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## War as a Service: Stop Overhyping Technology

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### SYNOPSIS

*Today's discussions on conflict stability, force transformation, and proliferation are very techno-centric. This focus misses more important developments, one of which is War as a Service (WaaS). WaaS is about deeply integrating and potentially amalgamating military capabilities among strategic partners, providing actors an option to leapfrog over peers.*

### COMMENTARY

THE CURRENT debate about the role of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in conflicts like Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh illustrates the prevailing techno-fetishisation that dominates the defence innovation discourse. As we have argued in [Beware the Hype](#), the overemphasis on UAV leads to a distorted perception of warfighting reality.

Correcting this misperception is important. The [military innovation literature](#) makes it amply clear that technology needs to be seen in a much broader context that also considers cultural, conceptual, and organisational aspects. Therefore, no military asset is decisive on its own. Rather, all assets need to be integrated into a complex military ecosystem that reflects this broader context.

### What WaaS Is All About

Instead of focusing on single aspects, more attention needs to be devoted to the way complex military ecosystems are delivered. War as a Service (WaaS) is a striking feature of the four conflicts mentioned above that has the potential to change force transformation and the use of military power. So far, both aspects have been overlooked.

WaaS is a comprehensive politico-military concept to transfer military power in a government-to-government framework. This government-centric focus potentially "renationalises" the monopoly of power and sets WaaS apart from outsourcing military power to non-state actors or unloading the burden of warfighting onto partners.

Unlike these concepts, WaaS describes the deep, strategically driven, and mission-tailored integration of foreign expertise, units, and assets into the partner's armed forces. Thus, WaaS is neither about outsourcing nor delegating warfighting power, but about embedding and potentially amalgamating military capabilities of strategic partners.

Russia's support of Syria and Field Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and Turkey's support of Azerbaijan and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya are exemplary WaaS use cases.

Turkey's WaaS offering included Turkish UAVs optimised for the use with Turkish missiles and electronic warfare payloads; UAV missions conducted by Turkish operation centres; close synchronisation of UAV missions with local force elements; third-party training prior to the conflict; operational planning by Turkish commanders; on-the-ground presence with Turkish troop elements and commanders/advisors as well as the use of Turkish battlefield engineers.

It is this turn-key approach that makes WaaS so attractive for suppliers and recipients. Recipients get instant access to the comprehensive mix of assets, concepts, tactics, and operational advice needed for battlefield success. Suppliers keep the force package ecosystem under full military and political control by using their own assets on behalf of the recipient.

### **Why WaaS Matters: Cocooning Bilateral Relations**

In principle, WaaS is a tried and tested approach to support allies that has been in use at least since the early modern era. The need to develop new warfighting concepts in response to changing strategic challenges, the growing importance of cutting-edge technologies, and the adaptation of commercial applications for warfighting, however, give WaaS a new meaning.

As discussed, deep integration is the key to understanding the strategic relevance of WaaS. Three aspects are particularly relevant:

*First*, WaaS offers a short cut to force transformation by insourcing dedicated force packages provided by an ally willing to lend military power to partners. Nagorno-Karabakh serves as a telling example. While Armenia grossly neglected force adaptation, [Azerbaijan gradually stepped up force modernisation](#). Indigenous improvements were leveraged with Turkey's WaaS offering thus boosting Baku's military power in a limited military operation.

*Second*, WaaS could change the character of bilateral relations because it is about more than weapons supply. By addressing tactics, providing operational support, and offering training, WaaS can stimulate strategic harmonisation between supplier and recipient in parallel with force transformation as illustrated by the [increasingly strong](#)

[Azerbaijani-Turkish bonds](#). This can accelerate the cocooning of bilateral relations vis-à-vis outside interference.

*Third*, to make maximum use of the politico-military leeway offered by WaaS, the WaaS supplier's defence industrial maturity is essential. A WaaS supplier that depends less on foreign products and technologies to produce the assets on offer can better mitigate the risk of third-party export bans that undermine the security of supply and thus protect bilateral relations. This limits the number of potential WaaS suppliers but might also incentivise states to focus even more on a tightly controlled national supply chain.

### **WaaS: Not a One-Size-Fits-All-Solution**

Despite the concept's attractiveness, our comparative analysis suggests that successful WaaS application depends on several factors:

*First*, WaaS rests upon a complex of power relations between partners resulting in mutually beneficial supply and demand. This requires highly congruent ambitions as the recipient gives the supplier a free hand by accepting the turn-key solution. The supplier, in turn, must be willing to offer the full package, take the risk of getting involved in the conflict, and feel at ease with "white labelling" its contribution.

*Second*, conflict characteristics matter. If only one warring party has access to WaaS-like support the power balance becomes highly asymmetric as seen in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this regard, supplied WaaS portfolios play a key role.

*Third*, the behaviour of the WaaS recipient is decisive. In Libya, Field Marshal Haftar probably overplayed his cards as he relied on Egypt and the United Arab Emirates as supporters while also seeking the assistance of the Wagner group. Not only did Cairo and Abu Dhabi part ways throughout the conflict. Haftar's forces also lacked the necessary capability to integrate outside support thus leaving him with a patchwork of loosely coordinated force elements rather than integrated force packages.

*Finally*, the WaaS recipient's defence industrial maturity matters, too. Poland's decision to buy 24 armed Bayraktar TB2 UAV in May 2021 [met local critique](#), as national UAV manufacturers would have reportedly been able to deliver comparable solutions. Robust defence industrial capacities and diverging defence industrial interests between local players and foreign WaaS suppliers can render WaaS integration much more difficult and limits its potential to improve the recipient's military capabilities.

### **Way Forward**

The overfocus of today's defence discourse on technology might become obsolete, if WaaS suppliers combine concepts, operational experience, and comprehensive battlefield support with leading technologies to offer fully integrated force packages.

That's why defence analysts must pay more attention to WaaS and start asking pertinent questions:

Is WaaS a push or rather a pull market? Which nations are ready to supply WaaS or ask for WaaS support? How will the military establishment of WaaS recipients respond to the outside force elements that should be integrated? What is the impact on civil-military relations in the recipient nation? And finally, is it easier to regulate a state offering WaaS than a private military company?

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