Opinion Paper

115/2026 09/11/2026

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Wars of Fracture for a New International Order



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Abstract:

This article analyzes the global situation from the perspective of the breakdown of the globalization era and the competition for world economic dominance between the United States and China. It describes the evolution of international relations since the fall of the Soviet Union and proposes the term "fracture wars" because they shatter globalization precisely at choke points —critical points where trade and technological exchanges converge. The wars in Ukraine and Iran fall into this category. In both cases, the radical shift in the EU's stance is also evident, abandoning its traditional idealism in favor of a more bellicose rhetoric. The result will be a less interconnected and globalized world, more fragmented and with limited trade between the blocs that emerge from this decades-long process.

Keywords:

Globalization, Global South, multipolarity, proxy war, unipolarity, war of fracture.

How to quote:

ALONSO MARCOS, Antonio. *Wars of Fracture for a New International Order*. Opinion Paper. IEEE 115/2026.

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Introduction

What do the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Yemen have in common? Many explanations can be offered for the geopolitical landscape of current conflicts, and this is just one more proposal. Human beings, as they are rational and social animals, tend to see recurring patterns and to find some logic in the complex world unfolding before their eyes. Often, analyses convey ideas such as everything is static and maps don't change, ignoring History. However, it's essential to remember that in previous centuries, leaders organized international order through wars and their subsequent peace agreements, broken almost immediately, according to their national interests. Thus, war is not an exception in the history of humanity, but the constant. Is it something ingrained in the human soul? Is it a phenomenon due to ambition, greed, the concentration of political power in a few hands? Why this is so is a question that polemologists have grappled with, but it is not the central theme of this article. Why in recent decades, at least since 1991, seemed that war had been banished from this world is something that must be answered from Sociology, Psychology and International Relations, because that perception is nothing more than an illusion[1].

Indeed, it would be necessary to explain what mechanisms led public opinion to believe that armed conflicts were something of the past, that they were no longer used as just another instrument in relations between states, following the reasoning of Carl von Clausewitz in *On War* (1832), when he stated that «War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means. We say, mixed with other means, in order thereby to maintain at the same time that this political intercourse does not cease by the war itself.» Therefore, doing an exercise of selective memory, it is possible to think that there were no armed conflicts in Europe since the Second World War, that the world experienced a period of relative calm since 1945, and forget all the wars of independence in Africa and Asia—in addition to those in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan—the guerrilla wars in the Americas, the ethnic cleansing in the Great Lakes and the Balkans, apart from a MENA (*Middle East and North Africa*) region ablaze since the Gulf War and the Arab Spring, as well as the Global War on Terror.

[1]See PÉREZ GIL, L.: «*The definitive repeal of the prohibition on the use of force in international relations*». IEEE Analysis Document 25/2026. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3614440/ieee-2026-derogacion-uso-fuerza-relaciones-internacionales-analisis25.pdf/.

The mirage of peace

Looking at the world from our serene European vantage point of view—or Western, since American soil has never been attacked, except for Pearl Harbor (1941) and September 11 (2001)—, can give us a false picture, far from the real world. Many countries have been living in precarious conditions for decades, suffering the scenario described by Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651): «In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.». Such seems to be the daily reality for billions of human beings on our planet, where only a quarter enjoy decent standards of living.

Only when the scourge of war—or its consequences, whether in the form of refugees or soaring prices—knocked on Europe's door the citizens of the developed world reacted, demanding that their political leaders make any decision to solve the problem. If in the 1990s there seemed to be a prevailing desire for peace, understanding, diplomacy, and conflict resolution, now the main character in the media is one of the Apocalypse horsemen—who, let's not kid ourselves, rarely appear alone—war, demanding harsh punishment for one of the sides, instead of remaining neutrally on the sidelines and calling for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, based on international law and through multilateral bodies.

The construction of the enemy is not a new mechanism. The villain, the archenemy, has been clearly defined in recent years in textbooks, novels, films, and mass media. This led citizens to demand decisive action against such figures. How can we not recall Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, or Assad, among others? All of them, broken toys, puppets in the hands of the great powers; as soon as they were no longer useful, were abandoned and fell from grace, losing power, privileges, and even their lives.

Even so, despite acknowledging that war is not the exception but the rule, it seems that the arrival of the 21st century brought with it a change of model that is gradually taking

shape. Since the 1950s, the EU has been committed to extending its model: peace through trade, human rights over violence, liberal democracy as the supreme political system, civilization versus barbarism. However, something provoked that the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, defended to abandon the uncompromising idealism espoused by her predecessor, Javier Solana, in 2003—despite the recently begun war in Iraq. She introduced *principled pragmatism* as the guiding principle of its foreign policy at the 2016 Security Strategy. The next step, the commitment to punishing Russia in the document presented by Josep Borrell, Mogherini's successor, in 2022—as a consequence of the recently begun war in Ukraine—was shown as the natural evolution of this European vision: from idealism to realism. The culmination of this evolution could be seen in March 2026, when the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stated that Europe could no longer be the guardian of the old rules-based global order. She herself was forced to amend her statement by the President of the European Council, António Costa, but it was not a slip of the tongue; rather, it was a melancholic acknowledgment that the world is no longer what it once was and that the EU cannot stand alone in defending international law, as playing by rules that no one respects anymore would put us at a disadvantage.

Have we reached the end of the era of globalization? What are the characteristics of this new world? Are current wars due to deep-rooted causes or are they part of a «controlled demolition» of the old order?

The end of globalization

By late 1990s, it was quite evident that a new international order was emerging, leaving behind an era of bipolarity, as both superpowers were reaching a series of unprecedented agreements, such as those on disarmament, which constituted what was called the «European security architecture. » This led to the emergence of theories such as those of Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, which pointed either to a change in the nature of conflicts or even to their end. Huntington, in *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993 and 1996), wrote not on «fracture wars» but on «faultline wars, » referring to civilizational clashes which exacerbate ethnic, cultural, or religious differences. With the disappearance of ideological collision between capitalism and communism, civilizations would replace ideologies. Years later, the Alliance of Civilizations was launched as an

attempt to cancel this element as triggerer or intensifier of conflicts. On the other hand, Fukuyama proclaimed *The End of History* (1989 and 1992), starting from the same premise—the "absolute victory" of one of the two sides—, although he later corrected himself, forced by events, because History continued, as did wars and other dynamics of power and influence.

Aware of American preeminence, William Kristol and Robert Kagan founded in 1997 the *think tank* called *Project for the New American Century*, whose main objective was to design a strategy and suggest concrete proposals to consolidate American global leadership in the economic-commercial and military spheres [2].

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century marked the era of globalization. So much so that even China saw it as an opportunity for progress, joining the bandwagon of prosperity fostered by the capitalist model—joining the World Trade Organization at the end of 2001—and achieving double-digit annual GDP growth until the 2008 crisis. The global economic collapse was merged with a previous process: other powers started to defy publicly the US supremacy and called for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq: while the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) met no immediate opposition, the invasion of Iraq (2003) was rejected even before it happened, calls were made for an early withdrawal from Afghanistan (2006), and Vladimir Putin described NATO expansion as a threat to Russia at the 2007 Munich Security Conference [3].

The birth of a new international system

By 2007, rumors were already circulating about the true motivations of the United States for launching a series of military campaigns in the region. In an interview, US General Wesley Clark—NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) from 1997 to 2000—revealed that after 9/11, he visited the Pentagon and a colleague showed him a revealing document: «This is a memorandum that describes how we're going to take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and finally, Iran [4].» There is only speculation about why the United States would

[2]See KRISTOL, W. and KAGAN, R.: «Toward a neo-Reaganite foreign policy», *Foreign Affairs,* 4, 1996, pp. 18-32. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/20047656.

[3]This topic is controversial today, but a dispassionate study of the documents reveals that, indeed, US presidents were aware that Russia considered NATO's eastward expansion a provocation. Numerous documents in the White House archives attest to this. Senator Joseph Biden acknowledged this in a well-known speech before the *North Atlantic Council* in 1997.

[4] See «Gen. Wesley Clark Weighs Presidential Bid: "I Think About It Every Day"», *Democracy Now!,* March 2, 2007.

be interested in carrying out such a plan; but what is undeniable is that they intervened militarily in all of them. There are also doubts about whether the stated purposes for initiating each of these campaigns were genuine. Regarding the latter, why did President Donald Trump decide to attack Iran on February 28, 2026?

Wars have a political purpose and are waged for a reason, to achieve an objective. This is how humanity performed for centuries. It seemed that the entire humankind had undergone a profound transformation in how we manage relations between states—renouncing war after the immense collective disaster of the Second World War—, but we had only adopted a kind of more or less civilized veneer, actually. Thus, instead of outlawing war—as was done after the Great War—an international organization —the United Nations—was simply created. Such forum was useful only to admonish about containing or even directly condemning the use of violence, but without taking any truly effective measures to resolve the underlying problems that had led countries to armed conflict. On the other hand, it proved to be effective at resolving problems between the great powers.

The Charter of San Francisco of 1945, UN General Assembly Resolution 2625 (XXV) of 1970 on *jus cogens principles*, and the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, along with the entire framework for the protection of human rights—both within the UN and in other regional organizations—are the cornerstones of this edifice that aspires to build a peaceful humanity. They sought to establish the foundations of a collective security architecture, where the security of one means the security of all, and where the security of one cannot come at the expense of others. Although wars continued, this framework served as a moral or aspirational point of reference. Nowadays, no one longs for anything like it, and the pronouncements of current political leaders—their words, actions, gestures, decisions, everything—point out in a different direction. Heads of state and government no longer speak of peace, negotiation, or dialogue, but of rearmament and war.

Nor is the EU now interested in seeking peace through trade, its founding and unifying element and its engine of expansion for decades. It has become more aggressive. And just as the United States underwent a shift in mindset, moving from the sweet dream of

Available at: https://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/2/gen_wesley_clark_weighs_presidential_bid

the «unipolar moment» described by Charles Krauthammer in the early 1990s [5] to the reality of China's gradual overtaking, the EU has also taken its time to move from the wishful thinking of the effectiveness of its regulatory power to the harsh setbacks of color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and the responses of neighboring European countries to its ideological agenda, culminating in the power plays carried out by Putin's Russia in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 and, above all, 2022). After decades of Cold War and American preeminence, in Spain it is accepted as natural that the United States is present thousands of kilometers from Washington in the Middle East or that its opinion is considered relevant when its Congress speaks about Ceuta and Melilla, but if its actions are examined carefully it is inevitable to ask why it is assumed as a starting premise that this should be the case.

Nowadays, it is easy to detect this trend that began at the start of the 21st century, when the EU and NATO opted for an eastward expansion, which Russia perceived—and still perceives—as a threat. First, Russia reacted timidly and clumsily, being a victim of the element of surprise; later, it did it more forcefully and violently. Even so, it must be acknowledged that the Russian response fits within a typical escalation of a security dilemma: one state fears an attack from another, leading to an arms race and the formation of military alliances.

Francisco J. Ruiz González pointed out that NATO documents, since its expansion in 2004, reflected an «irresolvable dichotomy» between the newer members fears —who perceived Russia as a bête noire—and the older members—who did not see it that way— and that the latter had to grapple with this situation [6]. He also recalled, in that article, the words of the US ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul: «Developing policies to contain enemies or embrace allies is easy; formulating policies toward strategically important states like Russia, which are neither friends nor enemies, is much more difficult [7]. » The world has changed considerably, as has the perception in Brussels regarding Russia: the consensus among the allies is now much broader and more consolidated than in 2012. NATO and the EU have abandoned diplomacy and negotiation and are only

[5] See KRAUTHAMMER, C.: «The unipolar moment», *Foreign Affairs,* 1, 1990, pp. 23-33. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/20044692 .
[6]RUIZ GONZÁLEZ, FJ: *NATO-Russia relations after the Chicago Summit*. IEEE Analysis Document 24/2012, p. 6. Available at: https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/7468728.pdf .
[7]MCFAUL, M.: «Realistic engagement: A new approach to American–Russian relations», *Current History,* 648, 2001, pp. 313-321. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2001.100.648.313 .

interested in pressuring the Kremlin, punishing it economically, and weakening it strategically, while simultaneously feeding—in every sense—the invaded country. Of course, open channels of dialogue still exist between both sides of Europe, but the deterioration of relations with Russia is evident. This is attested to by the number of mechanisms and initiatives that have been launched in the last five years, including the Coalition of the Willing and the signing of bilateral memoranda of understanding between Ukraine and almost all NATO countries.

Within the EU itself, joint arms procurement has begun through centralized purchasing, grant funds, and the simplification of industrial standards: the EDIRPA instrument for coordinated emergency purchases [8], the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) for medium-term funding, and the European Defence Agency (EDA) facilitating joint contracts. All of this is in addition to the appointment of Andrius Kubilius as the first Commissioner for Defence—something that had been speculated about even before von der Leyen finished her first term—following the extensive Ninisto Report that justified this decision.

It seems that the great powers today disdain diplomacy because it makes them appear weak, leaving war as the only means of conflict resolution. This is merely an instrument, a tool that—unfortunately—leaves a trail of blood and destruction, but which fosters the opinion among citizens that a very high price must be paid to build a more just world—according to each person's perspective, whatever that may mean—a price that must be willingly paid because it is the best course of action. In other words, it seems that if a new international system with new rules is to be built, it will not happen on its own, nor will it come without cost, but rather through the collective trauma of war. Thus, if ties with Russia and China are to be severed, how can this be justified to Western citizens?

Sensu contrario, Russia could end the war in Ukraine quickly by resorting to even more lethal and massive strikes than it is currently using, or especially than it did in the first year of the war. However, it is not doing so due to material incapacity or moral or ethical constraints, but because one of the political objectives of this war of division is precisely to sever ties with the EU and construct a new, fragmented globalization, forming a bloc

[8]EDIRPA stands for *European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act*, the Instrument for Strengthening the European Defence Industry through Common Procurement.

more focused on the Global South. This would be one of the reasons why prolonging the conflict makes sense according to the Kremlin's calculations, where it seems clear that its objective is not the conquest of Ukrainian territory, nor the invasion of the whole Europe, but rather to break relations with the rest of the continent.

It is possible to speculate about who is responsible for this looming divorce—maybe already underway, due to the successive EU sanctions packages against Russia—and various versions will be heard: for Western leaders, Putin is an expansionist who disregards basic human rights, a bloodthirsty figure, a kind of new Hitler [9]; for Putin, they are afflicted by an unbridled Russophobia that seeks to disconnect Russia from its immediate surroundings, isolate it, economically strangle it, dismember it, and usurp its natural resources. Be that as it may, the ultimate result is that this is a war of division that would give way to a world where Russia is no longer connected to the rest of Europe but rather focused on Asia.

With this type of war, the ties and bonds between countries are severed, leaving them part of a distinct and antagonistic bloc. For this reason, they could also be called wars of fragmentation, because the last result is the shattering of a homogeneous globalization into several fragments, as if someone had smashed a marble statue into several sizable pieces.

This conceptual framework—which does not aspire to be defended as an absolute truth, but rather as a proposal for other analytical approaches—helps us understand the war in Ukraine in a way that differs from the term coined as an «unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine. » Accusing Russia now of being a kind of bully that disrespects its neighbor Ukraine, when Russia has been interfering in Ukrainian politics since the very beginning of independence, not since 2014 or 2022; or denouncing it for attacking a sovereign country, as if no one had done so in the last thirty years; or justifying Western support for Ukraine when it is neither a member of the EU nor NATO—all of this leaves many gaps unexplained. What if we consider that it is a war of attrition against Russia, a powerful ally that could come to China's aid in a potential future conflict with the United States [10]?

[9]See also “Merz compares Putin to Hitler after the 1938 Munich Pact,” *Swissinfo*, December 13, 2025. Available at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/merz-compara-a-putin-con-hitler-tras-el-pacto-de-m%C3%BAnich-de-1938/90633314

[10]See FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, J. and PÉREZ GIL, L.: “Russian-Chinese relations during the period of the war in

For this last hypothesis to make sense, a war between the two actors would already have to be underway, something that has not yet materialized. However, it is a possibility that has been speculated about for decades, ever since some authors warned about an «emerging China» and the «yellow peril [11]. » Furthermore, a conflict between the two does exist, manifested in the form of a trade war—which is yet another instrument of economic warfare, less devastating than a conventional war, according to some authors. It is possible to add two more elements: First, China no longer fears the United States reaction to its actions or comments, therefore now dares to respond publicly to any statement or decision it dislikes, considering it as an equal stakeholder. Second, China fostered the adaptation and modernization of its military industry. Both elements seem to point out in the same direction: confrontation, which may be more or less open and declared, depending on the will of the parties involved and how far they are willing to escalate the tensions.

This danger was foreseen by Henry Kissinger in the 1970s and more recently by Graham Allison and his *Thucydides Trap* [12]. Kissinger did all his best to avert that scenario; Allison considers it is almost inevitable. In any case, this would be yet another example of war of fracture, of rupture of the existing international order into a new one, where either the United States will maintain its leadership [13]—the question is for how long, as happened to Sparta against Athens after the Peloponnesian Wars—or China will seize it. Thus, the restructuring of the Middle East currently underway in the Strait of Hormuz also seems to be a response to this power struggle between the United States and China, which is more or less conducted overtly.

Finally, it's important to remember that international relations didn't start in 2020. They are rooted in events and decisions made in previous centuries, which can no longer be simply ignored or dismissed. This is crucial not only for understanding how countries react to the actions of others, but also for examining the arguments and principles they championed to defend their causes, and whether these are consistent with current

Ukraine," *IEEE Analysis Document* No. 10/2026. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3332608/relaciones_ruso-chinas_2026_dieeea10.pdf

[11]See CANCIAN, M. and HEGINBOTHAM, E.: *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan.* CSIS. Rhode Island, Washington, January 23, 2023. Available at: https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan .

[12]See ALLISON, G.: *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Houghton Mifflin. Harcourt, 2017.

[13]See FRIEDMAN, G.: *The Next 100 Years. A forecast for the 21st Century*. *Random House*. New York, 2010.

practices. In fact, the accusation of double standards is one of the most painful—and most common—in international forums, and one that sparks endless debates, fueled by a relentless barrage of «whataboutism».

Conclusions

In conclusion, it could be argued that these proxy wars are very similar to the wars of attrition that occurred during the Cold War, when the two superpowers confronted each other indirectly, through intermediaries. Now, the war is being waged directly between the major powers—the war in Ukraine is, in reality, a war between Russia and NATO—but they all conceal this and pretend to the public that they are unaware of it, so as not to be forced to deploy troops *en masse* or act with the full force of their capabilities. In this way, the war remains at a low intensity level and is prolonged. Thus, a certain «inevitability of conflict» is propagated among the public, framing the «other» as an enemy and justifying all kinds of actions against them.

Paradoxically, although all these events are public and unfold before our very eyes, we seem unaware of the extreme seriousness of this situation and the far-reaching consequences of our political leaders' decisions. Everything points toward open warfare, yet there's a desire to downplay it and carry on as if nothing were happening. In fact, Russia has already shown in the battlefield the extent of munitions of disproportionate power, but that didn't instill terror in the European population.

Furthermore, even when major powers invoke noble principles to justify starting armed conflicts, the ultimate reason for these wars is the very survival of the state, understood in its broadest sense. This includes not only territorial integrity but also access to natural resources that enable superior economic development. The aspiration of states considered great powers is not merely to maintain their status, but to gain a strategic advantage that allows them to outcompete others. In previous decades, this was achieved through a race to secure sufficient energy sources, while today the struggle is to monopolize access to critical resources essential for new technological developments: new materials, AI, and quantum computing.

In the new emerging world, International Law is less respected and the role of multilateral institutions in working together for peace is more ignored, if that was not an illusion, if we have ever truly lived in such a world.

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