Ukraine Is Changing the Rules of War: The Lessons of 2026 the West Can No Longer Afford to Miss

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Abstract: *By 2026, the war in Ukraine has become far more than a territorial confrontation: it is a laboratory for the future of warfare, where drones, digital networks, artificial intelligence, command-and-control systems, commercial infrastructure, and the industrial capacity to sustain a war of attrition are being tested simultaneously. Ukraine's experience shows that the advantage no longer automatically belongs to the side with the most expensive platforms, but to the actor capable of rapidly integrating sensors, software, and weapons, adapting systems at high speed, and replacing losses fast enough. From Magura and Sea Baby maritime drones to Kropyva, GIS Arta, Delta, Palantir, and Starlink, the war demonstrates that information speed and connectivity can be as important as firepower. At the same time, shortages of Patriot interceptors and the competition for licenses, production capacity, and stockpiles reveal the hard limit of the digital revolution: software cannot compensate for a lack of ammunition and industrial depth.*

The Black Sea most clearly concentrates these transformations. Ukraine has managed to challenge Russian naval superiority without possessing a comparable conventional fleet, while the confrontation has expanded from warships to ports, oil terminals, grain shipments, tankers, and commercial routes. Strikes on Odesa, Novorossiysk, and Caspian Pipeline Consortium infrastructure have turned logistics, energy, and maritime insurance into components of warfare, with consequences spreading into global markets. In parallel, the Vatican illustrates the opposite limit of the conflict: however radically the technology of war changes, the problem of ending war remains profoundly political and human. The central lesson is that future wars will be won not only through technological superiority, but also through the ability to see, decide, produce, adapt, and endure faster than the adversary – and ultimately to convert military advantage into a political outcome.

Key words: *artificial intelligence, Ukraine, Russia, drones, The Black Sea, War.*

Introduction

After more than four years of war, Ukraine is no longer merely the site of a territorial confrontation with Russia. It has become a laboratory in which the weapons, doctrines, industries, logistics networks, and diplomatic limits that will define future conflicts are being tested. The

war in Ukraine has long since moved beyond the point at which it could be explained simply through the map of the front, the number of square kilometers gained or lost, or comparisons between Russian tanks and Western weapons supplied to Kyiv. In 2026, it is simultaneously a land, air, naval, industrial, informational, digital, and economic war. In an increasingly undeniable sense, it is the laboratory in which the warfare of the future is being tested.

This is where a drone costing tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars can disable a platform worth tens or hundreds of millions. This is where a country almost devoid of a conventional navy has shown that it can push a regional naval power onto the defensive. This is where software can be modified faster than a Western military procurement system can move a weapon through its traditional acquisition cycle. And this is also where an oil terminal, a merchant ship, an insurance premium, or a pipeline can become part of the war without being, in the traditional sense, a weapon.

Two seemingly distant arenas are, in fact, telling the same story. The first is the *Black Sea*, where Ukraine has shown that a state with almost no conventional fleet left can challenge a major naval power's control of the sea. The second is the *Vatican*, where the war demonstrates how difficult the role of mediator becomes when the aggressor and the victim cannot simply be placed within the same moral equation.

Between these two extremes – the naval drone and the negotiating table – lies one of the great lessons of the war: Ukraine is changing not only how wars are fought, but also how the West must think about power, deterrence, and peace.

The Drone Is No Longer an Auxiliary Weapon

Perhaps the most visible revolution produced by the war in Ukraine is the transformation of unmanned systems from auxiliary tools into primary weapons. During the early years of the conflict, drones could still be viewed largely as force multipliers for conventional power: they observed, identified targets, and corrected artillery fire. By 2026, that description is obsolete. Aerial, maritime, FPV, reconnaissance, strike, and interceptor drones now form an ecosystem of combat in their own right. They no longer simply complement conventional warfare; they reshape its structure.

The Black Sea provides the most spectacular example. Ukraine entered the war facing a Russian fleet that was vastly superior. According to classical naval logic, the outcome appeared predictable: the state possessing cruisers, frigates, submarines, naval aviation, missiles, and major bases should dominate the sea against an adversary without a comparable fleet. Yet the war overturned that equation. Maritime drones such as *Magura* and *Sea Baby*, combined with missiles and intelligence sup-

plied by different sensors and platforms, reduced the Russian Black Sea Fleet's freedom of action in the western Black Sea and contributed to the relocation of a significant share of its naval assets from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk. Ukraine did not achieve naval supremacy in the traditional sense. It achieved something that may be even more important for a state operating from a position of inferiority: the ability to deny the adversary uncontested control of the sea — what naval doctrine calls *sea denial*.

This is the *first major lesson*: a country no longer necessarily needs to build a fleet comparable to that of its opponent in order to challenge its freedom of movement. In a relatively enclosed sea such as the Black Sea, the combination of geography, coastal missiles, intelligence, drones, and distributed platforms can alter the balance of power. This is precisely why developments there are being studied far beyond the region, including in the Baltic states and in Asia, where a potential confrontation around Taiwan raises similar questions. The issue is no longer merely how many ships each side possesses, but how many of those ships can survive in an environment saturated with sensors and relatively inexpensive weapons.

There is, however, a reverse side to this revolution. Unmanned systems do not always obey the political geography drawn for them by their operators. A system that loses communications, navigation, or positioning as a result of electronic warfare can become unpredictable. This is why the war in the Black Sea is beginning to generate not only new weapons but also an entire doctrine around what an autonomous system should do when it loses contact with its operator: return, stop, self-destruct, or continue the mission. What appears to be a technical question can quickly become a political one when a drone leaves the theater of operations for which it was launched.

From this follows *the second major lesson*: cost asymmetry – for decades, the West built armed forces around increasingly sophisticated, capable, and expensive platforms, and Ukraine demonstrates the limits of that philosophy once war becomes a contest of attrition. If a drone costing tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars can damage or destroy a ship worth tens or hundreds of millions, the calculation can no longer be made solely in terms of technological performance. What matters is how much the weapon costs, how quickly it can be produced, how many units can be lost, and, above all, how quickly the next one can be built.

This is one of the explanations for the success of the Ukrainian model. Systems are modified constantly. A product that works today may become vulnerable a few months later, sometimes within weeks, once the adversary identifies its frequencies, signature, or employment tactics. Software is altered, frequencies are changed, navigation systems are modified, and new attack methods

are introduced. The opponent then adapts in turn, and the cycle begins again. Technological perfection can therefore become a trap. An extraordinary system that reaches the front after five years may be less useful than one that is merely good enough, built within five months, and continuously modified. This is the origin of a principle Western militaries are rediscovering through Ukraine: *sometimes the second-best system available today is more valuable than the best system available too late.*

This philosophy does not mean abandoning sophisticated technology. It means accepting that a modern military must be able to fight simultaneously with two categories of systems: a limited number of extremely capable and expensive platforms and a mass of relatively inexpensive, expendable systems that can be lost without crippling the force.

Ukraine learned this lesson not from doctrine, but because it had no alternative.

From Drone to Target: The Invisible Revolution of Software

Some of the most important innovations of the Ukrainian war do not even look like weapons, for they are applications, digital maps, servers, tablets, and networks that have dramatically reduced the time between the moment a target is seen and the moment fire can be opened against it. This is where systems such as *Kropyva* and *GIS Arta* come in, developed and adapted by Ukrainians for artillery fire control. In traditional warfare, an observer identified the target, transmitted coordinates, the information moved up and down several layers of command, firing data were calculated for the battery, and throughout this entire process the target might move. Ukraine sought to compress this chain to the point where the observer, drone, digital map, and artillery unit effectively become nodes in the same network.

Kropyva can operate on tablets and relatively ordinary devices and distribute target data to units capable of firing. GIS Arta follows a similar logic. This is why such systems have often been described as an "*Uber for artillery*". Not because artillery has become simple, but because the software can identify the available firing asset and distribute the target far more rapidly than in a traditional command chain.

This is one of the most important transformations of the war: *a weapon can no longer be judged separately from the information feeding it*. An older gun linked rapidly to a reconnaissance drone may, in certain circumstances, be more relevant than a far more capable artillery system receiving targeting information too slowly. The Ukrainian war has not eliminated the kill chain, but it has begun to compress it until the chain increasingly resembles a network.

Above this tactical infrastructure sits another layer: *the large-scale integration of data*. Platforms developed by *Palantir*, together with Ukrainian systems such as *Delta*,

have demonstrated that modern war is no longer merely a competition for weapons. It is also a competition over the ability to transform enormous amounts of information into a coherent operational picture.

Drones produce imagery. Satellites produce imagery. Radars generate data. Reconnaissance units transmit coordinates. Open sources contribute additional information. Intelligence services add another layer. The problem is no longer the lack of information, but the excess of it. If all these data streams remain isolated in separate systems, their value is limited. If they can be correlated, filtered, and rapidly distributed, they begin to alter the way military decisions are made. This is where platforms such as *Palantir* and *Delta* matter: not through the spectacular notion of an artificial intelligence autonomously "deciding" what must be destroyed, but through their ability to reduce informational noise and turn dozens of different streams into an intelligible picture of the battlefield.

Taken together – *Palantir, Delta, Kropyva, GIS Arta, and drones* – these systems reveal something important about the real Ukrainian revolution: it is not represented by any single weapon. It is represented by the *network*. The drone sees, the network transmits, the software correlates, the command decides and artillery, a missile, or another drone strikes. Whoever can compress this circuit from tens of minutes to a few minutes, or even less, gains an advantage that the number of tanks alone cannot describe.

Almost none of this architecture could have functioned at the same scale without resilient communications. Here lies one of the most unusual lessons of the conflict: a commercial network developed by Elon Musk's company became critical infrastructure in a high-intensity war. *Starlink* provided Ukraine with connectivity where terrestrial communications infrastructure had been bombed, occupied, or jammed. Its terminals allowed units to communicate, drone operators to transmit imagery, commanders to remain in contact with troops, and digital systems to continue operating in an environment where conventional telecommunications were under constant attack.

This represents one of the sharpest breaks with classical warfare: a private company can control a communications infrastructure on which, at certain moments, the combat capability of a state depends. That dependence inevitably creates vulnerability.

Russia has attempted to jam Starlink. It developed electronic-warfare systems designed to reduce the effectiveness of connections and disrupt Ukrainian drones relying on such communications. In other cases, Ukrainian forces began hunting the Russian jamming systems themselves in order to preserve their communications.

A new kind of contest thus emerges: it is no longer enough to

destroy the tank or missile launcher. One can instead attempt to destroy or disrupt the *link* that allows the system to function. The war in Ukraine has therefore shown that commercial infrastructure can become military infrastructure and that the boundary between the two can almost disappear.

All of this has also produced an industrial transformation. Under the pressure of war, Ukraine was forced to build an ecosystem of hundreds of companies, small teams, engineers, programmers, and military organizations communicating far more directly than in a traditional procurement model. Not every product works. Some disappear quickly. Others become obsolete after Russian countermeasures are introduced. But this is precisely the logic of the system.

Instead of one perfect platform developed over a decade, successive generations of the same system appear. The battlefield becomes simultaneously the end user, laboratory, and research department. This may be the most difficult lesson for NATO, because it requires not merely the purchase of new weapons, but a change in procurement culture itself.

A war of attrition demands quantity, stockpiles, and the ability to replace losses quickly. It requires accepting that expendable, relatively cheap technology can sometimes matter more than a sophisticated platform the military cannot afford to lose. This does not mean that major platforms disappear. A fighter aircraft, frigate, *Patriot* system, or missile battery remains essential. But none can operate alone. They must function within an ecosystem of sensors, expendable drones, communications nodes, and distributed electronic-warfare capabilities. In future warfare, the power of a platform will increasingly depend on the network into which it is integrated and the speed with which that network can change.

Here lies the brutal limit of the digital revolution: *Kropyva* can reduce reaction time, and *Palantir* and *Delta* can organize data. *Starlink* can keep a unit connected. A drone can detect an enemy battery or armored column. But no algorithm can replace an interceptor that does not exist in the stockpile.

The Battle Moves into the Factory

By 2026, shortages of missiles for *Patriot* had become one of the most sensitive points in Ukraine's defense, particularly as Russia continued to employ ballistic missiles against cities and infrastructure. For Kyiv, the difference between possessing a *Patriot* battery and possessing a *Patriot* battery with sufficient ammunition became literally the difference between having and not having a defensive capability.

It is a paradox that perfectly summarizes modern warfare: a country can field one of the most sophisticated air-defense systems in the

world and still be vulnerable if the magazine is empty. This is why the issue quickly shifted from the diplomacy of deliveries to the industry of production.

Ukraine no longer wants only to receive interceptors, but it wants access to *production, licenses, technology transfer, and industrial capacity*. This is an important shift.

During the early years of the war, the question was how many *Patriot* batteries could be sent to Ukraine and how many missiles each ally could spare. By 2026, the question had become how rapidly Western production could be expanded and how much of that production could be relocated or licensed in Europe and, potentially, in Ukraine itself.

The problem is that modern interceptors are not products that can simply be manufactured anywhere once a technical drawing has been transferred. They depend on specialized components, materials, certified suppliers, electronics, propulsion, software, facilities, and trained personnel. In addition, some *Patriot* technologies remain among the most tightly protected by the United States. This is where a true industrial negotiation begins.

Germany is seeking to expand its own capacity and gain greater control over *Patriot* production in Europe. New capabilities for GEM-T interceptors are being developed, while European states are attempting to reduce dependence on the existing pace of American production lines. Ukraine, in turn, is trying to enter this system not merely as a consumer, but as a participant in production.

This represents a strategic shift: *Kyiv is attempting to move from the position of a customer permanently waiting at the end of the queue to that of an industrial actor within the Western defense system.* Germany and Poland enter this equation not necessarily as competitors with Ukraine for the same license, but as states facing the same fundamental problem: *demand for air and missile defense is growing far faster than existing production capacity*.

Poland is massively expanding its own air and missile defenses and requires large numbers of interceptors for its national architecture. Germany is attempting to rebuild stockpiles, expand production, and support Ukraine at the same time. Other European states face similar pressures.

Inevitably, competition for industrial time emerges. It is a different form of competition from that taking place on the battlefield. It is not measured in square kilometers or even in the number of batteries already deployed, but in *each state's position in the production queue*.

The war in Ukraine has therefore demonstrated that a country's security depends not only on what it has purchased, but also on the manufacturer's ability to deliver ammunition at the rate at which it is consumed. And this leads to one of the most important conclusions of the entire Ukrainian experience: future war will not be merely a competition for technology, but a competition for the

factories capable of reproducing that technology in sufficient quantities and at sufficient speed.

From "Uber for Artillery" to Patriot: The Two Faces of Future War

The two worlds appear almost opposite. At one end are *Kropyva*, *GIS Arta*, *Delta*, *Starlink*, and drones: software, tablets, small teams, start-ups, rapid adaptation, and products that can be modified on very short cycles. At the other end is *Patriot*: sophisticated radars, launchers, command centers, interceptors built with tightly controlled technologies, specialized factories, licenses, and production timelines measured in years. Ukraine needs both!

This is perhaps one of the most important corrections to the idea that cheap drones will simply "replace" sophisticated weapons. The war instead demonstrates that the military of the future will need to combine *cheap quantity with expensive technology, software with heavy industry, and the speed of the start-up with the capacity of the missile factory.*

A drone costing a few thousand dollars can destroy a vehicle worth millions. *Kropyva* can turn a tablet into a node within an artillery command network. *Starlink* can keep a brigade connected when terrestrial infrastructure has been destroyed. *Palantir* and *Delta* can help transform an ocean of information into an intelligible operational picture. But when a ballistic missile is heading toward a Ukrainian city, the problem becomes brutally simple: the interceptor capable of destroying it must exist. If the stockpile is empty, the best software in the world cannot fire a missile that was never produced.

The Black Sea: Logistics Becomes the Front

Ukraine has demonstrated something else as well: wars are not won only where soldiers are shooting at one another. They are also fought where fuel, grain, ammunition, and money move. By 2026, the Black Sea had become a demonstration of this transformation. Attacks on ports, oil terminals, merchant ships, and export infrastructure pushed the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation beyond the military front itself. Odesa, Novorossiysk, the Danube ports, and infrastructure in the Sea of Azov are now elements of the same strategic equation.

For Ukraine, maintaining access to the sea means economic survival. Agricultural products remain one of its principal sources of external revenue, and ports are difficult to replace with rail, road, or Danube transport. For Russia, by contrast, the vulnerability lies in energy exports and the infrastructure that serves them.

This is why Ukraine has gradually shifted from defending its own maritime corridors to attacking the adversary's logistics. Russia seeks to reduce Ukrainian agricultural revenues; Kyiv seeks to raise the cost of Russian energy exports. The Black Sea

has therefore become the place where the two economies attempt to strike one another without having to capture a single kilometer of territory.

The intensity of the confrontation can be seen in this summer's statistics. In July, Ukraine reported 35 attacks on ships in port, 22 attacks on vessels at sea, and 67 strikes on port infrastructure. By comparison, ships had been attacked only 14 times throughout all of 2025. The increase says more than the numbers alone. It shows that naval warfare has entered a stage in which commercial ports and military infrastructure coexist within the same zone of risk. Russian shipping company FESCO suspended new Black Sea bookings after one of its vessels was hit in a drone strike, while Russia intensified strikes on port infrastructure around Odesa, through which more than 90 percent of Ukraine's agricultural exports are shipped. In this confrontation, the port is no longer behind the front. It has become part of the front.

For Kyiv, the problem is particularly serious because agriculture remains vital to the economy. Every terminal hit, every ship refusing to call at port, and every rise in insurance premiums produces a direct economic loss. Ukraine is attempting to develop alternative routes through the Danube, railways, and road transport, but logistics have their own limits. Estimates contained in the source material suggest that these alternative corridors can, in the immediate future, absorb only about half the volumes normally shipped through Black Sea ports. This explains why strikes on Ukrainian ports have consequences far beyond the front line. Russia is not merely hitting cranes, silos, or berths. It is striking Ukraine's ability to convert agricultural production into revenue. And the effect reaches global markets.

At the same time, Kyiv is trying to create the same problem for Moscow. Activity in the Sea of Azov is restricted, the major Russian grain port of Taman is affected, and exports continue from Novorossiysk and Tuapse at a slower pace.

Strategically, however, oil is the more important target. Energy revenues remain fundamental to Russia's economy and to the financing of the war. This is why Ukrainian strikes have gradually moved from refineries and storage facilities toward terminals and ships. Several tankers have been damaged, while loading operations at Novorossiysk and at the Caspian Pipeline Consortium terminal were temporarily suspended.

Here, however, the war enters a far more complicated zone, because not all oil leaving a Russian port is Russian oil.

The *Caspian Pipeline Consortium*, CPC, is the principal artery through which Kazakh oil reaches the Black Sea and international markets. Approximately 80 percent of Kazakhstan's crude exports use this route. Geography creates an almost perfect contradiction. The oil is predominantly Kazakh, the pipeline crosses Russia, the terminal lies near

Novorossiysk, and Novorossiysk is simultaneously one of the Russian Federation's most important naval, logistics, and energy hubs. For Ukraine, the area is an obvious strategic target. For Kazakhstan, it is a gateway to the world market. For Washington, it is also where Ukraine's strategic interests intersect directly with Western commercial interests. *Chevron* and *ExxonMobil* hold significant investments in Kazakhstan's energy sector, and Chevron also owns a stake in CPC. Therefore, when Ukrainian drones reach the vicinity of the terminal or ships using the facility are threatened, the effects no longer concern Russia alone. They can hit Kazakhstan, the global oil market, and American companies.

This is what prompted Washington's reaction. According to the information contained in the source material, the US administration asked Kyiv to halt strikes on CPC infrastructure and on non-Russian vessels using the terminal, with the issue reaching senior levels of American political leadership. The message is important. The United States is not asking Ukraine to abandon its campaign against energy infrastructure that finances Russia's war. It is saying that there is a boundary: striking the Russian war economy cannot automatically turn every piece of infrastructure located on Russian territory into an acceptable target.

Kyiv must distinguish between Russian and Kazakh oil, between vessels involved in Russian trade and international shipping, and between infrastructure financing the Kremlin and infrastructure that merely passes through Russian geography. On a map, the distinction appears simple. In a port under drone attack, it becomes much harder to preserve.

This is one of the subtler lessons of modern economic warfare: *the economic front does not have the clear borders of the military front*. A single drone can cross several geopolitical boundaries without crossing a single physical frontier.

Behind the grain, oil, and terminals are people. Merchant sailors entering the Black Sea are not officially participants in the war, but they work in an environment where an attack can begin at any moment. Maritime security companies recommend risk assessments for every voyage and the designation of protected areas aboard ships during drone attacks.

That alone says much about how the nature of commercial navigation in the region has changed. A civilian sailor no longer simply enters a commercial port; he enters a possible theater of operations.

This erosion of the boundary between civilian and military space is one of the most dangerous features of the confrontation in the Black Sea. A terminal can be both commercial and strategic. A ship may carry grain, oil, or cargo that indirectly contributes to the economy of a belligerent state. Civilian infrastructure may stand beside a military facility. The gray zone is expanding.

The market has already reacted. The average daily cost of operating an oil tanker in the Black Sea rose above $300,000 per day, from just over $200,000 only a week earlier. War-risk insurance for calls at Black Sea terminals rose to around 2 percent of the value of the vessel, compared with roughly 1 percent two weeks earlier. One percentage point may sound minor. For a ship worth ten of millions of dollars, however, it means hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional cost for a single voyage. And that cost does not remain with the shipowner. It is passed to the trader, enters the price of the commodity, and eventually reaches the consumer.

This way, the drone becomes not only a military weapon, but an economic instrument. It does not even need to strike a ship. It is enough to convince the insurer that the next ship might be hit.

The escalation would be easier to absorb if the Black Sea were the only major commercial corridor under pressure. It is not. The Strait of Hormuz has been affected by confrontation between the United States and Iran, while Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea remain exposed to Houthi pressure. The Black Sea is beginning to enter the same category.

The three theaters are very different militarily and politically, but they share one essential characteristic: disproportionate amounts of energy, grain, and merchandise pass through them. If one is disrupted, the market can find alternatives. If two are disrupted at the same time, costs rise. If several such chokepoints become unsafe simultaneously, the problem ceases to be regional and becomes systemic. This is the true global significance of the naval war in Ukraine: *a conflict between two states begins to interfere directly with the arteries of the world economy*.

During the first years of the Russian invasion, the Black Sea could be described primarily as the maritime extension of the Ukrainian front: Crimea, Sevastopol, the Russian fleet, Odesa, Reni, Ismail, and the grain corridor. By 2026, the equation is far wider. Here the war between Russia and Ukraine intersects with food security, oil exports, Western corporate interests, Kazakh crude, international shipping, and simultaneous crises along global maritime routes.

For Russia and Ukraine, the Black Sea is a theater of war. For the sailor, it is a risk zone. For the insurer, a higher premium. For the trader, uncertainty. For the consumer, potentially a higher price. This is the difference between a regional conflict and a war that begins to shape the international system.

There is, however, a limit to all the military, digital, industrial, and economic lessons Ukraine provides. Drones can alter the balance of power, strike ships, push a fleet into another port, temporarily close terminals, and turn an insurance premium into an instrument of economic warfare; industry can produce millions of unmanned systems, and arti-

ficial intelligence can reduce the time between detecting a target and striking it; *Kropyva* can reduce artillery reaction time; *Palantir* and *Delta* can organize information; *Starlink* can preserve the network; *Patriot* can intercept a missile if sufficient ammunition exists; and industry can attempt to produce the next interceptor more rapidly.

But none of these technologies can answer the question that inevitably appears in every war: *How does it end?* This is where an actor that seems to belong to an entirely different world enters the story: the Vatican.

The Vatican, Washington, and the Limits of Moral Diplomacy

Russia's war against Ukraine has placed the Holy See in an extremely difficult position. The Vatican condemns the suffering caused by the war and supports the need for a just peace, while at the same time seeking to preserve channels of communication with both Kyiv and Moscow. This is different from the position practiced during the final phase of the Cold War: under John Paul II, convergence between the Vatican and Washington against the Soviet system was far more visible; under Francis, the Holy See sought greater autonomy from bloc politics and resisted becoming the religious component of the Western Front against Russia.

Here, however, the fundamental contradiction emerges: diplomatic neutrality becomes extremely difficult to separate from moral neutrality when there are an invading state and an invaded state. The more the Vatican maintains contact with Moscow, the more Kyiv can interpret this caution as insufficient moral distance from the aggressor. From the perspective of the Holy See, however, a complete break in contact would destroy one of the few diplomatic resources it possesses. The Vatican has no economic sanctions, brigades, or missiles. It has access and the ability to preserve channels that others no longer possess.

The role of the Holy See has therefore focused on the areas in which discreet diplomacy may still function: prisoners, civilians, Ukrainian children taken to Russia, humanitarian issues, and maintaining contacts between the two sides. This reflects a fundamental difference in time horizons: *Ukraine is trying to survive today; the Vatican is trying to preserve a door for the day after the war.*

Kyiv inevitably thinks in terms of ammunition, air defense, territory, mobilization, and security guarantees. The Vatican must also think in terms of negotiation, reconciliation, and the relationship that will inevitably exist with Russia once the fighting ends. The two horizons are not mutually exclusive, but they can collide brutally. For a state being bombed today, an appeal for tomorrow's reconciliation can sound premature; for a mediator, fully entering one camp can mean losing all useful-

ness when negotiations eventually begin.

This is the fundamental problem of moral diplomacy in the Russian-Ukrainian war: if the Holy See moves too close to the Western position, it loses access to Moscow; if it maintains too much distance, it risks turning diplomatic neutrality into the appearance of moral equivalence between aggressor and victim. There is no elegant solution to this contradiction. The Vatican cannot stop the war. It can only preserve a bridge and hope that one day both sides will need it.

At first glance, it is difficult to imagine two more different worlds. In the Black Sea, maritime drones hunt ships, terminals are attacked, tanker operators calculate risk, and fleets adapt to a technology that changes warfare from month to month. At the Vatican, the problem is almost the opposite: how do you preserve a channel of dialogue between two societies that have spent years in a devastating war? Yet the two arenas are, in reality, telling the same story. In the Black Sea, we see how radically the way war is fought can change. At the Vatican, we see how little the fundamental problem of ending war has changed.

Technology can alter warfare, but it cannot eliminate politics. It can make strikes more precise, but it cannot define victory. It can close a port, but it cannot determine what compromise a society that has paid the price of war for years is prepared to accept. It can help a weaker state deny control of the sea to a stronger power, but it cannot compel that power to accept peace.

Conclusions. Lessons for the West from the Ukrainian laboratory

Seen from 2026, Ukraine therefore offers the West a lesson far more complex than the simple recommendation to buy more drones. It shows that conventional superiority can be challenged through asymmetry, that a fleet can be pushed onto the defensive without the adversary building an equivalent fleet, and that cheap weapons produced in large numbers can force very expensive platforms to retreat or operate far more cautiously. It shows that speed of adaptation can matter more than technological perfection. It shows that software can turn an artillery piece into part of a network, that a commercial satellite constellation can become military infrastructure, that data can matter as much as ammunition, and that a modern battlefield is, above all, a competition over the speed with which information is converted into action.

But it also shows the reverse: digital technology cannot compensate for the absence of industry. *Palantir* may find the target, *Delta* may display it, *Starlink* may transmit the coordinates, Kropyva may calculate and distribute the mission. But if the drone, shell, or *Patriot* interceptor does not exist, information remains only information. This is why indus-

try can no longer be regarded as something behind the battlefield. *Industry is part of the battlefield.* Whoever cannot produce quickly enough cannot sustain the war long enough, regardless of how sophisticated the systems were with which that side entered the conflict.

Ukraine also shows that ports, tankers, terminals, grain, and insurance premiums can become weapons or vulnerabilities. Naval geography can no longer be read solely through the number of ships. A state without a conventional fleet can generate *sea denial*, while a relatively enclosed sea can become an environment dominated by sensors, drones, missiles, and electronic warfare.

But the war also reveals something technology cannot solve. At the end of all the drones, missiles, algorithms, attacks on ports, and economic calculations, there remains the same problem wars have always had: ***What does victory mean?*** Is it the recovery of all occupied territory? Is it the survival of the Ukrainian state? Is it the destruction of Russia's ability to restart the war? Is it an armistice? Is it a negotiated peace? And who can still mediate between two sides that are not merely fighting, but have come to define the very idea of peace in incompatible ways?

This is the final, and perhaps the hardest, lesson of the Ukrainian laboratory: future wars may be fought by swarms of drones; they may use artificial intelligence; they may turn unmanned vessels into weapons and make an oil terminal strategically more important than a city on the front; they may integrate the battlefield with grain markets, oil prices, and the insurance cost of a merchant vessel; they may turn a commercial satellite into a military node and a tablet into a fire-control interface. *But in the end, peace remains a profoundly human problem.*

Perhaps this is where all the threads of the war finally meet. Ukraine has shown that a smaller military can learn quickly enough to change the rules of confrontation with a stronger adversary. *Kropyva*, *GIS Arta*, *Delta*, and *Palantir* have shown that the time between information and strike can be compressed. *Starlink* has shown that commercial infrastructure can become war infrastructure. *Patriot* has shown that a sophisticated weapon is only as valuable as the ammunition stock behind it. The struggle for licenses and for expanded European production shows that the next stage of competition will not be fought only on the battlefield, but also in the factories of Germany, Poland, the United States and, if Kyiv achieves its goal, Ukraine itself. The Black Sea has shown that naval power can be challenged without naval parity. Ports have shown that the economy is part of the front. Ukrainian industry has shown that the speed of production and adaptation can sometimes matter more than perfection. And the Vatican demonstrates, through the very difficulty of its position, that however radically warfare evolves, the world has still not invented a

technology capable of replacing the moment when adversaries must decide whether they still want to fight or are ready to talk.

Ukraine is therefore more than the story of one country resisting an invasion. It is the place where the world can observe, in real time, how the relationship between technology, industry, geography, economics, and power is changing. And the warning for the West may be simpler than it first appears: *the next war will not necessarily be won by the side that enters it with the most sophisticated weapon, but by the side that sees change first, transmits information faster, produces faster, learns faster, and endures long enough for military power to be transformed, eventually, into a political outcome.*