink deterrence and defense in an era where cost asymmetries favor the attacker and technological change outpaces traditional planning cycles. The lessons from Ukraine suggest that future conflicts will be defined less by the size of forces and more by the ability to innovate, adapt, and operate effectively under conditions of uncertainty.

Ultimately, the lecture highlighted that war is becoming less controllable, more prolonged, and more deeply intertwined with global systems of technology and governance. The challenge for the international community is not only to respond to individual conflicts but to understand and manage the systemic transformations that underpin them.