

## Trends in conflicts in the last 10 years

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The Prussian strategist, General Clausewitz, viewed war as “nothing but the continuation of political relations by other means”: war served any purpose to convince others when talking did not. At Clausewitz’s time, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, international relations took place in what is referred to as a “*multi-polar system*” - a system in which more than two powers competed over global interests respective to their positions. These states included a/o the US, Russia, the colonial powers, most notably the British Empire and the French, but later also Germany and Japan. The First and Second World Wars demonstrated the horrific price of seeing war as a coercive means to diplomacy. Consequently, an international regulation of inter-state conflicts became the new mantra, expressed in the creation of the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations. Inter-state violence was declared illegal and states were expected to regulate their disputes by diplomacy. However, many issues were left unsettled and the remaining concepts of self-determination, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of states in the post-colonial status quo, were to cast tremendous consequences in the decolonisation period starting in the fifties and sixties.

### War in global, hegemonic and regional systems

The military adaptation to this new paradigm of diplomacy was the threat of an all-out nuclear war, whereby threat of war itself is sufficient to protect the “sphere of influence”. This system hinged on a “balance of power” between the superpowers. The core of this *bi-polar* system were East and West, surrounded by ‘client-states’<sup>1</sup>. Although branded as a “Cold War” extremely violent wars, mainly in the last-mentioned states, marked this period<sup>2</sup>. With the demise of the USSR, the *bi-polar* system of the Cold War transformed into a potential “*uni-polar*” with the US as the hegemonic power in a “New World Order” which would bring an end to ideological clashes: westernisation of all societies was regarded as a real possibility, introducing liberal-economic political systems universally and hence, take away the need for war. The apex of this hope was the broadly acclaimed “Peace Profit” emerging from the assumed declining defence budgets<sup>3</sup>. The end of the Cold War also terminated support to governments by the East or West, leading to their collapse and releasing nationalistic ethnic and religious clashes.

### A new version of multi-polarity

Indeed, the emergence of new identities, built around countries which have found new freedom, promotes *regionalization* as an alternative version of the age-old multi-polarity. Regional powers tend to regulate their interests independently, prompting or forcing other countries in the region to group around or ally themselves with it, in order to profit from the protective capacities of that state. The difference with the old multi-polar system is that these “new regional powers” do not compete for global hegemony. Still, they remain of high interest to global powers competing for supremacy; examples of such states are Pakistan, India, Iraq, Turkey, Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria and Venezuela. Amongst those, old-fashioned arms

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<sup>1</sup> The inevitability to belong to the East or the West led to the formation of a group of states declared as “non-aligned” albeit those countries were generally regarded by the West as allies of the USSR.

<sup>2</sup> Cold War - wars included those in which superpowers participated, such as the US in the Vietnam and the Russians in Afghanistan. The post-colonial wars of Angola, Mozambique and the confrontation of the East and West in “proxy” or “client” states as Somalia, Ethiopia, Korea, Cuba and others.

<sup>3</sup> Although defence budgets world wide reduced below 3 % of Global GNP, military expenditures still stand at some 700 bln US\$ globally while arms exports has expanded again to reach a total of 40 bn. US\$.

rattling and threats are common again<sup>4</sup>. These types of conflicts often categorise conflicts in regions as resource conflicts, be it over mineral resources, water, land or sea territorial sovereignty.

***“The proclaimed ‘New World Order’ did not bring the hoped ‘Peace Dividend’ and saw yet increased political violence, and new wars, albeit with a different character”.***

**Trends in Contemporary war: intra -state conflicts, and civilian victims<sup>1</sup>.**

Since the 18th century, some 471 wars<sup>5</sup> were fought causing some 120 million war-related deaths; *over 90 % of these deaths occurred in the twentieth century*<sup>6</sup>. Of the 250 wars fought in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, 194 occurred in the period 1945-1995, *90% of them taking place in Low Developing Countries* (LDCs) causing some 45 million war-related deaths; in the period 1990-1995 only, 70 states were involved in 93 wars in which 5,5 million people died.

Two shocking characteristics come to light in comparing the data of these conflicts. The first is that the classical conflict, is the exception rather than the rule. As only 15% of the conflicts qualify for the definition of war between 2 different states. The majority of contemporary wars are intra-state conflicts. The second is that the share of civilian’s deaths is increasing, accounting for the majority of conflict related deaths. The average of civilian deaths in WW I was 50%, rose to 73% in 1970, and was estimated at 85 % in the 80s<sup>7</sup>.

In spite of some inconsistency in the above data, three startling realities come to light:

- 1. The majority of present days wars are intra-state wars or civil wars not inter-state conflicts***
- 2. The majority of Post WW – II wars took place in the so-called Low Developing Countries***
- 3. With a declining overall death, the share of civilian victims is rising (up to 85%)***

The context of internal wars poses a series of serious challenges. The distinction between combatants and non-combatants becomes blurred or manipulated on purpose. With increased violent targeting of civilians; the tremendous increase in civilian’s mortality and more internal displacement as a result. The concepts of nation and state sharpen as politicians and governments increasingly play the ethnic, linguistic or religious card. This promotes polarisation between people, underlining their differences rather than commonalities. In some conflicts prevailing nationalities fight for secession or independence. In others, conflict is more anti-state or anti-regime oriented. However, most conflicts are often a mixture of insurgency, inter-state and anti-regime wars.

**Consequences in the conduct of contemporary conflict**

***“The main consequences in the conduct of contemporary conflicts are the reduced distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the***

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<sup>4</sup> Israel could be seen as regional power, yet it does not really fit in the model present. In spite of agreements it made with Turkey, Egypt and Gulf States, the characteristics of these are more military.

<sup>5</sup> William Eckhardt’s definition is widely used; War is an armed conflict between two or more governments and causing more than 1000 or more (conflict related) deaths per year.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Man Made Death: a neglected mortality*, JAMA Aug. 5 1988, vol 260, no. (data till 1975)

<sup>7</sup> Silvard R.L. *World Military and Social Expenditures 1987-1988*, Washington D.C. World Priorities, p 28. Michael Cranna (ed) *The true cost of conflict*, London, Earthscan, 1994, p xvii

***deliberate manipulation and targeting of civilians, the increased overlap between organised crime and insurgents, and the incapacity of the UN to address internal conflicts”.***

Another serious problem is the increased overlap between organised crime and (political) insurgencies. Criminal syndicates may promote a ‘political agenda’ as cover for criminal activities and some rebels or insurgents deteriorate into crime as result of the intensive connection between trade in drugs and arms. Thus increasing private armies and private security companies<sup>8</sup>, as a response to warlordism, mercenaries and internationally operating crime syndicates, or alternatively, criminalised insurgent movements<sup>9</sup>.

**UN and  
International  
Law**

The fact that most contemporary conflicts are internal, also seriously challenges International Law which principally regulates inter-state war. International Law does not specifically prohibit an uprising or resistance, whereas states are legally prohibited from interfering in others’ territory in case of (internal) conflicts. Member states may settle for the more restrictive interpretation of the Charter rather than the permissive version, to evade complicity or commitment, thereby undermining the possible constitution of Customary Law practice<sup>10</sup>. This is reluctance also expressed in the dropping participation of UN member-states in peacekeeping missions, from 80.000 in 1998 to 23.000 in 1997.

The UN-charter as well refers to States as signatories. However, more generic concepts such as “Nation” and “People” are not as well defined and have a varying significance, both in the interpretation of International Law as well as in UN jargon. The status these terms may provide is not legally supported. A particular expression of this is the term “self determination” as it is claimed by states, minority groups (linguistic, ethnic or religious) as well as indigenous people all at the same time. This is the expression of the fact that the UN-system is based on concepts constituted in a post WW-II and decolonisation period, defending the interests of the constituting member-states. Membership has increased by threefold since the constitution of the UN, mostly states that have diverging interests and other political dynamics, prompting them to claim waivers from existing UN Treaties but also to disclaim certain (western) interpretations such as those of the Human Rights Charter.

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. MPRI (Military Professional Resources), Dyncorp, Sandline and (terminated) Executive Outcomes

<sup>9</sup> Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Osama Bin Laden’s movement, but also Colombia’s guerrillas and paramilitary

<sup>10</sup> The interventions in Iraq and Kosovo are clear examples where these principles got overruled by member states, applying the “right to intervene as an Alliance under the US or NATO. In other cases member states are reluctant to step in, as the unsupported UN mission to DRC and Angola demonstrate.