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Why is the world at war?

Those of us who remember the sixties recall the antiwar line: 'what if they put on a war and no one came.' The implication was that war was a choice. Richard Haass picked up that thought in his *War of Necessity, War of Choice* (2009). The rub, unfortunately, is that what is a war of choice for one side often becomes a war of necessity for the other: Russia *chose* to make war on Ukraine, but the attack made war a *necessity* for Ukraine if it was not simply to surrender and face extinction as a country.

The rise of war is stunning – and sobering. In absolute numbers, war deaths declined after 1946. However, in 2022 global deaths from conflict nearly doubled from the year before, to 238,000, according to the Institute for Economic and Peace Global Peace Index. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the most noted, but it was less deadly than the fighting in Ethiopia between the national government and forces in Tigray, 82,000 versus 104,000 in 2022. The Ethiopian number won the dubious prize of the most conflict deaths in a single country since the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

The next year added the war in Gaza to the sombre total. The United Nations reported over 30,000 civilian deaths in 2023, three-quarters more than 2022, and the majority of these deaths occurred in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. The proportion of women killed in armed conflicts doubled in 2023, and the proportion of children killed tripled.

WH Auden famously said 'thou shalt not sit with statisticians nor commit a social science', so the numbers need to be treated with caution. The number for Ethiopia, for instance, might be as many as 600,000 since 2020 if deaths from conflict-driven starvation and deprivation of health care were included. For

perspective, crime still kills many more people than war. In 2017, a half milllion people died from homicide, versus 89,000 killed in conflict and 19,000 by groups generally regarded as terrorists.

What is striking about the recent increase is the involvement of states. The world had come to think of violence as mostly intra-state conflict in poor countries as globalisation drove incomes further apart and as it and climate change drove together ethnic or other groups which fought over land, water or values, or often some combination of the three. Darfur was the saddest example of such conflicts. When I was Vice Chair of the U.S. National Intelligence Council in the 1990s, the American military's Transport Command asked us to do an assessment of future humanitarian emergencies in Africa, for the Command knew that it would be called upon to deliver relief supplies and so wanted to know where there might be air or seaports. Sadly, the prediction was relatively easy because the emergencies were sure to emerge from some admixture of ethnic conflict and drought.

Those conflicts have not declined, rather they have increased. In 2016, more countries suffered violent conflict than in any of the previous thirty years. To boot, the conflicts are becoming both more fragmented and more expansive. For instance, number of states and armed groups in the Syrian civil war mushroomed after 2011. Now, the main groups are the governing Syrian Arab Republic and its allies, especially Russia and Iran, and the opposition and its allies, Al Qaeda and affiliates, Islamic States, and the originally mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces.

Moreover, the conflicts have spread regionally, with political, socio-economic and military issues linked across borders, making conflicts longer, more protracted, and less responsive to traditional forms of resolution: witness the inability of the African Union or coalitions of regional states to deal with the wave of coups in Africa in the last several years. The pattern of conflict also means that the victims are disproportionally poor and of color. When Hamas butchered 1200 Israelis on October 7, there was at first grief around the world, but when perhaps a million Tutsis were slaughtered in Rwanda, the world barely noticed – and did nothing to stop the killing.

Still, the question arises: why the greater involvement of states? One easy answer, to commit a social science, would be simply the small sample size. Much of the increased state killing depends on three states, Ethiopia, Russia and Israel. Israel will wind up among the league leaders in killing, but it was forced by Hamas' choice into a war of necessity, though its choice of how to prosecute that war was at least as much a matter of choice as of necessity. And whether Hamas should be regarded as a quasi-state or a terrorist group is mostly a matter of definition.

As always in human affairs, the answer to why more states now is not likely to be singular. Surely, global geopolitics has changed. The world is a long way from America's unipolar moment of the 1990s when only it was truly able to project power around the globe. Now, it is no longer the only country willing to project its power far outside its region: Russia,

China, and even smaller powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and North Korea are all part of the trend. Russia has injected the threat of nuclear war into the equation by changing its doctrine; now Russia will treat an attack by a non-nuclear state that is supported by a country with nuclear capabilities as a joint attack by both. Thus, Russia could in principle consider any major attack on its territory, even with conventional weapons, by non-nuclear-armed Ukraine sufficient to trigger a nuclear response, because Ukraine is backed by the nuclear-armed United States.

If Francis Fukuyama thought that history had ended with the end of the Cold War, he was wrong about that, but he surely was right that at that moment democracy and free market economics reigned supreme. Russia was strapped and China only stirring, so countries that wanted to escape America's democratic embrace had nowhere to turn. A generation and a half later, global circumstances are very different. China advances its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Russia punches above its weight as a failing petro-state. Democracy is under siege: as recently as 1990, countries ranked as non-free by Freedom House accounted for but 12 per cent of the global economy. Now, they account for a full third, equal to the levels when European fascism was on the rise in the 1930s (Mounk and Foa 2018). There seems some credence to the nostrum that 'democracies do not make war on fellow democracies.' And given America's polarisation, any country that is counting on the United States to remain a predictable leader of the western world is making a fool's bet.

A final factor is more elusive. The ending of America's unipolar moment also seems, in retrospect, the beginning of the end of the liberal international order – the American-led combination of the post-World War II institutions, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund with pride of place to market economics. What will replace it is still a work in progress, but to the extent the current world configuration has a shape, it is two loose 'clubs', one around China and the other around the United States. Have international norms withered along with America's unipolar moment? Vladimir Putin plainly thought he could get away with naked aggression, starting a brutal twentieth century war most of us thought would never happen again, especially not in Europe.

The process must have been uncomfortable for China's Xi Jinping, for it contravened the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention that the Chinese Communist Party held dear for more than a half century. Yet while Xi has been careful about supplying Russia with armaments, his bromance with Putin has remained solid. Meanwhile, many countries in the Global South have remained firmly on the fence, perhaps voting with Ukraine in the United Nations but shunning any sanctions while enjoying the benefits of cheaper Russian oil. For them, that liberal international order has reduced global inequality across countries but not within them, and in that sense has failed.

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