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War has strongly returned to geopolitics



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Abstract:

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the communist system and the subsequent triumph of the liberal-democratic model induced in Western societies the dominant idea that war in capital letters had become history.

Three decades later, the world panorama is the opposite: war has returned to the very centre of international relations, nuclear weapons have regained their lost prominence, and Europe is living under the threat of a worrying escalation.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have put the final nail in the coffin of the international order presided over by the USA, have distanced the Global South from Western leadership and are bringing the revisionist powers, China and Russia, closer into line with Iran and North Korea.

In addition, wars are accelerating exponential advances in certain technologies that, in a sorcerer's apprentice fashion, could take on a life of their own and intensify warmongering dynamics.

If the growing rivalry between the major powers is not reversed, the world could end up sleepwalking into the abyss of a devastating war. It is therefore essential to review the intellectual parameters from which the war phenomenon is interpreted.

Keywords:

Geopolitics, War, Strategic thinking, Technology, Great powers, West, Ukraine, Middle East.

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> "The prospects for peace in the world remain bleak, with an increase in intractable conflicts driven by the proliferation of parties, overlapping and diverse causes, escalating geopolitical tensions and growing fragmentation. As such, the intensity and death toll of armed conflict continues to rise, with a year-on-year increase of 37%".
>
> (Armed Conflict Survey 2024)[1]

Introduction

With the decline of the Cold War, the idea became widespread in Western societies that war, as a phenomenon confronting the major powers and the most advanced societies, had been superseded by the progress of history.

The triumph of the liberal-democratic model over its Marxist-Leninist alternative was interpreted as the preamble to a historical moment where the rest of the world would eventually converge towards the model of society—both politically, economically and ideologically—consolidated in Western countries under the banner of individual freedom and moral autonomy.

Francis Fukuyama became the great prophet of what was interpreted as an axial moment in human history. Thus, in his famous article "The end of history?", written in 1989, in which he gives a Hegelian reading—according to Alexander Kojève's interpretation—of what was to become an "absolute moment", one can read:

> "Looking at the flow of events over the last decade, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something fundamental has happened in world history. [...] The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident, first of all, in the total exhaustion of viable alternatives to Western liberalism. [...] What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: it is the end point of the ideological evolution of humanity and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. [...]

[1] Mia, Irene (2024). Editor's Introduction [online]. *Armed Conflict Survey 2024*, IISS. [Accessed: 2025]. Available from: Armed Conflict Survey 2024: Editor's Introduction.

> This does not imply an end to international conflicts *per se*. The world would be divided into a historical and a post-historical part. Conflict between states still in history, and between those states and those at the end of history, would still be possible. [...] But large-scale conflicts must involve large states still caught in the grip of history, which are the ones that seem to be disappearing from the scene. [...]
>
> The end of history will be very sad. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the global ideological struggle that demanded daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, endless technical problem solving, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands"[2] .

However, the passage of time has proved rather the opposite, and the period that began "with rising visions of world peace is ending, three decades later, with growing risks of world war"[3] .

> "Europe is experiencing the most devastating military conflict in generations. Brutal fighting between Israel and Hamas is spreading violence and instability across the Middle East. East Asia, thankfully, is not at war. But it is not exactly peaceful either, as China coerces its neighbours and accumulates military power at a historic pace. If many Americans do not realise how close the world is to being ravaged by fierce, interrelated conflicts, perhaps it is because they have forgotten how the last global war came about."[4] .

These wars have reshaped geopolitics by drawing in dozens of other countries and a host of fearsome non-state actors. The international landscape is thus dominated by a confrontational logic that, from antagonistic worldviews, has relied on force to shape the future global order according to its own values and interests. Moreover, with humanity's

[2] Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of History [online]. *The National Interest*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available in: Fukuyama, Francis - The End of History | PDF | Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel | Liberalism.
[3] Brands, H. (2024). The Next Global War: How Today's Regional Conflicts Resemble the Ones That Produced World War II. *Foreign Affairs*.
[4] *Ibid*.

astonishing material progress, war has become more destructive with potentially apocalyptic profiles.

Countless headlines warn of the possibility of a third world war. The possibility of such a scenario, even if it does not materialise, conditions the decisions of the world's main leaders. Similarly, there is a danger that passions will dominate reason in circumstances where there is a tendency to demonise the opposition and where some sectors argue that there is only room for victory . [5]

In the US, the fear that, in a context of détente, the passage of time will favour China and merely delay the inevitable clash between the two powers weakens those voices calling for a reversal of these dynamics through strategic dialogue akin to that of the Cold War.

Donald Trump's second coming to the US presidency i will likely entail a significant shift—still difficult to assess—in global geopolitics.

Armed conflicts are also functioning as laboratories for the intensification and acceleration of the technological, geopolitical and social transformation processes that are shaking our times, opening up new scenarios for the future conditioned by the major fractures in the international system.

This intensification of the phenomenon of war is a consequence of the global disorder described by Ambassador Dezcallar in the first chapter, in which—paraphrasing Claudio Magris—he states that when one era dies and another fails to be born, we find ourselves in “the age of monsters.”.

However, nothing is predetermined. The multitude of interests at play in a tightly interconnected world, and the fear of the catastrophic consequences of war, counterbalance the forces and inertia driving towards military confrontation.

This document aims to reflect on the phenomenon of war in order to understand the seriousness of the current situation and to give a chance for a more peaceful world. The war conflicts sow the seeds of hatred, revenge and violence violence—and therefore, of new wars—although it also brings societies to realise the necessity of joint efforts in favour of peace. It is as mistaken to fall into anthropological optimism that presents peace as the natural and definitive state of relations between and within nations, as it is to adopt

[5] Pottinger, M. and Gallagher, M. (2024). No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed. *Foreign Affairs*.

the opposing Hobbesian and Machiavellian view that denies the human capacity to build a more just and peaceful world.

How did we get here?

As can be seen in Figure 1, after the Cold War the number and intensity of armed conflicts had been declining. However, in the second decade of the 21ST CENTURY, the process reversed, mainly due to the rise of internationalised internal conflicts, and war regained prominence without corresponding attention in Europe because it affected peripheral regions and had little impact on the material well-being of their societies.

Moreover, some of those wars had incubated radical movements and ideologies that used terrorism as their mode of action. At the end of the Cold War, victory in the Afghan-Soviet war had spurred the emergence of Al-Qaeda—with the 9/11 attacks as its corollary—and the wars in the Middle East had encouraged the appearance of various terrorist militias. The U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 further destabilised the Middle East and served as fertile ground for the rise of the Islamic State. These terrorism multinationals sent shockwaves in all directions.

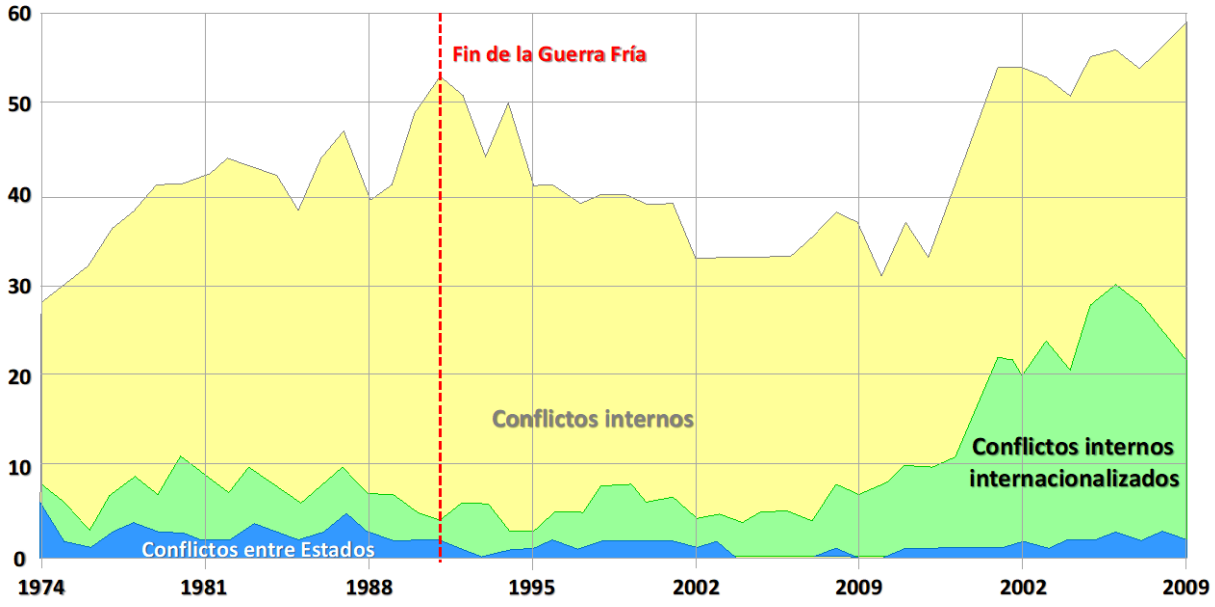


Figure 1: Evolution of the number of armed conflicts from 1946 to 2023. *Source*: own elaboration with data from UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps (UU.SE).

Thus, the national security strategies of the Western powers focused on the fight against transnational radical Islamic terrorism, which was understood as a very serious phenomenon but rooted in a periphery resistant to progress. Fukuyama's thesis was not, therefore, refuted.

All this distracted Washington's attention, although Graham Allison had already warned in a first article in 2012 - followed by another in 2015 and his renowned book in 2017 - that China's rise would eventually generate a dangerous warmongering logic:

> "China's increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea is less important in itself than as a sign of things to come. For six decades after World War II, the US *pax pacifica* has provided the economic and security framework within which Asian countries have produced the fastest economic growth in history. However, having emerged as a great power that will overtake the United States in the next decade to become the world's largest economy, it is not surprising that China is demanding revisions to the rules set by others. The question that will define the world order in the coming decades will be: can China and the United States escape the Thucydides trap?"[6] .

However, it was not until the 2017 US national security strategy (NSS) that Western powers became aware of the sea change in the globalising and democratising trends that sustained the illusion of moving towards the perpetual peace predicted by Kant. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, great power rivalry emerged as the strategic priority:

[6] Allison, G. (2012). Thucydides's trap has been sprung in the Pacific. *Financial Times*.

> "China and Russia challenge American power, influence and interests, and seek to erode US security and prosperity [...] China and Russia are revisionist powers that want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests"[7] .

Thus, in 2020, Robert C. O'Brien, the US Security Advisor, stated:

> "For decades, the conventional wisdom in the US was that it was only a matter of time before China became more liberal, first economically and then politically. We could not have been more wrong: a miscalculation that constitutes the biggest US foreign policy failure since the 1930s. How could we have made such a mistake? Primarily by ignoring the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. Instead of listening to the CCP leadership and reading its key documents, we believed what we wanted to believe"[8] .

However, as explained in the previous *Strategic Panorama*[9] , in 1996 Beijing and Moscow had signed a strategic partnership aimed at opposing the unipolar international order and the US power shaping the global order in its own image without the agreement of the other powers, which at the time were still quite weakened.

Despite the intense rivalry and mistrust between the two neighbouring states, there was a noticeable and progressive rapprochement between them as they distanced themselves from the great hegemon.

While the possibility of a clash of wills with the US and its allies was looming in China and Russia, strategies of rapprochement with non-Western countries were also being developed with the aim of weakening Washington's leadership and dominance of the international system. The resentment that still prevailed in much of the world towards the imperialism and colonialism of the Western powers was harnessed and strengthened for geopolitical purposes.

[7] The White House (2017). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. [Accessed: 2024]. Available from: NSS_BookLayout_FIN_121817.indd.
[8] O'Brien, R. (2020). How China Threatens American Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*.
[9] Pardo de Santayana, J. (2024). Revisionist powers and the global south. *Strategic Panorama 2024*, IEEE. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Strategic Panorama 2024 - CESEDEN.

Inadequate response

As discussed above, little attention was paid to the objective reality unfolding outside the Western world and all reliance was placed on one's own subjective vision, which was given universal scope. As Kissinger points out in his latest book:

> "Leaders think and act at the intersection of two axes: the first, between the past and the future; the second, between the enduring values and aspirations of those they lead. [They must balance what they know, which is necessarily drawn from the past, with what they sense about the future, which is inherently conjectural and uncertain. It is this intuitive sense of direction that enables leaders to set goals and establish strategy"[10] .

Thus, the decisions leaders make regarding national security policies are conditioned as much by what they expect from the future as by their own value system, aspirations and corresponding interpretation of reality.

In this way, excessive optimism led to the dismantling of nearly all the mechanisms created during the Cold War for managing rivalries between Moscow and the Western capitals. There was a reliance on the seductive power of the Western way of life and its associated values, disregarding the sound prudence that historical experience advises.

Likewise, in the most recent US National Security Strategy, from October 2022, it is stated that: “the need for American leadership is greater than ever. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. [...] In response, the United States will lead with our values.”[11]

However, it is clear that this strategy is not being well received outside the West: the rest of the world questions US leadership and resists the values that the West stands for, given that the great American power is deeply divided on a question of values.

[10] Kissinger, H. (2022). *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy*. New York, Penguin Press.
[11] The White House (2022). *National Security Strategy*. [Accessed: 2024]. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combi ned-PDF-for-Upload.pdf.

Moreover, the Armed Forces of Western countries were not adequately preparing for future armed conflicts. In the case of the European capitals, their security rested on the North American 'big brother'; in Washington's case, the prevailing belief was that, although technological superiority showed many weaknesses in limited asymmetric wars, military confrontation with other major powers would be predominantly conventional in nature, a context in which military and technological supremacy was expected to be highly favourable.

> "After the shock of 9/11 in 2001, the focus shifted to terrorist organisations, insurgents and other non-state groups. The ensuing 'war on terror' overshadowed reflection on conflicts between states . War was, of course, an important feature of the post-9/11 period. But it was a highly circumscribed phenomenon, often limited in scale and fought in remote locations against obscure adversaries. For most of this century, the prospect of major inter-state war was a low priority for American military thinkers and planners"[12] .

On the other hand, the dazzling military success of the 2003 invasion of Iraq pointed to very agile, short-duration conventional wars with relatively small forces under the umbrella of highly advanced military intelligence and the use of state-of-the-art means and procedures. Subsequently, there was great confidence that the fourth industrial revolution, the digital revolution, would not fail to play into the hands of those who were leading it: THE US.

> "A little less than a decade ago, there was a growing consensus among many experts about how conflicts would be reshaped in the coming years. They would be faster, fought through cooperation between people and intelligent machines, and rely heavily on autonomous tools such as drones. Space and cyberspace would become increasingly important. [Nuclear threats would persist, but they would be limited compared to the existential dangers of the past"[13] .

[12] Karlin, M. (2024). The Return of Total War: Understanding-and Preparing for-a New Era of Comprehensive Conflict. *Foreign Affairs*.
[13] *Ibid.*

The harsh reality

All in all, since 2017 the rivalry between the great powers has only intensified year after year. From 2022 onwards, the picture has darkened further with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the shadow of nuclear weapons looming over Europe and the subsequent unleashing of a series of armed conflicts in the Middle East, a region that, after decades of low-intensity proxy conflict, offered reasonable prospects for stabilisation and development.

At present, four major fronts, increasingly interconnected, have the potential to further deteriorate the international landscape and, in the worst-case scenario, drag the world sleepwalking towards the abyss:[14]

- In the Ukrainian war, Kiev and its allies face the dilemma of taking a high nuclear risk or prolonging a devastating war with no clear prospect of victory while Moscow finds oxygen in the global south[15] . In 2025, Trump's arrival opens up a big question mark.
- In the Middle East, the buckle of global geopolitics, the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas has destabilised the region and beyond, threatening the onset of several inter-state conflicts including a full-scale war between Iran and Israel[16] . The ceasefire agreed in January this year offers some hope.
- The possibility of war over Taiwan or the multiple nearby points of contention is a contained volcano that focuses the strategic attention of the two giants of global geopolitics, haunts many of the neighbours and may affect the rest of the world.
- North Korea is putting on a surreal show of increasingly threatening attitudes. Its regime is emerging from isolation and is being strengthened by the war in Ukraine and the disagreement between the major powers. The fear in Washington is that if these last two theatres were to ignite with the other two still active, the situation could become intractable.

[14] Westad, O. A. (2024). Sleepwalking Toward War: Will America and China Heed the Warnings of Twentieth-Century Catastrophe? *Foreign Affairs*.
Stavridis, J. and Ackerman, E. (2021). How the U.S. Could Sleepwalk into a War with China [online]. *TIME*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available in: How the U.S. Could Sleepwalk into a War with China [online].
[15] Pardo de Santayana, J. (2024). Russia cast in stone. *Revista de Política Exterior*.
[16] Mia, I. *Op. cit.*

Two other conflicts outside Western powers and associated with unrecognised borders, between India and Pakistan and between India and China, have the potential to become major conventional wars with nuclear implications.

Africa, our southern neighbour, despite the scant attention it receives from Europe, is the continent that has suffered the highest number of war-related deaths in the past year.

> "There, the frictions between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda and between Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the confrontation between Niger (together with Mali and Burkina Faso) and the Economic Community of West African States, in particular Nigeria, pose significant risks of escalation into inter-state conflicts"[17] .

With Donald Trump back in the US presidency something will undoubtedly change in the global war landscape. At the time of writing (January 2025), its scope is still difficult to assess. The war in Ukraine opens a new chapter with the very complex and uncertain challenge of a peace process with potential scenarios in one direction and in the other depending on whether this process affects unity within the EU. The Middle East will test Trump's leadership. His strident statements regarding Canada, Greenland and Panama suggest that his geostrategic focus will clearly be on China and that this challenge requires resizing US power and influence.

> "We are living in times of change and this new administration will be formed on the basis of this idea. They are not here to continue or rectify certain policies. Their spirit is more radical and their will is firm, both because of the characteristics of the character and because they will only have four years to develop a policy that seeks to bring about major changes. The rush is evident"[18] .

[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Portero, F. (2024). Qué Alianza [online]. *El Debate*. [Consultation: 2025]. Available in: Florentino Portero | Qué Alianza.

The Global South takes the floor

Meanwhile, a phenomenon that had been unfolding in the shadows is now emerging into the open. The nations now referred to with the rather ambiguous term “Global South” had been observing how the “alpha male” of global geopolitics was being challenged, potentially losing its privileged position, and that the time for a power shift was approaching. After a long period in a subordinate hierarchy and weary of Western paternalism, they now perceive an opportunity to shake off Western tutelage and to reclaim the role and dignity they believe rightfully theirs.

However, European societies paid little attention to the wars ravaging certain parts of the emerging South. One need only recall the attitude of European states during the Rwandan genocide. It is therefore not surprising that, when the war in Ukraine broke out, the countries of the global South were reluctant to align themselves with the Western powers to sanction the aggressor Russian state.

Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar put it this way: "Europe has to stop thinking that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems"[19] .

The Gaza war has further alienated Western nations from the sensitivities of developing countries by what they perceive as double standards in relation to the war in Ukraine.

The enlargement of the BRICS and its potential development as an alternative forum to the G7 is working in favour of the revisionist powers, as it significantly reduces the ability of the US and its allies to use sanctions and their economic dominance through the dollar for strategic purposes. Russia's economic resilience in the Ukrainian war so far is proof of this.

However, it is still unclear how the BRICS will evolve in the future and how this will affect geopolitical balances.

> "Some of its members, most notably China and Russia, want to position the grouping against the West and the US-designed world order. The addition of Iran, a long-time

[19] Jaishankar, S. (2022). Statements made at the GLOBSEC Forum in Bratislava on 4 June. *Youtube*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Russia-Ukraine War I Jaishankar Calls Out West Again, Questions 'Isn't Europe Funding The War?' (youtube.com).

> US adversary, only heightens the sense that the grouping is now aligned on one side of a larger geopolitical battle . Other members, notably Brazil and India, do not share this ambition. On the contrary, they want to use BRICS to democratise and encourage reform of the existing order, helping to guide the world from the fading unipolarity of the post-Cold War era towards a more genuine multipolarity in which countries can move between the US- and China-led blocs'[20] .

Perhaps most worrying is how the latest wars are fostering a toxic and globally impactful alignment of the revisionist powers with Iran and North Korea, bringing them out of their isolation and reinforcing their middle power profile.

Russia and Iran's military partnership was forged in 2015, when Russia intervened in the Syrian war to support the Basar al-Assad regime. Tehran granted Russia access to a military base in Iran from which it could launch airstrikes.

> "The two countries also established a joint military commission to facilitate high-level engagement between their generals, personnel training and arms procurement. [But since 2022, Moscow and Tehran have taken their defence cooperation to a whole new level. Iran now supplies Russia with combat drones, ballistic missiles, artillery shells, small arms ammunition, anti-tank missiles, mortar bombs and glide bombs. Iran also helped Russia build a drone factory in Russia's Tartaristan region. In return, Russia has agreed to send Tehran fighter jets, attack helicopters, training aircraft and radar systems. It has also shared cyber and intelligence capabilities." [...]
>
> Iran and Russia cooperate on much more than conventional military matters. [The Kremlin has shared secret information and technology to help Tehran develop nuclear weapons. Russia has used its seat on the UN Security Council to shield Iran from accountability for its destabilising actions and violations of international law. Moscow has shared intelligence and provided weapons to Iranian-backed groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis"[21] .

[20] Gabuev, A. and Stuenkel, O. (2024). The Battle for the BRICS: Why the Future of the Bloc Will Shape Global Order. *Foreign Affairs*.
[21] Snegovaya, M. and Alterman, J. B. (2024). Iran and Russia's Fragile Partnership: How America Can Divide Two of Its Main Adversaries. *Foreign Affairs*.

In the case of North Korea, cooperation has extended beyond the supply of large quantities of ammunition to Moscow, to the point of deploying North Korean troops on Russian territory to fight Ukrainian forces in the Kursk region. This has destabilised domestic politics in South Korea and has also raised alarms in Japan.

The strategic and geopolitical alignments surrounding the ongoing wars are seriously affecting the struggle for the reconfiguration of the future world order between Western powers and the revisionist bloc. The recent fall of the Syrian regime after more than fifty years in power is a serious blow to Russia and Iran in the Middle East, but carries the associated danger of strengthening jihadist terrorism regionally and globally. Moscow and Tehran have responded by signing a comprehensive strategic partnership on 17 January.

All of this indicates that, despite Washington still enjoying global military primacy, the prestige and influence of the West are being eroded and called into question.

Global warfare in figures

The number, intensity and duration of conflicts in the world are at their highest level since before the end of the Cold War. Wars are increasingly difficult to address and feature greater armed violence amid a proliferation of actors, complex and overlapping motives and global influences, not least the progressive internalisation of internal conflicts.

This trend is driven by intensifying competition between great powers and the more assertive foreign policies of many emerging powers within a context of gradual geopolitical fragmentation. The recent *shocks* of the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine have added to the woes of fragile states and regions, reinforcing the causes of conflict while reducing resources to resolve or at least mitigate them[22]

[22] Mia, I. *Op. cit.*

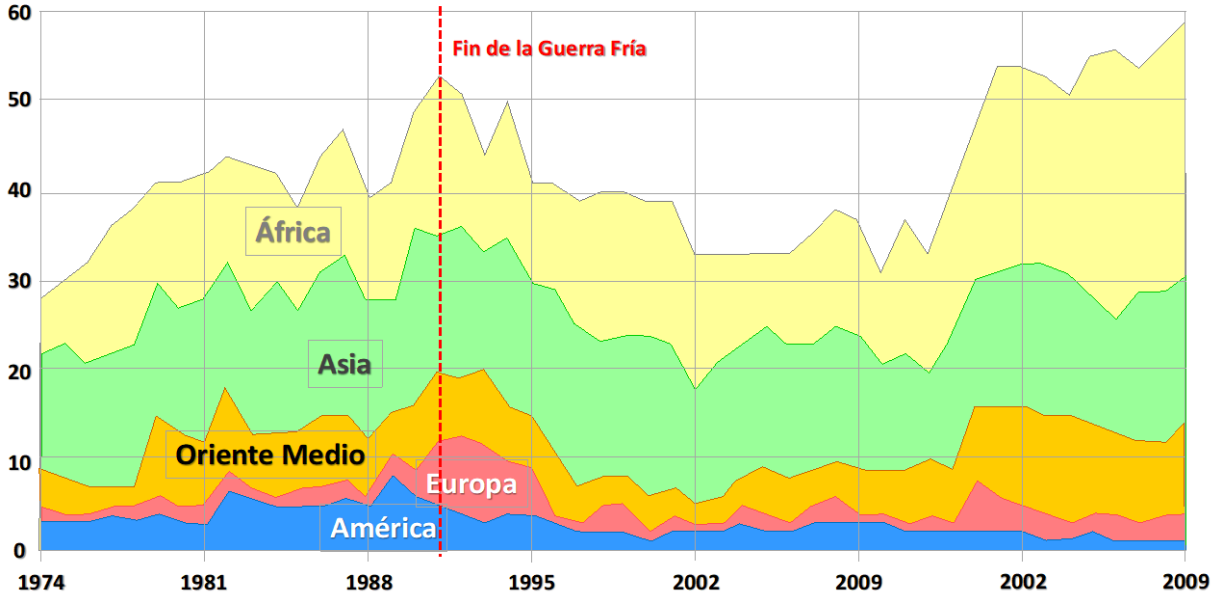


Figure 2: Number of state armed conflicts by region from 1946 to 2023. *Source*: own elaboration with data from UCDP Charts, Graphs and Maps (uu.se).

In 2022 there were 55 active conflicts with an average duration of between eight and eleven years. A decade earlier there were 33 active conflicts with an average duration of seven years[23] . In addition to the two wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, there were active armed conflicts in 50 other states in 2023. As can be seen in Figure 2, the largest number of conflicts are taking place in Africa, followed by Asia and the Middle East.

Globally, the intensity of armed conflicts has increased in the period from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024 with 17% more fatalities on average per conflict. Deaths from violent events increased by 37% year-on-year and reached almost 200,000 worldwide. This points to an increasingly challenging situation in terms of humanitarian, stabilisation and reconstruction needs.

The highest death toll was in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 62 631 deaths and a increase over the previous year, followed by the Middle East and North Africa with 52 164 cases

[23] According to the *Uppsala Conflict data program* available at: https://ucdp.uu.se/year/2022.

and a 315% increase; Europe and Eurasia with 38 789 deaths, an increase of 2%; Asia with a 3% drop to 21 347 and the Americas with 17 845 deaths, a 9% decrease .[24]

War as a technological laboratory and accelerator of change

Major wars have always served both as laboratories of military innovation and as accelerators and instigators of profound geopolitical change. In this case, with the world in the midst of a Heraclitian revolution, the phenomenon has become even more incisive.

Moreover, global powers are closely observing the nature of warfare to draw military lessons and assess the effectiveness of war as a geostrategic tool. The conclusions they reach—as is the case with China in relation to Taiwan—may determine future behaviours.

With all parties involved in conflicts facing existential threats, both in Ukraine and the Middle East, these wars have assumed a total character and are unfolding across all domains—land, sea, air, cyber, space, and cognitive—thereby turning theory into reality. Nevertheless, the fear of nuclear escalation imposes certain limits.

As wars become protracted, their total character has necessitated the consumption of vast quantities of ammunition and other military resources, bringing about a renewed need to resort to a war economy.

> "The era of limited warfare is over; the era of total conflict has begun. Indeed, what the world is witnessing today resembles what past theorists have called 'total war', in which combatants marshal vast resources, mobilise their societies, prioritise war over all other state activities, attack a wide variety of targets, and reshape their own and other countries' economies. But because of new technologies and the deep linkages of the globalised economy, today's wars are not a mere repetition of old conflicts"[25] .

The interaction of a phenomenon of such magnitude with new technologies, already in full development before 2022—and which are now finding the opportunity to experiment—creates enormous synergies. Thus, for example, AI is making available an immense

[24] Mia, I. *Op. cit*.
[25] Karlin, M. *Op. cit.*

volume of real data, without which progress would be very difficult, that only a high-intensity armed conflict could provide.

> "Artificial intelligence (AI) has enabled the proliferation and utility of unmanned systems both in the air and underwater. Drones have transformed battlefields and the need for counter-drone capabilities has exploded. The strategic importance of space, including the commercial space sector, has most recently been highlighted by Ukraine's reliance on the Starlink satellite network to connect to the internet"[26] .

However, we are again seeing wide, entrenched fronts combined with artillery hammering, reminiscent of scenarios of the past that were thought to have been overcome. Satellites and drones, used on a massive scale, have made the battlefield transparent, making it difficult to concentrate the forces needed for the offensive and inducing stalemate.

Another surprise has been the massive use of lower-cost, less technologically developed drones and missiles to overwhelm defences, which have prevailed over more sophisticated means.

> "Advances in AI and autonomous systems, combined with a new generation of commercially available technologies and reduced manufacturing costs, are enabling armies and armed groups to bring "mass" back to the battlefield"[27] .

Moreover, it is much more expensive to defend against a massive attack with less advanced means than to execute it.

> "So when, in April 2024, Iran launched more than 300 weapons against Israel, including one-way attack drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles with the support of the US and a handful of Middle Eastern countries, Israel repelled almost all the

[26] *Ibid*.
[27] Horowitz, M. (2024). Battles of Precise Mass: Technology Is Remaking War-and America Must Adapt. *Foreign Affairs*.

> weapons. But at what cost? One report suggests that launching the attack cost about $80 million, but defending it cost $1 billion."[28] .

In both Ukraine and the Middle East, the importance of combat in maritime spaces is also becoming apparent. The vulnerability of warships to aerial and maritime drones makes it necessary to rethink the use of naval power and, in particular, that of large fleets.

> "Safeguarding freedom of navigation has historically been one of the US Navy's primary missions. But its inability to secure the Red Sea has cast doubt on whether it can fulfil that mission in an increasingly turbulent Indo-Pacific"[29] .

It is noteworthy how Turkey and Iran—countries not traditionally regarded as leaders in military innovation—have surpassed both Russia and other European nations in the development of drones. This, together with the operational value that these cheap and easy-to-produce means are acquiring, raises the number of states and actors of strategic relevance.

Moreover, the use of these new technologies is also becoming more widespread in armed conflicts in less developed nations. In Sudan, for example, both insurgents and the government are using drones and algorithms in their fighting .[30]

In a context saturated with remotely guided weaponry, electronic warfare is gaining immense importance. Russia is using it with considerable effectiveness, which has, for instance, reduced the accuracy of long-range artillery systems, such as the HIMARS, against their targets by over 90%.

A technology currently being tested by the Americans and British in the Middle East against aerial drones, and which could reduce the cost per shot in defending against drone swarms, is directed energy weapons: systems that use highly concentrated energy, such as lasers or particle beams, rather than a solid projectile . [31]

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[28] *Ibid*.
[29] *Ibid*.
[30] Milley, M. A. and Schmidt, E. (2024). America Isn't Ready for the Wars of the Future: And They're Already Here . *Foreign Affairs*.
[31] Horowitz, M. *Op. cit*.

Quantum technology also threatens to revolutionise the art of warfare. Although it still faces great technical challenges, it will be able to make any communication undecipherable. In a theatre of warfare where all kinds of command and information transmissions occur over vast distances and where the attempt to jam them through electronic warfare is vital, whoever gets ahead in this area can nullify much of his opponent's combat capability .[32]

The pace of change and progress in warfare has been frenetic. In the case of AI, innovations are introduced every two weeks or so. Thus, having research and development, as well as a military industry of its own, is crucial in this context of permanent adaptation, as it makes it possible to react more quickly and appropriately to new weapons and technologies by creating the appropriate countermeasures . [33]

Whereas prior to 2022 grey-zone and hybrid warfare were seen as the methods by which revisionist powers challenged their rivals, they are now complementary means of harassment beyond traditional battlefields. Cyberattacks are the most commonly used method for this purpose, necessitating the protection of critical infrastructure. States will need to bolster their cyber defences through a combination of regulatory measures, new legislation, and novel technical efforts that can complicate the attackers' ability to penetrate networks.

> "As digital technology becomes increasingly integrated into all aspects of our lives, the importance of cyber security cannot be overemphasised. Studies suggest that the damage caused by cybercrime could reach $10.5 trillion per year by 2025, so the need for robust defences should be quite evident"[34] .

The longer these ongoing wars last, the more radical the transformation will be. The knowledge and experience gained give a great advantage to the actors involved in these struggles. Thus, for example, although it may seem counter-intuitive, Russia, if it does not collapse, will emerge stronger because it has knowledge and experience in the use

[32] Giles, M. (2029). How quantum weapons will change the wars of the future [online]. *MIT Technology Review*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: How quantum weapons will change the wars of the future. MIT Technology Review.
[33] Horowitz, M. *Op. cit.*
[34] SentinelOne (2024). What is Cyber Security? Types, Importance & Threats [online]. *SentinelOne*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available from: What is Cyber Security? Types, Importance & Threats.

of new technologies in the field of warfare of enormous strategic value. For Beijing, which aspires to have state-of-the-art armed forces, this increases the value of its ties with Moscow.

Again the threat of mutual assured destruction

Perhaps the most influential factor in the geostrategic reconfiguration of the world is the renewed prominence of nuclear weapons. In addition to Putin's threat of its use in the Ukrainian war, China is increasing its nuclear arsenal at a rapid pace. According to the annual report to the US Congress:

> "By mid-2024, the People's Republic of China (PRC) surpassed 600 operational warheads in its arsenal and will have more than 1000 by 2030, much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels. The PRC will continue to build up its forces until at least 2035[35] ".

By 2033, China could possess 1,500 deployed nuclear warheads, equalling the number held by the United States and Russia, and fundamentally transforming the global nuclear balance. Will Washington allow a combined Moscow and Beijing to clearly surpass its own nuclear capabilities? What course of action will India ultimately take, and consequently Pakistan? How will Israel respond if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold? What steps will other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey take? And in the Far East, how will Japan and South Korea act in the face of North Korea's continued provocations?

Bob Woodward, in *War*[36] , his latest book, describes a fact that had already been published by Jim Sciutto[37] on *CNN* in March 2024. According to both journalists, at the end of 2022, US intelligence services, based on information from inside the Kremlin, put

[35] U.S. Department of Defense. (2024). *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024, Annual Report to Congress* [online]. U.S. Department of Defense. [Accessed: 2025]. Available from: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024.
[36] Woodward, B. (2024). *War*. New York, Simon & Schuster.
[37] Sciutto, J. (2024). Exclusive: US prepared 'rigorously' for potential Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine in late 2022, officials say [online]. *CNN*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Exclusive: US prepared 'rigorously' for potential Russian nuclear strike in Ukraine in late 2022, officials say | CNN Politics.

Putin's chances of using the tactical nuclear weapon at 50% when the 30,000 troops deployed and isolated north of the Dnieper River were at risk of being annihilated.

Nor can the possibility of accident or human error be forgotten. A recent article in *Foreign Affairs* reads:

> "Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it has placed approximately 30% of its estimated 5580 nuclear warheads in an unsustainably precarious situation. Early in the war, concerns that the invasion would increase the danger of a nuclear detonation or accidental explosion focused on the risk to Ukraine's four nuclear power plants and Russia's threats to intentionally escalate the conflict beyond the nuclear threshold. But the more Ukraine tries to attack targets inside Russia, the clearer it becomes that Russia's unwillingness to adequately protect the nuclear arsenals it has stockpiled in its west - which are now within range of Ukrainian missiles and drones and even Ukrainian troops - poses a serious risk."[38] .

This is reminiscent of the Cold War, when deterrence was the main component of the strategic dialectic that pitted the two blocs against each other.

> "Today, almost every debate about US foreign policy and national security boils down to the challenge of deterrence, which is one of the keys to managing escalation - a task that, while neither glamorous nor rewarding, largely determines Washington's policy in both Ukraine and the Middle East."[39] .

Similarly, the development of AI is not only revolutionising the battlefield, but if left unregulated, something that is being pursued with great effort - so far to no avail - it could, in a sorcerer's apprentice fashion, create an out-of-control dynamic. Progress is exponential and its value as a tool lies in the speed of response and integration of innumerable factors, making human intervention increasingly marginal. Kissinger went so far as to assert:

[38] Moon, W. (2024). How the War in Ukraine Could Go Nuclear-by Accident. *Foreign Affairs*.
[39] *Ibid*.

> "We are in the classic pre-World War I situation where neither side has much room for political concession and where any disturbance of the balance can have catastrophic consequences. [The fate of humanity depends on whether the US and China can get along. The rapid progress of AI, in particular, leaves them only five to ten years to find a way"[40] .

Diversity of actors involved

Another crucial aspect of the new era of more comprehensive conflicts is the increasing number and diversity of actors involved. Whereas past wars saw the proliferation of terrorist groups, various militias, and improvised armies, we must now add traditional conventional forces and technology companies, along with numerous actors active on social media. Some of these non-state forces are surprising observers with their military achievements and strategic impact, such as the Houthis in Yemen who, with Iranian support, are challenging the U.S. Navy and seriously affecting navigation along the Suez Canal route.

The involvement of many mercenaries and volunteers—both national and foreign—fighting alongside regular forces on both sides of the Ukraine war is also evident. Additionally, through mobile phones and numerous apps, anonymous citizens can provide highly valuable real-time military information, further blurring the line between combatant and non-combatant without even wielding a weapon.

The way citizens follow war events has changed completely. In the Ukrainian war, there has even been talk of the first open-source war.

The battle for the narrative, which accompanies and forms part of the wars themselves, is being greatly enhanced by new communication technologies. This has led to enormous, largely futile, efforts to combat disinformation. However, it should be borne in mind that the first casualty in all wars is the truth, not only in defence of the legitimacy of the cause, but also as a means of facilitating surprise, which is essential for military advantage.

[40] Kissinger, H. (2023). Henry Kissinger explains how to avoid world war three. *The Economist*.

A perspective from Spain

The geographical distance between Spain and the battlefields of Ukraine and the Middle East also reduces the immediate impact of these wars on Spanish territory. The Spanish troops deployed on NATO's eastern flank do so, in principle, out of commitment and solidarity with their allies. Nevertheless, the outcome of the war in Ukraine could have a decisive influence on the future of the European Union, to the extent that its potential rupture cannot be ruled out.

When the war in Ukraine ends—and depending on how it concludes—European countries will need to devote significant military and political effort to securing the eastern flank. In any case, the Spanish state will be compelled to significantly increase its defence spending.

A further concern linked to this is Russia's presence and attitude in Africa, where it seems to be here to stay. This presents itself as an obstacle to Spain's and the EU's essential relations with the continent and, in particular, to security strategies aimed at the region. Equally worrying is the possibility that the Kremlin might instigate the destabilisation of one of the southern neighbours as a means of forcing Western powers to divert attention and resources in that direction.

The numerous conflicts in Africa and their intensification are a serious obstacle to the continent's development, can have a direct impact on Spain's security, and affect and, above all, will affect demographic pressure in the direction of Europe. It is only a matter of two to three decades before one out of every four inhabitants of the world will be African[41] . All of this is a priority for Spain, which faces the challenge of convincing the rest of Europe that the southern flank, its stability and development are decisive for the future of the entire Old Continent.

In the case of Middle East conflicts, these can have many ramifications. In addition to the potential economic and energy consequences, there are the diplomatic consequences of differences with Tel Aviv. If tensions escalate and fully reach Iran, they could have a very serious global impact.

[41] Robledo, R. (2024). Waiting for the barbarians [online]. *Strategic Overview 2024*, IEEE. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Strategic Panorama 2024 - CESEDEN.

Similarly, we cannot help but wonder what consequences the despair and pain of the Palestinian population as a result of the Gaza war might have, both in the Middle East and beyond. Will the development of induce a new version of jihadist terrorism or intensify the existing one? Will it send shockwaves to European societies or to the Sahel, the region where, until now, this terrorism has grown the most?

The warlike climate of rising tensions is also seriously affecting the cyber security of Spain and its European partners. This can be expected to continue and even intensify even if some kind of peace is achieved in Ukraine.

Reflection on the nature of war

The philosopher and Jesuit Carlos Valverde considered the human being to be a disconcerting reality. He did not view this in a positive or negative sense, but rather as the inability to interpret, explain and foresee human behaviour down to its last details and consequences[42] . Thus, there would be no theory capable of comprehending human phenomena in their entirety. There would always remain, in some way, man's ability to surprise himself.

Nothing today seems more disconcerting than war, its extreme violence and destruction, and the danger that it could drag the planet towards Armageddon. In the Anglo-Saxon world—and by extension, in the West—war has mainly been interpreted through the lenses of idealist and realist theories, both of which are based on contradictory and maximalist philosophical foundations (on the one hand, Rousseau's notion of man as good by nature—the noble savage—and, on the other, Hobbes' conception of man as a wolf to man). This has hindered, or at least complicated, the necessary dialogue between these two schools of thought.

Falling into anthropological optimism disarms societies in the face of the fact that contradiction and, consequently, conflict is in human nature—and where there is conflict there is the potential for it to degenerate into war—and so is the capacity of human beings to deal with conflict with greater or lesser success. There are examples to suit all tastes in history.

[42] Valverde, C. (1996). *Genesis, structure and crisis of modernity*. BAC.

The most commonly used arguments that we were moving towards an increasingly peaceful world were as follows:

- The democratic peace theory: democracies do not wage war against each other. This would only apply if we were truly moving towards an increasingly democratic world, which does not seem to be the case, nor is there an absolute guarantee that, if it were to happen, there would be no more wars. Although few, there have been wars between democracies, and in particular between the US and Britain. However, there have been numerous wars that both states have waged against non-democratic countries.

  Since the US is the guarantor of the security of all major democracies, one wonders whether democratic peace might not in reality be the peace that the great American power is projecting on its own empire.

- The theory of economic interdependence. Although with interests thus created it is reasonable to think that the likelihood of war is reduced, history shows that it is not eliminated.

- Kant's perpetual peace. The influential Prussian philosopher wrote in 1795 a pamphlet entitled *Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein filosophiscer Entwurf,* which could be translated as *Towards Perpetual Peace. A philosophical proposal* and summarised, paraphrasing the gospel: "Seek first of all to approach the ideal of practical reason and its justice; the end you are aiming at - perpetual peace - will be given to you as well"[43] . Well, since then there have been three total wars in Europe and countless others of a limited character. There is no objective reason to believe that Kant's moral imperative will be simply obeyed by mankind. Rather, the facts prove the opposite.

On the opposing side of anthropological pessimism we see how Mearsheimer, who has been able to predict in great detail what happened in the Ukrainian war[44] and who presents himself as a new Machiavelli, states that: "I am a realist, which means that I

[43] Kant, I. (1795). *Towards perpetual peace. A philosophical design*. Alamanda.
[44] Mearsheimer, J. J. (2015). *Why is Ukraine the West's Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer* [online]. Lecture delivered at the University of Chicago, 25 September. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Why is Ukraine the West's Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer - YouTube

believe that the great powers dominate the international system and constantly compete with each other in security matters, which sometimes leads to war"[45] .

The American professor bases his theory on the premise that the pursuit of increased security is the decisive factor governing the relations between great powers, and consequently, the international system. It is true that when concern over security is very high—as it is today—it becomes a priority and dominates the international landscape. However, this is not necessarily always the case. It was not, for example, during Yeltsin's leadership of the Russian Federation or under Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin in the People's Republic of China.

However, the main problem lies in basing a theory of international relations on a thinker as obscure as Hobbes, who denies free will,[46] or as amoral as Machiavelli, who argues that, in the pursuit of his political objectives, the end justifies the means, erasing all ethical limits and referring everything to the results achieved. In the end, everything revolves around power because the most powerful ends up imposing itself and the narrative or discourse of values is reduced to one more means of domination.

When no window to hope is opened, people end up believing that everything is darkness. It is a different matter to bear in mind that Hobbesian and Machiavellian behaviour cannot be ruled out on the international scene, which calls for prudence. The balance of power not only facilitates the management of such an eventuality, but also reduces the perception of threat and facilitates the creation of confrontation management mechanisms. This healthy measure of caution was discarded after the Cold War as unnecessary in a world that seemed to be leaving behind nineteenth-century mentalities and marching inexorably towards the triumph of liberal democracy that would eliminate the contradictions that lead to war . [47]

Moreover, the experience of war itself leaves a deep mark on the interpretation that human beings make of the reality that surrounds them. Thus, for example, the thought of Hobbes himself (1588-1679) was conditioned by the bloody English civil wars (1642-51), which coincided with a key period of maturity in his philosophical production . [48]Thus, in

[45] See: Mearsheimer, J. J. on his own website: Mearsheimer | Home.
[46] Kreeft, P. (2023). *Socrates Children*, *Volume III, modern philosophers*. World on Fire.
[47] Fukuyama, F. *Op. cit.*
[48] Kreeft, P. *Op. cit*.

times of war and intense geostrategic confrontation, such as those we are currently experiencing, realist theories gain currency.

Conversely, the devastating experience of war and violence can also induce a deep vocation for peace and a need for reconciliation. This was the case with the birth of the European project after the two world wars or Nelson Mandela's emphasis on forgiveness in the African spirit of UBUNTU[49] . For UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "Mandela is an example that inspires us to improve the world. A central aspect of his civil battle was forgiveness"[50] .

Neither idealists nor realists succeed in capturing the full complexity of the human condition in the face of the phenomenon of war. Claudio Sánchez Albornoz stated that "freedom makes history and history makes freedom"[51] , which means that human societies and their leaders have the power to choose between the path that leads to peace and the path that leads to war. Neither option is determined, although each historical moment finds circumstances and conditions more or less favourable to one or the other.

At present, the ongoing wars and fears of potential ones—especially regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea—represent a serious obstacle to a reasonably just and peaceful international system.

In recent years, when the trend towards more warlike activity has continued to intensify and technological dynamics could have counterproductive effects, strategic dialogue between the major powers is more necessary than ever.

If the current situation were to continue for several decades and, moreover, if the animosity between the antagonistic powers were to continue to grow, sooner or later the world would end up sliding down the slope of a devastating world war.

The priority should therefore be to reverse this confrontational tendency by establishing confidence-building measures and coexistence mechanisms. As Graham Allison has long proposed, the emphasis should not be on winning the contest between the great powers,

[49] Mthembi-Mahanyele, S. (2024). *South Africa's foreign policy* [online]. [IEEE Analysis Paper 49/2024, 10 July]. [Accessed: 2025]. Available from: Opinion Papers - CESEDEN.
[50] Gisotti, A. (2022). Forgiveness will set you free: The lesson of Nelson Mandela [online]. *Vatican News*. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: Forgiveness will set you free: The lesson of Nelson Mandela - Vatican News.
[51] Valverde, C. *Op. cit.*

but rather on preventing war between them and, at the same time, ensuring that the rivalry that grips them does not spread the phenomenon of war elsewhere.

It can also be argued that if the West is to have a positive influence on the rest of the world, it must begin by resolving its own internal contradictions. Societies so fractured and polarised around their own values cannot impose themselves in the dispute over the design of the future international order, let alone claim to have their worldview accepted as a universal reference.

Conclusion

After the Cold War, the excessive faith that peace would find its way through globalisation and the progressive democratisation of the world weakened the mechanisms and mental attitudes to oppose opposing wills which, however much they were despised, had not ceased to exist. This "paradoxically" facilitated the advance of the war phenomenon.

These ideas prevailed in Western societies at least until 2017, when the US NSS recognised great power rivalry as its strategic priority.

In this way, the revisionist powers, which in 1996 had signed a strategic partnership whose main objective was to put an end to the unipolar order presided over by Washington, found the way clear to strengthen their international position.

While Beijing and Moscow understood the importance of cultivating relations with the countries now referred to as the Global South, Western nations—more prone to introspection—paid little attention to the armed conflicts occurring there.

Now, in the struggle to shape the future global order, war has regained the limelight: Europe is living under its effects, the shadow of nuclear weapons is once again looming over its territory, and ongoing armed conflicts threaten to escalate dangerously.

Moreover, there is a risk that the law of the pendulum will swing Western societies from Kantian optimism to warmongering jingoism. Neither idealism nor realism holds the key to addressing the challenges facing the world. We must not lose confidence in human freedom to find the path to peace, nor rule out the possibility that it may opt for the path of war. We must prepare for war, while building an international context conducive to peace.

For the time being, it would be enough to ensure that the trend of intensifying rivalry between the great powers gives way to a certain détente and a strategic dialogue at the highest level to avoid an undesirable outcome and reverse the deep mistrust and hostility between the opposing parties.

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