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WHY INTER-STATE WAR WILL TAKE PLACE IN CITIES

Introduction: The Rise of Urban Warfare

Humans have always fought each other in and for cities.¹ However, a startling rise in urban conflict has been evident in the last three decades. This urban revolution first began to be noticed in the 1990s, with major battles for Mogadishu, Grozny and Sarajevo. The last two decades have only accentuated this trend. In the early twenty-first century, the longest and most intense battles have occurred in cities, not in the field.² The wars in Iraq, Syria, the Donbas, Libya and Yemen have all been predominantly fought not only for but, often, actually inside cities, as the battles of Aleppo, Mosul, and Marawi show.

Scholars and practitioners have unanimously identified two reasons for the urbanization of conflict; demography and asymmetry. In 1960, the world population was 3.5 billion of which 0.5 billion lived in cities. The current world population is 7 billion of which 3.5 billion now live in cities.³ As slums have proliferated, cities have become the site of immiseration, alienation and discontent, out of which civil conflict and insurgency have inevitably arisen.⁴ Conflict has inevitably followed the explosion

¹ Wayne Lee *Waging War: conflict, culture and innovation in world history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

² Stephen Graham *Cities under Siege: the new military urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010), 4

³ Mike Davis *Planet of the Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), 1-11.

⁴ E.g. Russell Glenn *Combat in Hell: a consideration of constrained urban warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo Centre, 1996), 2; Ralph Peters 'Our soldier, their cities' *Parameters* 26/1 (Spring 1996), 43; Gregory Ashworth, *War and the City*. (London: Routledge, 1991); Michael Desch 'Why MOUT Now?' in Desch Mike (ed) *Soldiers in Cities: military operations on urban terrain* (Carlisle PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2001); David Dilegge, Bunker, R, Sullivan, J and Keshavarz, A (eds) *Blood and Concrete: 21st century conflict in urban centers and megacities* (Xlibris, 2019); Roger Spiller *Sharp Corners: urban operations at the century's end*. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2001); David Betz and Hugh Stanford-Tuck 'The City is Neutral' *Texas National Security Review* 2/4 (2019), 60-87; Sean Edwards *Mars Unmasked: the changing face of urban operations*. (New York: Rand, 2000); Louis DiMarco *Concrete Hell: urban warfare from Stalingrad to Iraq*. (Osprey, 2012); Stephen Graham *Cities, War and Terrorism*. (London: Verso, 2000); Gian Gentile, David E. Johnson, Lisa Saum-Manning, Raphael S. Cohen, Shara Williams, Carrie Lee, Michael Shurkin, Brenna Allen, Sarah Soliman, James L. Doty III *Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations for the US Army* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo

of the urban population. In addition, scholars have also emphasized the asymmetric advantages of fighting in cities. Today cities – especially ones with rapidly growing slums – now offer insurgents the best opportunities for evasion, concealment, ambush and counter-attack against the technologically superior weaponry of state forces.⁵ The result is that insurgents have ‘come out the mountains’ or jungles.⁶ Indeed, the city offers such advantages that Frank Hoffman maintains that urban insurgency constitutes the major military challenge of the early twenty-first century.⁷ It is now all but universally accepted that conflict has migrated into cities in the early twenty-first century because of mass urbanization and the cover which dense urban terrain offers to insurgents.

It is right to concentrate on demography and asymmetry; these variables are plainly necessary to any explanation of urban warfare. Moreover, in the case of insurgency and civil conflict, which has been the understandable focus of most recent scholarship, they work extremely well. However, the current literature raises important additional questions: Will inter-state war also take place in cities? It is, indeed, highly likely that states will fight each other in cities, if they go to war. However, against the current consensus, it necessary to go beyond the demographic and asymmetric arguments that have, up to this point, dominated the debate. Inter-state urban warfare is also likely to migrate to cities not just because of demography or asymmetry but also substantially because of the reduction in the size of armies

Centre 2013), iii, 8-9; Michael Evans *City without Joy: military operations in the 21st century* (Canberra: Australian Defence College Occasional Series No.2, 2007), 14; Mary Kaldor *New and Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Mary Kaldor and Saskia Sassen ‘Introduction’ in *Cities at War* (New York: Columbia University Press), p.2.

⁵ Michael Evans *City without Joy: military operations in the 21st century* (Canberra: Australian Defence College Occasional Series No.2, 2007), 14; Davud Kilcullen *Out of the Mountains* ((London: Hurst and Company, 2013), 74, 76

⁶ Kilcullen *Out of the Mountains*, 74, 76.

⁷ Frank Hoffman, ‘Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next Revolution in Military Affairs’, *Orbis: a Journal of World Affairs* 50/3 (Summer 2006), 395–411; See also Michael Evans *City without Joy*.

themselves. Perhaps, because force size seems so banal, its potential significance to inter-state urban warfare has been ignored. Yet, the size of armies has always played an important role in defining the character of warfare historically. Force size is no less significant now especially as most state forces have contracted drastically. This article focuses solely on force size. It explores the correlation between the contraction of state forces and the rise of urban warfare. It proposes that the reduction of state forces has increased the chances that opposing armies are increasingly likely to converge on urban areas because that is where the decisive strategic and operational objectives are located.⁸ Of course, size cannot explain every aspect of twenty-first century urban warfare. However, by highlighting the issue of force size, it may be possible to reach at least a more comprehensive understanding of urban warfare in the twenty-first century – and its future trajectory.

In order to explore this thesis, the article compares twentieth and twenty-first century examples of inter-state warfare. It describes the lineal character of land warfare in the twentieth century by reference to the Battle of Stalingrad Campaign before demonstrating how operational geometries have changed in the twenty-first century through a discussion of the Iraq Invasion of 2003 (counterposed against the Gulf War of 1991) and the Donbas conflict. It tests thesis that the reduction of state force by considering a contrary case, namely Korea. Finally, it concludes with a brief analysis of the most recent inter-state war, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which seems to affirm the claims that reduced forces have altered the geometry of campaigns and increased the chances of urban battles.

⁸ For a longer discussion of this argument, including how numbers may also have played into the rise of urban insurgencies, see Anthony King *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021)

The Limitations of the Demographic and Asymmetric Arguments for Explaining Inter-State War

The existing scholarship on urban warfare has focused on civil conflict, the proliferation of which is explained by reference to two master variables: demography, supported by asymmetry. However, many scholars seem to believe that inter-state warfare will also migrate to cities for the same reasons. They presume that because cities have become so large, inter-state war will also occur in urban areas, just as civil conflicts have.⁹ For instance, although her work is on civil conflicts, Alice Hills slides into a discussion of inter-state warfare which she seems to think is also very likely.¹⁰ Yet, she appeals to no other variables to explain its increased likelihood. Similarly, while his book is about the urban guerrilla, David Kilcullen discusses Royal Marines' 3 Commando Brigade on the Al Faw Peninsula in March 2003 in the opening phase of the Iraq invasion as evidence of contemporary urban operations and their increased probability. Yet, this action was a conventional operation against the Iraqi Army.¹¹ Like Hills, he never mentions any other variables except demography and asymmetry to explain why state force will also be drawn into cities against each other. In his recent work on the history of the US Army's urban battles, Alec Wahlman also affirms these two variables as a sufficient explanation of all forms of urban warfare, both civil and inter-state. He analyses the battles of Aachen, Manila, Seoul and Hué to demonstrate this.¹² Yet, in each case, including Hué, these were battles between state forces – not insurgents. There is an accidental elision of civil conflict and inter-state

⁹ Alice Hills *Future Wars in Cities* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), pp.142, 233; Kilcullen *Out of the Mountains*, p.277; Wahlman *Storming the City*, pp.1-2.

¹⁰ Hills *Future Wars in Cities*, p.142. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Kilcullen *Out of the Mountains*, p.277.

¹² Wahlman *Storming the City*, pp.1-2.

war in the literature. These scholars presume that the causal variables operate in the same way in the cases of both inter-state war and civil conflict.

Of course, demographics must play some role in urban warfare. Without dense human settlements, there can *ipso facto* be no urban warfare. It is also possible that in some theatres, the urban sprawl is so extensive that it will be very difficult for massive state forces to avoid urban fighting. Certainly, some scholars, especially when discussing megacities, have implied this.¹³ Yet, even in western Europe, one of the most densely urbanized parts of the planet, there are still large open areas in which opposing forces might meet. Other theatres are not particularly urbanized at all. The sheer physical extension of cities will not always compel states to fight each other in cities.

The demographic argument is not simply numeric; it also emphasizes the immiseration of the urban poor as a key condition for urban conflict. This is surely correct for civil conflict. Yet, the condition of the urban population – so vital to civil conflict - fails to explain why state forces would necessarily be forced into cities when they were fighting each other. In inter-state warfare, the material conditions of the urban population are operationally secondary. Indeed, the people are often quite irrelevant. In an inter-state war, forces do not seek to control or secure the civilian population in the first instance, still less to earn the consent of the people, but only to defeat each other. If the immediate defeat of the opposing force is paramount, why would state forces necessarily converge on urban population centres, especially since they are so difficult to operate in? The population is likely only to be a hindrance. Would they not prefer to engage each other in the field, where they can exploit full

¹³ Chief of Staff of the Army, *Megacities and the US Army* (June 2014), 4; Kevin Felix and Frederick Wong 'The Case for Megacities' *Parameters* 45/1 (Spring 2015): 19-32; William Adamson 'Megacities and the US Army,' *Parameters*, 45/1, (Spring 2015), 45-54.

range of their weapons? Indeed, most state forces actively want to avoid fighting in cities for precisely this reason. Demography may be a necessary condition for explaining inter-state urban warfare, but it is not a sufficient one.

There are equivalent problems with the asymmetric argument when it comes to inter-state warfare. No one would deny the defensive advantages of fighting in cities. Just like insurgents, the armed forces are also well aware of the potential benefits of protecting themselves in urban areas, especially since air and artillery strikes have become increasingly lethal.¹⁴ Yet, while advanced precision weaponry might theoretically recommend cities for defence, urban areas have some disadvantages too. They are not as immediately convenient for large state forces as they are for insurgents; it is difficult for armies to move in and out of them in large formations or to fire artillery, especially rocket systems, from them. They cannot move or hide nearly so easily as small insurgent bands. The population are also a potential incumbrance to a large conventional force rather than a support, as they are for guerrillas. Moreover, if they are on the defensive, field fortifications might work just as well. The Republic of Korea, for instance, has built massive defensive works south of the DMZ, not in Seoul. Advanced weaponry might recommend that state forces take refuge in cities but, in the case of conventional armies, it does not alone determine that they should or that they will. Their situation is different to those of insurgents for whom the urban environment is more immediately appropriate.

There is an anomaly in the literature, then. Scholars assume that inter-state warfare is urbanizing but the key variables (demography and asymmetry) they invoke, developed from civil conflicts, are insufficient to explain its rise. The problem here seems to be that, fixated on counter-insurgency and civil war, scholars have focused

¹⁴ Matlary and Heier *Ukraine and Beyond*, p.164.

exclusively on social, demographic and political factors: on the size of cities and the condition of their populations. They have, consequently, overlooked the armed forces themselves. This is strange since, of course, the armed forces do the fighting; their weaponry, tactics and posture have always substantially determined the conduct of war historically and are no less important now. It is time to redress the balance and to consider military forces as a significant variable in and of themselves for explaining urban warfare.

There are many ways of doing this. Clearly, weaponry is vitally important in understanding urban warfare. Drones and precision weaponry have allowed state forces to develop new tactics and methods in the urban battle.¹⁵ Artificial intelligence and autonomous weapons are likely to have an impact in the next decade.¹⁶ Weaponry is certainly vital in the urban battle and should be the focus of investigation. However, in order to understand the immediate prospects of inter-state urban warfare, rather than its character, another important dimension of military forces may be more important: size. The brute size of military forces has been almost entirely omitted from contemporary discussions of urban warfare.¹⁷ This article seeks to rectify that oversight.

¹⁵ David Johnson, Wade Markel, M, Brian Shannon, *The 2008 Battle for Sadr City: Reimagining Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2013); Peter Singer *Wired for War: the robotics revolution and conflict in the twenty-first century* (London: Penguin 2009); Michael Boyle *The Drone Age: how technology will change war and peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); David Hambling *Swarm Troopers* (Swarm Troopers: 2015).

¹⁶ See Kenneth Payne *I, Warbot* (London: Hurst and Co, 2022); Christian Brose *The Kill Chain* (London: Hatchette, 2020).

¹⁷ This factor has fleetingly been acknowledged in the literature but it has never been systematically investigated: See Stephen Graham *Cities under Siege*, 162; Saskia Sassen 'When the City itself becomes a technology of war' *Theory, Culture and Society* 27/6 (2010), 37; Warfare Branch, Headquarters Field Army *Operations in the Urban Environment*. (Warminster: Land Warfare Centre, 2018), 13.

Force Size

Force size has, of course, long been recognized as an important determinant of war. For instance, at the beginning of his celebrated work on politics and military history, Hans Delbrück, asserted that the best starting point for the analysis of warfare was always the size of military forces. ‘Wherever the sources permit, a military-historical study does best to start with the army strengths... Without a definite concept of the size of the armies, therefore, a critical treatment of the historical accounts, as of the events themselves, is impossible’.¹⁸ Of course, Delbrück’s four volume work on military history is not a quantitative study of armies; it is a critical study of military operations, their political purposes and effects. Yet, throughout the study, he uses numbers to demolish specious claims in the historiography.

Delbrück’s analysis is highly perceptive. However, he does not specifically discuss the relationship between force numbers and urban combat. Indeed, in a four volume work on the history of warfare from antiquity to the end of the nineteenth century, Delbrück hardly discusses siege and urban warfare at all. In order to appreciate the correlation between force size and urban combat, it is necessary to turn to the work of other military historians. Christopher Duffy is immediately relevant here. In his seminal analysis of the early modern fortress, he has explicitly highlighted the relationship between forces sizes and urban warfare. Duffy has shown how the *Trace Italienne* was developed in response to the rise of artillery and how these forts, in turn, changed the character of both states and armies at that time. From 1500 to the mid-eighteenth century, the fortress and the siege played a critical role in military operations. Indeed, it might even be claimed that the siege – not the battle – was the

¹⁸ Hans Delbrück *History of the Art of War within a Political Frame* (London: Greenwood Press, 1975), 33.

defining characteristic of warfare at this time. Armies at this time could not ignore fortresses or fortified cities because the garrisons within them could easily attack their lines of communication. Armies in the early modern period were therefore forced to take fortresses on their line of march before advancing deeper into enemy territory. However, Duffy notes that there was a decline in siege warfare in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Crucially, this decline had little to do with improvements in armaments. Although new methods of forging artillery were discovered, that facilitated the production of lighter field guns, their ballistic capabilities were not radically changed, especially in the case of siege guns.¹⁹ Early modern fortifications were, consequently, preserved until the 1850s. The decisive factor in the decline of siege warfare in the late eighteenth century was organisational. From the middle of the eighteenth century and, especially, during the Revolutionary wars, armies grew prodigiously. Napoleon's *Grande Armée* of 1812 consisted of one million men; but his opponents also began to expand their forces in response.²⁰ The implications for early modern fortification were profound: 'Fortresses were predominant because, according to a rough rule of thumb, we find the smaller the forces engaged on a theatre of war, the more importance attaches to the available strongpoints'.²¹ As armies grew in size at the end of the Age of Enlightenment, they were able to bypass fortresses or fortified towns. The garrisons within which were simply too small to threaten them or their lines of communication, as they had earlier in the century. Fortresses and fortified cities could

¹⁹ William McNeill *The Pursuit of Power: technology, armed force and society since AD 1000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

²⁰ Michael Howard *War in the European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²¹ Christopher Duffy *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1660-1789*, Volume II, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 292. Duffy may have derived this thesis from the writings of the Austrian Archduke Charles who in his writings of 1836 similarly claimed that 'this delusion [about the importance of fortifications] dissipated as armies grew in numbers', Beatrice Heuser *The Evolution of Strategy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 80.

be enveloped or simply covered by increasingly large hosts.²² Precisely because armies were so large it was also easier for them – or for parts of them – to take fortresses and cities. Written in response to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic War, Clausewitz’s *On War* demonstrates this shift very clearly. It is striking that while Clausewitz wrote an entire Book on the ‘Engagement’ (battle), he devoted only three chapters of *On War* to fortresses and, none specifically, to cities and siege warfare; eleven pages of a six-hundred page treatise.²³

Duffy suggests that the operational significance of urban warfare in the early modern period was dependent on the size of armies. This is a deeply significant claim. If the early modern period is taken as indicative, it is possible to propose a wider hypothesis about urban warfare. In any historical era, the smaller the armies, the more important fortresses and cities become; sieges and urban warfare attain priority as military forces contract. By contrast, the larger the armies, the more likely that open warfare in the field will predominate over siege-craft. As forces expand, cities become less operationally significant. The frequency of urban warfare is, therefore, a function of the size of military forces.

The Decline of Mass Armies

Duffy’s thesis is particularly pertinent to the question of inter-state urban combat in the early twenty-first century because military forces are smaller now than they have been for centuries. In the last half century and, especially the last thirty years, large, state forces have all but disappeared; the mass citizen army, which was the norm during the twentieth century has been displaced by smaller all-volunteer forces.

²² Jeremy Black *Fortifications and Siegecraft* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 236.

²³ Carl von Clausewitz *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Book Six Chapters 10 and 11, ‘Fortresses’ and ‘Fortresses – Continued’ and Book Seven Chapter 17 ‘Attack on Fortresses’.

Military scholars began to note this important transformation of western armed forces in the 1970s. At that point, some western forces had already begun to abolish conscription²⁴ Following the Cold War, conscription and the mass army became increasingly obsolete, so that by the second decade of the twenty-first century, all major western powers had abolished national service. As a result, western forces have declined to about half or a third of their Cold War size [see Table 1]. After the end of the Cold War, the US Army, for instance, contracted from 700,000 to 481,000 and is set to contract further. It is true that some European countries, such as Sweden, have recently reintroduced limited conscription but these selective drafts in no way reverse the general trend.

American and European commentators have often worried about this reduction of state forces. Yet, in fact, the trend is global. It is evident among the west's rival states. China and Russia have displayed the same pattern. Indeed, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's army is now proportionately far smaller than its western rivals. In 1991, the Soviet Army consisted of 1.4 million active soldiers and a reserve of a further 4 million. Today, the Russian Army fields 280,000 personnel; it is approximately 20 per cent of its Cold War size. It is true that the North Korean and Iranian Armies have grown somewhat in the same period. The Israeli and Indian armies have remained about the same size: 120,000 and 1.2 million strong. However, in every case, relative to their populations, armies have shrunk everywhere.

About Here

²⁴ E.g. Karl Haltiner 'The Definite End of the Mass Army in Western Europe?' *Armed Forces and Society* 25/1 (1998), 7-36.

Table 1. Army Active Service Personnel: western, allied and rival powers²⁵

If Duffy's thesis is correct, then the reduction of force size and, therefore, combat densities on the battlefield, should be expected in and of itself to increase urban fighting in inter-state warfare. On his thesis, reduced forces necessarily converge on cities and towns.

Fronts: twentieth century warfare

In order to understand the significance of the declining force sizes to the future of urban combat, it is useful to consider the twentieth century, as a comparator and contrast. Urban warfare was, of course, by no means irrelevant during this period. In the First and Second World Wars, armies sometimes fought directly for possession of major and capital cities such Leningrad, Moscow, Stalingrad, Manila, and Berlin and a host of smaller towns like Aachen, Aschaffenburg, Groningen and Ortona. The grand strategic aim of belligerents in both wars was to defeat their opponents' field armies and to occupy their opponent's capital. Cities were typically the operational and strategic objectives and, sometimes, serious fighting took place in them.²⁶

However, throughout the twentieth century, armies were so big, they campaigned in the field. In the First World War, Russia, France, Germany, Britain, and the United States raised armies of, respectively, 12 million, 8 million, 11 million, 8 million, and 1 million. In the Second World War, they fielded armies of 12 million, 5 million, 10 million, 4 million, and 8 million; the Japanese Imperial Army consisted

²⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies *The Military Balance 1991*; International Institute for Strategic Studies *The Military Balance 2019*.

²⁶ S.L.A. Marshall 'Notes on Urban Warfare' Army Material Systems Analysis Agency, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland April 1973, 8-11.

of 6 million soldiers. In each campaign, mass citizen armies formed fronts. There were three reasons for this. Fronts allowed armies to bring all their combat power to bear. It was necessary for armies to form fronts in order to avoid being outflanked by the huge hosts which opposed them. Finally, but no less importantly, mass armies could be supported logistically, only if they deployed on fronts supported by a large rail and road system to their rear. Because mass twentieth century armies gathered on large fronts, they predominantly fought for cities, outside them in the field.

Perhaps the best example of the topography of twentieth century warfare is provided by the most famous urban battle of the Second World War: Stalingrad. Stalingrad has rightly fascinated and appalled military historians. Not only was it one of the bitterest and most brutal engagements of the War but it is plausibly held as the turning point of the entire conflict. Much of the historiography of Stalingrad has focused on the intense urban combat between August and November 1942. This is totally understandable. The fighting inside the city was among the most intense in the Second World War. It was the first time that mass western armies, fully equipped with modern weaponry of machine-guns, tanks, artillery and airpower, had been involved in a sustained battle inside a city.

Stalingrad has been taken as an ideal example of modern urban warfare then. At the tactical level, this may be true. Yet, Stalingrad campaign also exemplified the lineal geometry of twentieth century warfare. While they were the most intense and important actions, Sixth Army's operations in Stalingrad were only part of much wider a German Army campaign on this front. Sixth Army was part of the Wehrmacht's re-designated Army Group B (formerly Army Group South) which orchestrated a wide-ranging campaign across a front, hundreds of miles north and south of Stalingrad. Stalingrad itself was not a particularly large city; in July 1941 it

had a population of 900,000, covering an area of less than 100 square miles.²⁷

Consequently, most of the Wehrmacht's Army Group B, which consisted of the Fourth Hungarian, Third Rumanian, Fourth Rumanian, Eighth Italian, Fourth Panzer, Second and Sixth Armies (1.5 million men), was deployed not into Stalingrad, but into the field around it.²⁸ Army Group B comprised some seventy-four divisions in total, of which only the twenty-four divisions of the Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army were ever committed to the fight in and around Stalingrad itself. The rest were deployed on the Russian steppes.²⁹

The Sixth Army was responsible for taking the city itself. It consisted of seventy divisions organised into four corps.³⁰ Even at the climax of the battle in November 1942 during the assault on the Barrikady and Red October factories, only LI Army Corps' eight divisions (389 Infantry, 305 Infantry, 14 Panzer, 79 Infantry, 100 Jäger, 295 Infantry, 24 Panzer and 71 Infantry) were directly committed to urban combat, while the other divisions were deployed well outside the city defending German lines north of the city.³¹ The Red Army's deployment was similar. Only the Sixty-Second Army under General Vasili Chuikov fought in the city itself. In the course of the battle, Chuikov commanded thirteen divisions and some additional brigades; it was a very large force but only about fifteen per cent of the Red Army's forces in the theatre.³² Eight Soviet Armies, consisting of over sixty divisions, eventually executed Operation Uranus in November 1942, encircling the Sixth Army.

²⁷ S.J Lewis 'The Battle of Stalingrad' in William Robertson (ed.) *Block by Block: the challenges of urban operations* (Ft Leavenworth, KA: US Army Command and General Staff College Press), 30.

²⁸ David Glantz with Jonathan House *The Stalingrad Trilogy, Volume 2: Armageddon in Stalingrad: September-November 1942*. (Lawrence, KA. University of Kansas Press, 2009).

²⁹ S.J Lewis 'The Battle of Stalingrad', 31.

³⁰ Glantz *The Stalingrad Trilogy*, 33, 719-720; Antony Beevor *Stalingrad* (London: Penguin 1999), 433-5.

³¹ Glantz *The Stalingrad Trilogy*, 609; Beevor *Stalingrad*, 242-3; S.J Lewis 'The Battle of Stalingrad'.

³² Beevor *Stalingrad*, 435-7.

While the most intense fighting certainly took place in Stalingrad itself where combat forces were most highly concentrated, the majority of German and Soviet troops were never deployed into the city. On the contrary, the battle at Stalingrad was part of a larger campaign fought along a front in the field. It might be thought that Stalingrad was unique. Yet, this would be wrong. Allied campaigns in this period such as in Normandy assumed a similar geometry where a front developed around Caen.³³ Indeed, the topography evident during the Stalingrad campaign pertained for most of the twentieth century. As Mearsheimer complained³⁴, NATO and the Warsaw Pact prepared themselves for a lineal campaign in the field along the Inner German border to the very end of the late Cold War – instead of fighting from inside urban areas.³⁵

It is noticeable that military doctrine throughout the twentieth century typically recommended that armies avoid fighting in cities.³⁶ This has often been interpreted today as evidence of the unique difficulty of fighting in cities both then and now. This is not a complete misreading of military doctrine; urban fighting was demanding and was recognised as such. However, in fact, twentieth century military doctrine recommended avoiding cities, not primarily because they were so much more impenetrable than field defences; the Western Front in the First World War showed how formidable field fortifications could be. Rather, urban fighting was to be avoided because, with mass armies deployed, the main element of the enemy's force was almost certainly to be found in the field – not in the town. It was, therefore, a mistake to commit forces to attacking a town, when the centre of gravity was elsewhere. This

³³ Alexander McKee *Caen: anvil of victory* (London: Souvenir, 1984), 247.

³⁴ John Mearsheimer 'Maneuver, Mobile Defence and the NATO Central Front' *International Security* 6/3 (Fall 1982), 104-122; John Mearsheimer 'Why the Soviets Can't Win Quickly in Central Europe' *International Security* 7/1 (Summer 1982), 3-39.

³⁵ For longer discussion of urban warfare in twentieth century, see King *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, 28-32.

³⁶ E.g. The Army Field Manual, Volume IV, Part 5, *Fighting in Built-up Areas*, 1-2.

is why commanders were warned against it: ‘Tactical doctrine stresses that urban combat operations are conducted only when required and that built-up areas are isolated and bypassed rather than risking, costly, time-consuming operations in this difficult environment’.³⁷ Commanders often followed the advice. It was noticeable at Aachen in 1945, for instance, the US Army’s VII Corps assigned only two battalions to the clearance of the city, while concentrating its forces, along with those of XIX Corps, further to east of the city against the main element of the German Army on the Siegfried Line.³⁸ In the Philippines, the Japanese Army did not think that Manila should be defended at all and sought to defeat the American forces in the jungle outside it.³⁹ At Stalingrad, German commanders egregiously forgot the injunction; they concentrated on the battle in the city, ignoring the wider front – with disastrous results.

The twentieth century seems to confirm Duffy’s thesis. From 1914 to 1991, a correlation between force numbers and inter-state urban warfare was observable. The mass armies of this era were so large that they formed fronts which encompassed cities and urban areas. Sometimes armies conducted urban battles but, precisely because of their immense size, most major confrontations took place in the field where combatants could deploy their full combat power against each other. Urban warfare was the subordinate form of operation.

³⁷ Field Manual 90-10, *Military Operations on Urban Terrain* (Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1979), 1-1.

³⁸ Christopher R. Gabel ‘“Knock ‘em all down”: the reduction of Aachen, October 1944’ in William Robertson(ed.) *Block by Block*. (Ft Leavenworth, KS: US ACGS College Press, 2003), 60-90.

³⁹ Kevin Benson ‘Manila, 1945, in John Antal and Bradley Gericke, *City Fights: selected histories of urban combat from World War II to Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 230-50.

Converging on Cities: twenty-first century warfare

In order to test this hypothesis about reduced forces sizes and the rise of high-intensity urban warfare, empirical evidence is plainly necessary. However, unlike the twentieth century, examples of inter-state urban warfare are relatively sparse in the twenty-first century. Although security forces have been committed to many urban or urbanized operations for the last two decades and more, inter-state wars have, therefore, been rarer. Moreover, most inter-state war since the end of the Cold War have involved limited border disputes such as the Kargil War of 1999 or the Sino-Indian conflict in Ladakh in 2020. The Eritrean-Ethiopian War (1998-2000) was a major conflict but it also took place in border areas; these conflicts have therefore necessarily taken place in remoter regions. So, in terms of the urban question, the sample is relatively restricted in comparison. Moreover, those inter-state wars which have involved urban operations are not evidentially optimal. The recent Nagorno-Karabakh War is important here; it was an inter-state war fought with advanced weapons for a large tract of land and will be discussed in the conclusion. However, the US Invasion of Iraq in 2003 is the only example when an advanced western power was engaged in an inter-state war this century. So, it has to be part of the sample. Yet, the Americans fought a very weak Iraqi army in 2003; it was a mismatch which lasted only three weeks. American forces enjoyed a freedom of manoeuvre which they would certainly not be accorded against a peer. So great care needs to be taken in extrapolating from it. However, while not ideal in itself, the Iraq Invasion becomes instructive when it is compared with the preceding Gulf War. In the analysis which follows, I will try to highlight the significance of force size and urban warfare by comparing the two wars, one from the twentieth and one from the twenty-first

century. I will then go onto to discuss the Donbas Conflict, even though that too is not an optimal example.

Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Iraq Invasion

Following Donald Rumsfeld's imperatives about the 'Afghan model', the US-led coalition into Iraq in 2003 was small.⁴⁰ The total coalition force consisted of 300,000 personnel, with 190,000 Americans, but the invasion force was much smaller, 143,000 troops.⁴¹ The Land Component consisted of five divisions (four American and one British). The US forces advanced on Baghdad on two parallel axes, 3rd Infantry Division in the west, 1st Marine Division in the east; the other three divisions (101st Airborne, 82nd Airborne and 1 UK Divisions) played supporting roles, mainly clearing and holding the lines of communication in the south.

The Iraqi Army was similarly diminished. In 2003, the Iraqi Army consisted of 375,000 troops: seventeen Regular Divisions, six Republican Guards Divisions and one Special Republican Guard Division. Yet, most of these formations played no part in the invasion. The Coalition eventually engaged a force of only four divisions, consisting of 12,000 Special Iraqi Republican Guards, 70,000 Republican Guards, supported by 15-25,000 Fedayeen fighters and the Secret Service: about 112,000 in total. The Iraq Army deployed in idiosyncratically.⁴² Much of Saddam's force was deployed in the north or east against the Kurds and Iraq. Saddam deployed his best Republican Guard and the Republican Special Guard divisions to the south of

⁴⁰ Andres, Rick, Wills, Craig and Griffith, Thomas, 'Winning the Allies: the strategic value of the Afghan Model' *International Security* 30/3 (2005/6),124-160; Biddle, Steven, 'Allies, Airpower and Modern Warfare: the Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq' *International Security* 30/3 (2005/6),161-76.

⁴¹ Andrew Cordesman *The Iraq War: strategy, tactics and military lessons*. (London: Praeger, 2003), 130; Kenneth Estes *Marine Corps Operations in Iraq 2003-2006* (Quantico: VA: USMC History Division).

⁴² Walter L. Perry, Richard E. Darilek, Laurinda L. Rohn, Jerry M. Sollinger (eds) *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND), 205.

Baghdad, with a view to defending the city in a series of blocking positions outside it.⁴³ In the end, these divisions fought very poorly. They suffered disastrous desertions before they were even engaged and were easily targeted by US air forces, once the war started.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Saddam deployed only the Ba'ath Party and Fedayeen into his cities, primarily to shore up his own regime, though, in the end, they did most of the fighting. The Feyadeen repeatedly left urban areas to fight the US advance in the open.⁴⁵ They unsuccessfully ambushed 1st Marine Division outside Al Kut and Diwalya, for instance.

The Americans, by contrast, were worried that Saddam would turn his cities into fortresses.⁴⁶ Consequently, the scale of urban fighting could – and perhaps should - have been much greater in 2003 had Saddam deployed his heavy forces into urban areas and had the Feyadeen always chosen to stay there. As Stephen Biddle noted: ‘perhaps the most serious Iraqi shortcoming was the systematic failure to exploit the military potential terrain’.⁴⁷ Indeed, Iraq officers were bizarrely opposed to urban fighting: ‘Why would anyone fight in a city?’⁴⁸ Nevertheless, despite the strange deployment of the Iraqi Army and the odd attitude of its commanders, combat still concentrated on urban areas. There was only one noteworthy encounter battle in the field: the fight at al-Kaed Bridge (Objective Peach) on 2-3 April 2003 in which 3-69 Armor inflicted a crushing defeat on a large Iraqi force.⁴⁹ The battle of Al-Kaed bridge notwithstanding, the major engagements occurred in An Nasariyah, An Najaf, Samaweh and Baghdad. An Nasariyah was the site of a major battle because two

⁴³ Perry *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 205.

⁴⁴ Perry *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 205.

⁴⁵ Perry *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 205.

⁴⁶ Perry *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 205.

⁴⁷ Stephen Biddle ‘Speed Kills: reassessing the role of speed, precision and situation awareness in the Fall of Saddam’ *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/1(2007), 27.

⁴⁸ Biddle ‘Speed Kill’s, 29.

⁴⁹ Perry *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 90-93.

crucial bridges over the Euphrates River and a canal on Highway 7 were located there; the bridges were strategic choke points on the American line of advance. 11th Iraqi Infantry Division, supported by Fedayeen fighters, put up a formidable defense in the city on the 23 and 24 March 2003. The Iraqi Division in the city ambushed 507th Maintenance Regiment, capturing Private Jessica Lynch, and, then, attacked the US Marine Corps' Task Force Tarawa along the road leading to the northern bridge, which became aptly known as 'Ambush Alley'.⁵⁰ The battle for An Nasariyah was the costliest action in the whole campaign for the US; eighteen US Marines were killed in the course of the fighting.⁵¹

Later, 101st Airborne mounted a major assault to clear An Najaf, while 82nd secured Samawah; 1 UK Division seized Basra. In each case, these urban attacks were the largest ground combat operations in which the formations were involved. Finally, 3rd Infantry Division experienced its most intense combat when it eventually reached Baghdad during its famous Thunder Runs into the city.⁵² The most intense fighting in the Iraq Invasion of 2003 took place in cities then – not the field.

How do we explain the relative frequency and the heaviness of urban fighting during the invasion? Demography was plainly not irrelevant. An Nasariyah, An Najaf, Samawah and Baghdad each had large populations, of respectively 300,000, 400,000, 200,000 and 4.5 million.⁵³ Because the objective was Baghdad, the US forces had to advance through these urban areas in order to defeat the Iraqi Army and bring down

⁵⁰ Perry et al. *Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 66-78; G Fontenot, E Degen and D Tohn *On Point: the US Army in Operational Iraqi Freedom* (Ft Leavenworth, KA: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 89; Gary Livingstone *An Nasariyah: the fight for the bridges* (Independent, 2017); Ray Smith and Bing West *The March Up* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 31-48; U.S. Marines in Battle *The Battle of An-Nasiriyah, Iraq and An-Nasiriyah on the Eve of War - March 23 to April 2, 2003, Task Force Tarawa, PFC Jessica Lynch, Ambush Alley*.

⁵¹ Tim Pritchard *Ambush Alley* (California: Presidio 2007), 189

⁵² David Zucchino *Thunder Run* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004)

⁵³ <http://www.geonames.org/IQ/largest-cities-in-iraq.html>

the regime. It was, therefore, highly likely that there would be extensive urban fighting in 2003, especially since they offered the best defensive positions.

Yet, is this a sufficient explanation? In the twentieth century and especially in north west Europe in the Second World War, armies often fought in theatres which were quite heavily urbanized and, yet, the major battles still typically took place in the field. In the Iraq War, it would have been theoretically possible for US Army and Marine divisions to have met each other in the field, as they did at Al-Kaed, especially since Saddam mainly deployed his armies to fight outside cities. Nevertheless, the heaviest fighting still occurred in the cities. Demography may have been a necessary variable but it was not a sufficient one. At this point, it is useful to consider force numbers. In particular, it seems plausible to claim that because neither side had sufficient combat forces to form major fronts in southern or central Iraq in 2003, the fighting necessarily congregated in urban areas. Lacking mass, Iraqi and American forces converged on decisive operational locations: roads, bridges, facilities, and, finally, the centres of power. These decisive points were typically located in urban areas which, then, became the foci of combat. Iraqi forces defended these points inside cities, and American had to attack them there.

Operation Desert Storm: a comparison

The suggestion that reduced force numbers drove Iraqi and American forces into urban areas is only a thesis at this point. In order to test the significance of force numbers in 2003, some further argumentation is required. At this point, it is instructive to compare Iraqi Freedom with Desert Storm, the Gulf War of 1991. That conflict is a good comparator because Desert Storm was also an inter-state war, in which an American-led Coalition fought the same opponent over some of the same

terrain, with much the same weaponry, the Revolution of Military Affairs in the 1990s notwithstanding.⁵⁴ There were also some similarities between the strategic goals of both wars. In 1991, the US-led Coalition invaded Kuwait in order to defeat the Iraqi Army and drive Saddam out; Kuwait City was the strategic objective. In 2003, the US-led Coalition invaded Iraq to defeat the Iraqi Army thereby destroying Saddam's regime; Baghdad was the strategic goal. Of course, there were obvious political and important operational differences between the campaigns. Kuwait City was only 100 miles from Coalition lines in Saudi Arabia at the start of the war, while Baghdad was over 300 miles from the Kuwaiti border. In 2003, the battlefield was substantially extended. Yet, operational differences notwithstanding, the geometries of both wars were strikingly different. In 2003, the Americans fought substantially in towns and cities; in 1991, they fought exclusively in the desert. Why?

Most scholars would simply repeat the claim that demographic differences provide a sufficient explanation; Iraq was more heavily urbanized than Kuwait and, therefore, more of the fighting took place in towns and cities in 2003 than it did in 1991. Yet, although it has always been taken as self-evident, the lack of urban fighting in the 1991 Gulf War is actually anomalous. On the basis of demography, significant urban fighting might have been expected. After all, in 1991, Kuwait was not without towns or cities. On the contrary, Kuwait's coastline was heavily urbanised; Kuwait City had a population of 1.5 million surrounded by a series of suburban towns, such as Mangaf, Abu'tfeira or Al Jafrah. It might be thought that it would be almost impossible to avoid urban warfare in this war, especially since

⁵⁴ By 2003, the US Army and Marine Corps had benefited from the Revolution in Military Affairs. Some formations had digital communications and there was a proliferation of precision munitions. However, the weaponry which the US and Iraqi forces employed was closely compatible with the Gulf War. The invasion relied on four of the 'big five' Army procurements of the 1980s: the M2 Bradley fighting vehicle, the M1 Abrams tanks, the Apache Attack Helicopter, and the Black Hawk helicopter.

Kuwait City, the strategic objective, was only a hundred miles from the Saudi border, where the Coalition forces were deployed. Yet, the only urban battle, a small engagement, took place in Khafji, in Saudi, when Iraqi – not Coalition - forces raided across the border before the major ground operations began.⁵⁵

Demography alone is not that helpful in explaining the topography of the Gulf War, then. By contrast, force size begins to account for why coalition and Iraqi forces fought in the desert – not in urban areas - in 1991. For Operation Desert Storm, the US Army deployed 700,000 troops as part of a multinational coalition of 900,000.⁵⁶ The coalition ground force comprised 400,000 soldiers: sixteen divisions. Iraq also deployed a huge force: forty-two divisions, approximately 800,000 troops, in all.⁵⁷ Saddam deployed his 11th Division around Kuwait City but the rest of his force was positioned along the borders of Kuwait and Iraq to form a continuous front of about 350 miles. Saddam’s deployment once again requires some explanation. A number of factors influenced him. He wanted to defend not just Kuwait City but the whole of Kuwait. This could be accomplished only by positioning his forces on the border. In addition, following his experiences in the Iran-Iraq War, he presumed that his forces would be best able to stop the US-led coalition in the desert, where he could bring their full combat power to bear. Indeed, he boasted that his deployment would generate ‘the mother of all battles’.⁵⁸ Of course, Saddam disastrously underestimated American air power.

At this point, though, the role of forces sizes in generating the distinctive geometries of the two wars becomes apparent. In 1991, the massive size of Iraqi and

⁵⁵ Dewar *Fighting in the Streets*, 81-4.

⁵⁶ Toomey, Charles Lane *XVIII Airborne Corps in Desert Storm: from planning to victory* (Central Point, Or: Hellgate 2004).

⁵⁷ G Fontenot, E Degen and D Tohn *On Point: the US Army in Operational Iraqi Freedom* (Ft Leavenworth, KA: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 100.

⁵⁸ Kevin Wood *The Mother of All Battles* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008)

Coalition forces recommended, even demanded, a lineal deployment along a front. They could not fight effectively or support themselves without deploying across a wide area. Their mutual disposition along a wide front was a function of their size. Consequently, because they had deployed on a front, once the brief ground war started ‘the battles and engagements of the first Gulf War were set-piece battles, reflective of World War II European combat’; the forces engaged in the field along this front.⁵⁹ The most famous encounters, the Battles of 73 Easting and Objective Norfolk, for instance, occurred in the desert miles from any human settlement.⁶⁰ In 1991, even though there was significant demographic potential for urban combat in Kuwait City and its suburbs, the belligerents fought each other exclusively in the open desert, very substantially because of their mass.

In order to confirm this correlation between force size and urban warfare and to highlight why the geometries of the two wars was so different, it may be useful to consider the Gulf War counterfactually. How might the Gulf War of 1991 have been fought if the US-led Coalition and Saddam Hussein had only deployed the forces available in 2003? If Saddam Hussein had defended Kuwait in 1991 with four divisions and some Fedayeen fighters, and the Coalition had attacked with five divisions, the campaign geometries would have been very different. In particular, the lineal defence Saddam actually adopted for Desert Storm along the Kuwait and Iraqi border would have made no sense (even for him). The five Coalition attack divisions would have easily bypassed their positions on the border, outflanked them and driven straight onto Kuwait City. Rather, with only 112,000 troops at his disposal, it seems more probable that Saddam Hussein, terrible general though he was, would have been

⁵⁹ Fontenot et al. *On Point*, 2.

⁶⁰ Dewar *Fighting in the Streets*.

compelled to draw his forces back to Kuwait City creating a defensive ring around that city or, even better, inside it. Under air bombardment and ground attack, these forces might have been driven deep into urban areas for cover anyway. With only five divisions, the Coalition would similarly have had to eschew the frontal advance of Desert Storm and have attacked along one or two axes towards Kuwait City, as they did in 2003. Fought with 2003 combat ratios, the mother of all battles is more likely to have taken place around and actually inside Kuwait City, rather than in the desert. In this scenario, the Gulf War, like the Iraq Invasion, would have been a more urbanized war – not primarily because of the demographics - but because of the force numbers.

The comparison of the 2003 Invasion and the Gulf War seem, therefore, to confirm Duffy's thesis that as armies contract, urban warfare becomes more prevalent. Downsized forces converge on urban areas, where the key objective are located. In 2003, reduced Iraq and American forces were not big enough to form fronts against each other. They could no longer to defend or to attack cities by fighting primarily in the field outside them. Meeting engagements in the field became less prevalent; battles migrated into urban areas.

The Donbas

The Iraq and Gulf Wars are suggestive. However, in order to corroborate the evidence, it is helpful to take a second example. Russia's wars in the last two decades provide further evidence here; in particular, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas are pertinent. I will focus on the latter. It is a long brutal war which is still continuing to this day and provides the best illustration of how Russia, as a major power, fights. Nevertheless, while evidentially useful, it is

difficult to categorise the Donbas conflict as a pure inter-state war. In response to the collapse of the pro-Russian government in Kiev in 2014 and the threatened suppression of ethnic Russian irredentists in eastern Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin deployed forces into the Donbas to secure the region. It is not officially an inter-state war, then; it a civil war between the Ukrainian government and separatist militias. Yet, the separatist militias in the Donbas are not completely distinguishable from Russian state forces; their military capabilities are almost all derived from the Russian state. Russia seems to be attempting to establish a de facto satellite state in eastern Ukraine. The involvement of Russia has been so pronounced that this conflict is probably better understood as a hybrid war between two states, with a nascent international border developing between Ukraine and the Donbas, rather than a civil war. Russia's war in the Donbas provides useful additional evidence to assess whether inter-state warfare in the coming decades will be urbanized.

In 2014, Russia deployed a relatively small force into the Donbas in support of the nascent Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. An estimated 12,000 Russian troops augmented a local rebel force of some 45,000: 57,000, in total. The Ukrainian regime deployed a similarly sized force: about 64,000 troops. 109,000 combatants were operating in a theatre of 15,000 square miles in 2014-15.⁶¹ After the initial battles in 2014 and 2015, the fighting descended into low-grade cross border skirmishes along a lightly-held, three hundred-mile, militarized frontier: the 'grey zone'.⁶²

⁶¹ Ydstebo, Palle 'Russian Operations: continuity, novelties and adaptation' in Janne Matlary and Tormod Heier (eds) *Ukraine and Beyond: Russian's strategic security challenge to Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 153-61; Alexey Nikolsky 'Little, Green and Polite: the creation of Russian Special Operations Forces' in Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov (eds.) *Brothers Armed: military aspects of the crisis in Ukraine* (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2014).

⁶² Paul Quinn-Judge 'Ukraine's meat grinder is back in business' *Foreign Policy* April 12 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/12/ukraines-meat-grinder-is-back-in-business/> Accessed: 12 June 2018.

However, the major battles between the Ukrainian Army and the separatist forces concentrated around the two major urban areas of Luhansk and Donetsk. For instance, in the summer of 2014, the Ukraine forces enjoyed very significant successes and it looked like they would drive a wedge between the two parts of the region. It was at this point that the Russians intervened, inflicting defeats on the Ukraine forces in a series of battles around Donetsk and Debal'tseve.⁶³ Donetsk Airport, for instance, became the site of major battles in 2014 and 2015. It was eventually taken by the Donetsk People's Republic Army in January 2015, though, in fact, Russian special forces played a critical role in the final assault, blowing up the terminal building with Ukrainian defenders still inside it.⁶⁴ The small town of Ilovaisk also played an important role in the war. In July 2014, the Donetsk People's Republic Army (DPA) took control of the town but they were attacked by several Ukrainian battalions which tried to retake it on August 10 2014. That attack was repelled but, on 18 August, the Ukrainian force established a foothold in the town. Fearing a collapse, Russian mechanized forces were sent to Ilovaisk to secure the town and reinforce the DPA on 24 August. By 27 August, the Russians linked up with the DPA, trapping the Ukrainians in a pocket. A two-day siege ensued in which 366 Ukrainians soldiers were killed and 429 wounded.⁶⁵

In early 2016, there was a renewed bout of fighting, which again focused on three urbanized areas: Avdiivka, a Ukrainian controlled industrial town with large coke and chemical plants, the major railway junction of Yasinovata, and Horlivka.⁶⁶

⁶³ Amos Fox 'The Re-emergence of the Siege: an assessment of the trends in modern land warfare' An Institute of Land Warfare Publication 18-2 June 2018. <https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/LPE-18-2-The-Reemergence-of-the-Siege-An-Assessment-of-Trends-in-Modern-Land-Warfare.pdf>

⁶⁴ Amos Fox, 'Cyborgs at Little Stalingrad: a brief history of the battles of the Donetsk airport, 26 May 2014 to 21 January 2015', May 2019: <https://www.ausa.org/sites/default/files/publications/LWP-125-Cyborgs-at-Little-Stalingrad-A-Brief-History-of-the-Battle-of-the-Donetsk-Airport.pdf>, 10.

⁶⁵ Amos Fox 'The Siege of Ilovaisk: manufactured insurgency and decision in war' <https://www.ausa.org/publications/siege-ilovaisk-manufactured-insurgencies-and-decision-war>

⁶⁶ Paul Quinn-Judge 'Ukraine's meat grinder is back in business' *Foreign Policy* April 12 2016.

Some of the towns which have been the scene of large battles have been quite large; Horlivka has a population of 257,000. However, most of the others are much smaller: Iloviask has only 15,600 inhabitants, Debal'tseve 25,000, Avdiivka 35,000, and Pisky 2000. As in 2003, demographics was not the prime driver here. Rather, in each case, the Ukrainian and DPR's forces have focused on seizing – or holding - key operational objectives which happen to be located in cities and towns: transport nodes or strategic terrain. The battles for Donetsk Airport were so bitter because it gave its occupiers a vantage point over and control of critical roads into the city. Reduced Ukrainian and Russian-backed separatist forces converged on these locations because while they were operationally important, neither combatant was large enough to form a dense front around them.

The evidence from the Iraq Invasion and the Donbas campaign is not definitive. They are only two campaigns; the Iraq Invasion lasted only three weeks, the Donbas War has been a curious hybrid campaign. However, they do seem to indicate something rather suggestive. In both campaigns, state or hybrid state forces coalesced on urban areas because they were so small. If Iraq and Donbas are any guide, it would seem very likely that, in the future, reduced state forces will be increasingly drawn into cities simply because they are no longer big enough to form fronts against each other. They will not therefore primarily fight battles in the field. Rather, they will converge on and, indeed, in cities where the key terrain is to be found; the key strategic and operational objectives (critical infrastructure, transport nodes, and political centres) are all typically located inside urban areas. Consequently, it is likely that in any future interstate war, state forces are likely to be drawn into cities, not only or primarily because of demography and asymmetry, but substantially because of their reduced size.

Korea

In order to prove the thesis that a reduction of force size has increased the chances of inter-state urban warfare, it is worth considering a contrary case. Korea is a highly pertinent example here, not least because it speaks to recent debates in security studies about megacities. In the last few years, there has been substantial debate about the prospects of fighting a war in a megacity. Many scholars and military practitioners are convinced that, in the next two decades, the armed forces are almost certain to fight not just in cities, but in megacities, urban settlements of 10 million inhabitants or more. For instance, the US Army's recent publication, *Megacities and the US Army*, argued that 'to ignore megacities is to ignore the future'.⁶⁷ Michael Evans disagrees because, although no one can deny the rise of megacities in the last thirty years, most of the human population still live in medium sized metropolitan areas.⁶⁸ Yet, Evans affirms the importance of demography to predicting the future of warfare. The Korean example is very helpful here because it is a theatre in which not only is inter-state warfare possible, but it also contains a genuine megacity only forty miles south of the 38th Parallel; ten million people live in Seoul today. On demographic grounds, any war on the Korean peninsula must involve a battle inside a megacity.

Yet, in fact, when the force sizes are considered, it is possible to reach a rather surprising conclusion. While there has been a radical reduction of forces in most other theatres, in Korea, forces remain extremely large. It is the one region in which mass

⁶⁷ Chief of Staff of the Army, *Megacities and the US Army* (June 2014), 4; Kevin Felix and Frederick Wong 'The Case for Megacities', 19-32; See also Shunk, David, 'Megacities, ungoverned areas, and the challenge of army urban combat operations in 2030-2040', *Small Wars Journal*, 20; Russell Glenn 'Megacities: the good, the bad and the ugly' in David Deligge et al (eds) *Blood and Concrete* (US: Xlibris, 2019), 356; Chief of Staff of the Army, Strategic Studies Group, *Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for an Uncertain Future* (Arlington, VA: Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army, Strategic Studies Group, 2014), 5; William Adamson 'Megacities and the US Army', 45-54; William Boykin 'From the Commandant,' *Special Warfare* 14/2 (22 March 2002).

⁶⁸ Evans 'The Case Against Megacities', 34.

armies still exist (even though South Korean forces had contracted somewhat in the last three decades). On the Korean Peninsula, for instance, approximately 700,000 North Korean soldiers and 400,000 Republic of Korea troops confront against each other along an 80-mile frontier.⁶⁹ Force densities remain exceptionally high. In order to protect itself, the Republic of Korean Army has also constructed extensive tunnel networks, bunkers and field fortifications. ROK forces aim to hold the North Korean assault on a series of defensive lines just south of the Demilitarised Zone – well before they reach Seoul – until American reinforcement arrive.⁷⁰ The Republic of Korea plan to fight in the valleys and mountains north of Seoul. Certainly, the major initial battles would take place there, in the field. It is, of course, possible that the North Korean forces could breach these defences and that subsequent battles could take place in Seoul itself. This is precisely what happened in 1950. However, in 1950, the South Korean and American forces were poorly prepared. Today, it would be very difficult to breach ROK defences quickly, even with the massive forces the North has at its disposal.

Korea has some ironies then. Demographics would predict a battle in Seoul; indeed, a battle inside a megacity is all but inevitable on this basis. Yet, ironically, precisely because of the massive size of the deployed forces, an urban battle is less likely in Korea than in other less urbanized theatres. It is far more likely that a front would develop around the DMZ to the north of the city. The Korean example is methodologically useful. It shows that inter-state urban warfare cannot always be predicted on the basis of demography alone; force size also has to be taken to consideration.

⁶⁹ Global Security Organization Korea <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oplan-5027.htm>; International Institute for Strategic Studies *The Military Balance 2017* (London: IISS, 2020), 287;

⁷⁰ Global Security Organization Korea <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oplan-5027.htm>.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, a consensus has emerged in strategic studies. Scholars – and military professionals – are all agreed that urban warfare in the future is more or less unavoidable, not only in civil conflicts but also in interstate war. The rise of urban warfare is attributed to two factors: demography and asymmetry. The scholarly unanimity is almost unique in this contentious field. The demographic and asymmetric arguments are not fallacious. They are plainly necessary to any explanation of urban warfare. These variables explain the origins of recent civil conflict in cities very well. They are certainly not irrelevant to explaining inter-state urban warfare. Without cities, there can be no urban warfare.

However, although necessary, demography is not sufficient in explaining why state forces are likely to fight in cities in the future. Here, force size becomes an important factor in understanding the distinctive geometry of recent – and future - military campaigns. As a result of their reduction, state forces have been unable to form fronts which typified inter-state wars in the twentieth century. Consequently, they have converged on urban areas where most of the decisive objectives are located. They are likely to be similarly drawn into cities in the coming decades.

Of course, the reduction of forces does not mean that states militaries will always fight each other exclusively in urban areas. Much of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in September to November 2020 took place in the mountains and plains of the southern part of this region. There, most of the fighting involved long-range exchange of artillery fire in the field. The Azerbaijan forces inflicted a heavy defeat on the Armenians by exploiting the potential of drones and long-range artillery. However, in September 2020, the Azerbaijani forces began to drive Armenian forces

out of the area bordering Iran. At this point, they concentrated on Shusha, a small but important border town, located on strategic road which connects Lachin to the republic's capital, Stepanakart, twelve kilometres away. The Nagorno-Karabakh President, Arayik Harutyanyan, declared: 'Whoever controls Shusha, controls Karabakh'.⁷¹ The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War reached a decision around this town. By November 4, Azerbaijani forces were in control of the mountains south of Shusha. The next day, Azerbaijan Special Operations Forces reached the road and seized vital terrain around Shusha by scaling the cliffs around it, taking control of the town.⁷² The Armenians tried but failed to expel them from the town. The loss of Shusha has been widely accepted as playing a major role in forcing the Armenians to concede most of Nagorno-Karabakh. It would be wrong to argue that the war in Nagorno Karabakh was an urban conflict. However, even in a mountainous and relatively lightly populated region, it is noticeable that the combatants eventually converged on a single town: Shusha. Precisely because force densities were low, Shusha, a town of just 4000 inhabitants, assumed strategic importance. Despite taking place in a rural and under-populated region, the Nagorno-Karabakh War demonstrated a similar geometry to the Iraq Invasion and to the Donbas conflict.

Recognising the importance of force numbers affirms the predictions in the current literature; warfare is, indeed, urbanising. Even in inter-state warfare, armies will almost certainly have to fight in cities in the future. However, they will have to do so not just because of demographics but also substantially because of the reduction of force size. An apparently banal military fact is likely to have profound implications for future warfare.

⁷¹ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/11/07/the-battle-for-shusha>

⁷² John Spencer and Harshana Ghoorhoo 'The Battle of Shusha City and the Missed Lessons of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War' *Modern War Institute* 14 July 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-battle-of-shusha-city-and-the-missed-lessons-of-the-2020-nagorno-karabakh-war/>

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