

## INTRODUCTION

# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The origin of the Special topic

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**Abstract** · In this introduction to the Special topic on future warfare from the perspective of technology assessment (TA), guest editors Markus Bresinsky and Karsten Weber describe how the idea for the Special topic developed, what contributions they expected, and why it seems important that the TA community reflects on its role in assessing the impacts and repercussions of weapons technology on individuals, societies, and the environment. This reflection on its own role, the authors argue, must be informed by the current state of global affairs. Regardless of whether TA is seen as an honest broker or an issue advocate – it cannot stand aside and ignore the many challenges posed by rapid change, or even massive deterioration, in international relations. In order to reflect on its own role, it must team up with scientists from other disciplines and practitioners from all professions.

*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Über die Entstehung des Special topic*

**Zusammenfassung** · In dieser Einleitung zum Special topic über die Kriegsführung der Zukunft aus Sicht der Technikfolgenabschätzung (TA) beschreiben die Gastherausgeber Markus Bresinsky und Karsten Weber, wie die Idee zum Special topic entstand, welche Beiträge sie erwartet haben und warum es ihnen wichtig erscheint, dass die TA-Community ihre eigene Rolle bei der Bewertung der Folgen und Auswirkungen von Waffentechnologien auf Individuen, Gesellschaften und die Umwelt reflektiert und sich dabei am aktuellen Weltgeschehen orientiert. Ob die TA als honest broker oder als issue advocate verstanden wird – sie kann nicht einfach daneben stehen und die vielen Herausforderungen ignorieren, die der rasche Wandel, um nicht zu sagen die massive Verschlechterung, in den internationalen Beziehungen mit sich bringt. Um

*ihre eigene Rolle zu reflektieren, muss sie mit Wissenschaftler\*innen aus anderen Disziplinen sowie mit Praktiker\*innen aller Berufsgruppen zusammenarbeiten.*

**Keywords** · *technology assessment, warfare, military technology, dual use, politics*

*This article is part of the Special topic “Technology assessment and future warfare: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” edited by K. Weber, M. Bresinsky. <https://doi.org/10.14512/tatup.7286>*

### A somewhat personal note

This introduction to the Special topic at hand does not aim to simply describe its main theme and to summarize the contributions. To begin with, the contributions speak for themselves and don't need interpretation. But more importantly, given the state of global affairs, for us (Markus Bresinsky and Karsten Weber) as guest editors of the Special topic it seems mandatory to reflect on the emergence of the ideas and expectations regarding the contributions to this Special topic, in order to better contextualize the contributions that were actually received, but also to understand why the submissions that we were originally expecting did not materialize. With this introduction we also aim to think about the contributions that the technology assessment (TA) community might need or, better to say, should have provided in order to be able to inform public and/or political debates on the technological implications and impacts of the new security situation in Europe and worldwide. This situation is characterized by global challenges to institutions of collective defense (NATO) and international crisis management (UN, EU, or coalitions of the willing) as well as increasing risks of international armed conflicts as well as interstate and civil wars. At the same time the impact of technology on warfare has tremendously altered the way these conflicts are conducted.

We are strongly convinced that the European TA community should have a voice in often frantic, emotional, and sometimes poorly informed debates about the weapons that Europeans in

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<https://doi.org/10.14512/tatup.7305>

Received: 22. 01. 2026; revised version accepted: 25. 01. 2026; published online: 23. 03. 2026 (editorial peer review)

general and the Germans in particular allegedly would need to defend themselves against any external threats or meet the ambitions of strategic promises given to allies. When public debates take place, in which the acquisition of (tactical) nuclear weapons are discussed, there is an urgent need for a rational voice that points out the effects of their deployment (Jacobsen 2024), but also of the mere construction and possession of such weapons, and that assesses the political and social consequences as well as the expected costs of their acquisition, not only in terms of money, but also in terms of other resources.

p. 18, italics in original) mentions that “[i]n 1902 he [H. G. Wells] also issued a manifesto, *Anticipation of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought*. This was the basis for his claim to be recognized as the first exponent of futurology. It included a chapter on ‘War in the Twentieth Century.’” Thus, if one considers futurology as a precursor of technology assessment, TA has always been concerned with the nasty business of war. It has to be stressed that the OTA conducted many more assessment studies concerning weapons and warfare, for instance about “Directed Energy Missile De-

## *Weapons and warfare as topics of science in general and technology assessment in particular never really took roots.*

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### Developing the Special topic

When we pitched our idea for a Special topic of TATuP on the future of warfare from a technology assessment point of view we were met with affirmation, but also with some reservations and even dismissal.

In science, there is no problem with disagreement, quite to the contrary, but in this case, it was not only disagreement but something more fundamental. In our pitch, and later in the call for papers, we speak about the “the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”. Surely, this reference to a ‘Spaghetti Western’ filmed in 1966 seems a bit odd, particularly to younger scholars, but first, we thought that a bit of irony could help to deal with such serious matters, and second, we explained it: TA itself, and surely many of its methods are offsprings of the Cold War and the thinking about (nuclear) strategies and (nuclear) deterrence. Thomas Schelling’s work “Arms and influence” (1966) and of course Herman Kahn’s famous and at the same time notorious book “On thermonuclear war” (1961) come immediately to mind. These and many other scholars introduced to a wider scholarly audience game theory, scenario techniques, and many more methods that now are being used in TA.

Not only did the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) employ these methods; among its many assessment projects one will find, for instance, a comprehensive study concerning the “The Effects of Nuclear War” (OTA 1979) of the size of a large-scale nuclear attack on U.S. military and economic targets. At that time in history, the assessment of the impact of weapons (of mass destruction) was not only considered indispensable, but good, since it helped, at least in some ways, to prepare for the worst, but first and foremost, it helped to inform politicians and the public about the utter destruction (not only) of all belligerent parties that would have to be expected if an all-out nuclear exchange would actually take place. Therefore, we call this phase of TA thinking about (future) warfare ‘the Good.’

But such assessments are far from being first. In his book “The future of warfare: A history,” Lawrence Freedman (2018,

fense in Space” (OTA 1984) and “The Defense Technology Base: Introduction and Overview” (OTA 1988), to name but two. Particularly the last-mentioned report might ring a bell because in light of the technological dependency of European countries regarding military capabilities, weapons technology as well as European parochialism, there are quite similar public debates going on currently (e.g., Meijer and Brooks 2021). In Europe, however, weapons and warfare as topics of science in general and TA in particular never really took strong roots, although there are some studies concerning the impacts of certain types of weaponry. In Germany, some universities formulated and put into effect so-called ‘civil clauses’ (in German: ‘Zivilklausel’) which are designed to prevent military-related research and development to take place at these universities (Altmann et al. 2025; Bornmüller 2023; Rieck 2024). It might be a bit over-exaggerated, but a bad odor seems to stick to military-related research and development. Or, to put it less colloquial, such research is often considered to be morally wrong or bad (for Germany, acatech 2025); that’s why we call this phase of technology assessment thinking about (future) warfare ‘the Bad.’

We understand that many of the reservations and rejections of our pitch might be linked to the line of thinking just outlined. It is to be respected that individual scholars do not want to be involved in any kind of military-related research; there can be no doubt about that (given this rather wide-spread reluctance, it might be surprising that studies in military history are prominent in Germany; similarly, peace and conflict studies are established and well received in the German scientific community). However, if one thinks this position through to its logical conclusion, then the only possible result is that science, and thus TA, becomes almost impossible. There is most likely no single field of knowledge that cannot be used for military purposes. Not only in technology assessment but in science in general, scholars must be aware of the possibility of dual use – and this is not only true regarding technology, but also, for example, for medicine, psychology, or sociology. It is by no means merely a coincidence that the Joint Committee on the Handling of Security-Relevant

Research of the German Research Foundation, DFG, and the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina does not draw any difference between scholarly disciplines in this regard. Consequently, if not for other considerations, even if one were convinced that military-related research in general and military-related technology assessment in particular is a nasty business better to be avoided, unfortunately it is still necessary (Lavoy et al. 2000) – today, given the current state of global affairs, possibly more than ever. Hence, we name this phase of TA thinking about (future) warfare ‘the Ugly.’ To some extent, that is what Martina Philippi argues for in her research article “TA in der ‘Zeitenwende’”, when she reflects on topics that were always relevant in TA, but which take on a new urgency with regard to possible future (and, of course, current) wars: How does TA respond to actors who deliberately act against the common good –

Yet, in 2026 as well as in the coming years we must face reality as it is. There is no real opposition to Donald Trump’s reign. In the months following his inauguration as the 47<sup>th</sup> president of the United States he dismantled almost all political and judicial checks and balances that could limit his authority and power. Neither the Democrats as the party of opposition nor the Republicans show any sign of resistance that could make a difference. Even if there are objections, or some kind of resistance to his political decisions, policies, or his greedy and abusive behavior, Donald Trump uses all the power of all three branches of the American government, the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary – obviously in complete disregard of the separation of powers – to prosecute and silence his critics. He now even ponders to prevent the midterm elections from taking place. What the U.S. currently experiences is a coup d’etat in slow motion.

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for example, in inter-state disputes or in conflicts between different stakeholder groups? This becomes particularly virulent in the context of dual-use technologies, including research and development. Whether or not one agrees with Philippi’s talk of the ‘Anthropocene’, given the blurring boundaries between civil and military technology, more stakeholders need to ask themselves and face up to the question of what kind of world they and we want to live in.

As if there were not sufficient motives to publish a Special topic on the matter already, there are unfortunately currently, and likely for the foreseeable future, far more urgent and probably also more practically relevant reasons to consider the topic of future warfare from a TA perspective.

### Why it matters, what was expected, and what happened

It is very likely that many, if not most authors, whether of scholarly articles or belletristic texts, would at least like to have once the opportunity to begin a text with a phrase like this: ‘When we talked about the future, we didn’t expect that in a few months we would live in a completely different world. But here we are; everything has totally changed.’ Well, be careful what you wish for. When we started to plan for the TATuP Special topic at hand in the midst of 2024, we certainly didn’t expect that the world would change as dramatically as it did. It is true that already at that time it was rather unlikely that Kamala Harris was going to win the U.S. presidential election. But that Donald Trump would win the election rather clearly and that at the same time the ‘Grand Old Party’ would win the majority in both chambers of the Congress wasn’t very likely either.

One could now argue that although all that is happening in the U.S. is deeply regrettable, given the human suffering as well as the political, economic, and societal fallout in the U.S. and abroad, but that from the point of view of TA in general and regarding this Special topic in particular, all this is of no concern. Yet, this would be utterly mistaken. Donald Trump’s political decisions severely affect science: Climate and environmental research, medicine, and the humanities at large, as only three examples among many others, are cut off from funding, researchers are laid off, and scholars are threatened and silenced. When science is prevented from doing its work unimpeded, the most important and irreplaceable foundation of technology assessment is lost since it needs independent and objective research and researchers, not mouthpieces of the government.

Yet, even if one were willing to admit that this is true one could still argue that this development is of no concern regarding the issues discussed in this TATuP Special topic. But again, this would be outright mistaken since there are eminent challenging topics of technology in defense. Current developments in conducting armed conflict demonstrate the role of technological innovations. Additionally, long-range weapon systems, missile defense systems, unmanned vehicles, drones, not to mention cyber and disinformation campaigns, have taken politicians, other decision-makers, and the public – at least to some extent – by surprise, which gives a taste of the prospective implications of a lack of TA concerning future warfare and its various impacts.

This Special topic was intended to initiate a self-reflection of the TA community in the context of what German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had called the “Zeitenwende” (Scholz 2022), or post-postwar period. Just as the moral and political certainties of the post-1990s period have been undermined by the Russian Federation’s attack on the Ukraine, we thought it necessary for

the TA community to reflect on whether the new geopolitical conditions can justify or even demand a (partial) reorientation of its own activities, whether such a turn should be rejected, or whether this reorientation has already taken place, but under different labels than technology assessment – as the submissions to the Special topic might indicate. It is, however, most likely that we would have conceived the main theme of the Special topic quite differently if we had known what happened next.

*If technology assessment is considered to be an honest broker of information concerning the various repercussions of technology, then there are a multitude of good reasons to assess the impacts of weapons, or ways to remedy these impacts.*

Since we didn't have the benefit of foreknowledge, we expected contributions to the Special topic from a more historical and self-reflexive point of view, for example about the relationship of science and the military in the U.S. (Jacobsen 2016) as a kind of enabler of TA in the form of institutions like the RAND corporation (a U.S. research and development think tank for public military consultancy). In particular, we expected studies on funding policies, and comparative studies that examine what this relationship looks like in Europe and whether it exists at all (Newlove-Eriksson and Eriksson 2023). We also hoped for contributions that would outline a possible role of TA regarding future warfare – given the number of scholarly articles and essays on civil clauses for universities we expected determined pleas for a civil clause for technology assessment or, just to the contrary, a resolute call that the TA community should support the strengthening of the defensive capabilities of European countries. Nothing like this materialized, at least not as a contribution to this Special topic – instead, one can find such debates in newspapers like *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* where two legal scholars argue for more defense-related research at German universities.

We find this silence disturbing, Markus Bresinsky probably for other reasons than Karsten Weber. Without going into too much detail, at least this much should be said here: If TA is to be considered an honest broker of information concerning the various repercussions of technology, then there are a multitude of good reasons to assess the impacts of weapons, or ways to remedy these impacts. With this it is not meant that technology assessment should take an active role in weapons development; it means, among other things, that TA restates all the insights of former studies concerning the impacts of weapons of mass destruction in a densely populated region like Europe. Jürgen Altmann argues in his article “Military technology assessment and preventive arms control” along similar lines, but from the perspective of arms control debates as well as the respective

research: An assessment of the impacts of new weapons technologies – and one might want to add, of dual-use technologies – is needed in order to enter into arms control negotiations on an informed basis. He believes that this is where TA, with its focus on technology and science, has a particular responsibility. Thomas Reinhold echoes this sentiment when he advocates in his research article “Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and the new geopolitics of security” for early assessment of new tech-

nologies in general and computer chips in particular. TA must no longer focus solely on the kinetic effects of weapons; greater attention must be paid to their informational aspects, for example regarding dual use and hybrid forms of warfare.

When former military officers and other (alleged) experts publicly (for instance on LinkedIn and TV channel n.tv, or in German newspapers such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Handelsblatt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Wirtschaftswoche*) call for tactical nuclear weapons for the German army they usually forget to mention where those weapons would probably detonate and bring utter devastation: either on the territory of our Northern and/or Eastern NATO allies—for instance Poland, the Baltic states, or Norway—or on German territory. As an honest broker, one does not have to take a stance in favor or against nuclear weapons, or any other weapon; it suffices to relay the information about the likely consequences of their deployment. The same argument can be made with regard to unmanned, or autonomous weapons systems and their implications for international law, especially for *ius in bello* (in a rather journalistic fashion Shane 2015). Furthermore, the war against Ukraine is a source and trigger of rapid innovation and technological development. Ukrainian expertise will dramatically shift the way how armed forces will be trained, equipped, and fight in future wars. It might be worthwhile to consider the short-, mid-, and long-term repercussions of that development on societies at large as well as on the environment. It might also be worthwhile to think about possible and plausible trajectories of technological developments that might blur the distinction between war and peace, combatants and non-combatants, and – for that matter –, civil and military-related research even more.

But there would be an even more important mission: Technology assessment could and probably should, for instance, think about ways to help rebuild Ukraine's war-torn utilities infrastructure in such manner that it will become the most sustainable, resilient, and cost-effective infrastructure possible. It is most ob-

vious that after the end of the war (which, hopefully, will come sooner than later) Ukraine will be heavily dependent on financial support and know-how provided by the EU and other states. If one accepts this assumption then it seems highly plausible and reasonable that the donor countries, together with all stakeholders in Ukraine, will not try to do business as usual, but to use the opportunity to create something much more appropriate in terms of environmental and social aspects. It might be a misperception on our side, but currently we cannot see such projects – at least not from EU countries. Hence it is of great importance

in her research article “Rethinking participatory technology assessment in security governance” in this Special topic, one must remain realistic: Participatory technology assessment, which has become an increasingly important form of TA in recent years, reaches its limits in the case of military-related technology for many reasons, one of which is secrecy. This poses challenges, for instance, with regard to the individual responsibility of researchers and developers, or the possibility of whistleblowing. TA must ask itself the critical question of what expectations of stakeholders are actually morally justified.

### *The submissions we thought about in advance did not materialize.*

that Miriam Läßle and Hanna Wüller highlight another rather neglected area of research in their article “Future warfare and robust healthcare”, in which TA could and probably should play a greater role: The power outage in Berlin in early 2026 gave a foretaste of what happens when critical infrastructure fails – the causes of which can be manifold. The crucial point here is that many (vulnerable) stakeholder groups are hardly visible, if at all, in the planning of preventive measures – this is where TA, in collaboration with other disciplines and professions, could help to remedy such situations.

Above all, however, it is confusing that we did not receive any submissions that explicitly advocated a specific role, neither as honest broker, nor as issue advocate, for TA in this era of change, given our deliberately provocative call for abstracts – at least not from the technology assessment community in the narrower sense. We truly think that taking a stance in these matters is indispensable to kick-start a productive discussion about where technology assessment should be heading. Considering the discussions of TATuP’s editorial board following the submission of our proposal, it is rather regrettable that there is no contribution that explicitly argues against the involvement of TA in military-related research. In these discussions there were not only honest brokers which informed us about possible repercussions of a Special topic of this kind, but issue advocates who took a firm stand against such an involvement – which is to be appreciated. Yet, without an open debate in the TA community instead of arguments behind closed doors there will be no resolution to the question. After the reelection of Donald Trump as president of the United States and in view of his barely veiled threats against NATO and Europe it seems more and more wishful thinking to expect that Europe will still be protected by the nuclear umbrella as well as the conventional might of the U.S. military. New ways of thinking are badly needed. Every decision that could be made in these matters will come at a price, whether it be a massive rearmament, some kind of appeasement, economic warfare, something in between, or something completely different. In this situation it is perfectly legitimate to act as an issue advocate, or as an honest broker, but ignoring the challenge will not work for sure. Yet, as Dana Mahr points out

In short: Our original concept of a Special topic on future warfare from a TA viewpoint did not work as expected and hoped for. The submissions we thought about in advance didn’t materialize. But all is not lost, as the submissions we actually received are better suited to a concept for the Special topic that we most likely would have developed if we had known in 2024 what would happen after Donald Trump’s re-election. Yet, we feel that an opportunity to start an important discussion was missed (one can learn a lot about similar discussions concerning “transformative science” from Grunwald 2018).

### Conclusion

The parallel development of the global political situation and of the Special topic is a showcase of indeterminacy and consequently unpredictability of the future. As in so many other instances of historic development, the causal arrow seems to point only in one direction – the global situation has had an impact on us as guest editors, on the Special topic, and on the achievement of the objectives associated with it, but conversely, it can be assumed that there will be no significant repercussions. Given this observation one could come to the conclusion that individuals may have a voice in such matters, but lack the capacity to change the course of action in any meaningful way because every single state of affairs determines what will follow. In such a conception of reality human beings are merely spectators of irrevocable events, and freedom of action is, at best, an illusion. Human beings might have free will but not the capacity to make a difference.

Most obviously, such a world view cannot be the foundation of technology assessment, let alone of life. If, on the one hand, TA researchers consider themselves honest brokers they must hope that relaying valid and reliable information makes a difference in decision-making. If, on the other hand, they think of themselves as issue advocates, they must expect that advocacy can change the decisions of others as well as impact public debates and initiatives concerning the creation and enforcement of norms, rules, and provisions to strengthen the international

world order. Although currently this seems rather unlikely, history tells us that such aspirations are not in vain: At some point in time informed discussions will shape the agenda, form, and content of international agreements – the creation of a rules-based international order in the aftermath of the Second World War is the most obvious example. Yet, even if those hopes and expectations regarding the possibility to change the course of history are futile, we must stick to the illusion of being able to make a difference.

On that score, the TA community as a congregation of individuals should try to generate new opportunities to reflect on its role regarding the (study of the) future of warfare and thereby on its aim to make a difference. It should welcome contributions from scholars from other scientific disciplines as well as practitioners of all professions – the submissions to the Special topic at hand prove that to be worthwhile. Hence, in order to support debate it should be announced that at the next Network for Technology Assessment conference, taking place on September 21–23, 2026, in Regensburg, there will be a session on this issue since it seems worthwhile to discuss this intensely. Maybe the debaters will be able to affect the state of global affairs, or some decision-makers, at least to some extent.

**Funding** • This article received no funding.

**Competing interests** • The authors declare no competing interests except that author Karsten Weber is a member of TATuP's scientific advisory board. This did not affect the peer review process.

**Ethical oversight** • The authors confirm that all procedures were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines.

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