

The here and now of a 'forever war' period

As multipolarity strengthens, the world could enter a stable phase where nations realise aggression no longer shifts the balance of power in their favour.

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Although there have been several on-off announcements about negotiations, ceasefires, and deals to end the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and between US-Israel and Iran, we are staring at a grim reality. Protracted conventional armed conflicts among countries are back in vogue, growing at an alarming rate, and proving to be intractable.



A small Ukraine would not have held on for so long against a big Russia if it wasn't for both the US and Europe backing the former. (AFP)

A study by the Norway-based Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) finds that direct inter-State conflicts have doubled in the past few consecutive years, jumping from two in 2023 to four in 2024, and reaching eight in 2025, which is the highest since data collection began in 1946. Comparing the current upward trajectory in inter-State wars with the Cold War era (1946-1989) and the post-Cold War era (1990-2020), it looks like humanity is going backwards, in the direction of savagery, instead of moving forward towards civilisation.

Cold War vs post-Cold War: A changing pattern of conflict

The Cold War period saw an average of two to four active inter-State conflicts per year, headlined by the Korean War (1950-1953), the Vietnam War (1965-1973), the India-Pakistan Wars (1948, 1965 and 1971), the Arab-Israeli Wars (1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973), and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Even though civil wars or internal wars outnumbered inter-State wars, the wars between States were deadly and accounted for up to four million battle-related deaths. What made things worse was that the average

duration of these inter-State wars — many were prolonged by superpower-fuelled ideological proxies — was around 16 to 24 months.

The post-Cold War period offered a welcome respite from this dreadful dynamic. Thanks to the end of the ideological contest between capitalism and Communism and the weakening of all power centres except the US, this era had an average of only one to two active inter-State wars per year lasting approximately three to four-and-a-half months. Fewer inter-State wars brought relief because international order rests on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of States. If inter-State wars lessen, it introduces systemic stability and makes intergovernmental institutions such as the United Nations (UN) more effective. No wonder, therefore, that the post-Cold War phase was a golden era for the UN.

Why today's wars are lasting longer

But since 2020, this relatively benign phase has been replaced by a ferocious new trend of frequent and lengthy inter-State wars that have once again marginalised the UN. The Russia-Ukraine war has exceeded four-and-a-half years of continuous fighting. The multiple wars involving Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories have dragged on for three years.

And the US and Israeli war on Iran which began in 2025, ebbed for a while, and then resumed in 2026, looks open-ended with no closure. There have been some short multi-day conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan (2020) and between India and Pakistan (2025), but it is anyone's guess whether these will reignite after a pause.

How multipolarity is fuelling more conflicts

One key factor behind the sharp uptick in inter-State wars and their longevity is something that is normally viewed as a positive development — the onset of a multipolar world. With more power centres emerging, the willingness to attack directly or to sponsor proxies that can withstand aggressors as part of global geopolitical rivalries has grown. If the original Cold War featured two superpowers that destabilised the world by arming their proxies, the current “new Cold War” is diffused, with more players. A small Ukraine would not have held on for so long against a big Russia if it wasn't for both the US and Europe backing the former militarily and economically. And Iran's resistance against the much superior Israel and the US owes to the intelligence, targeting, satellite, technological, and economic backing of Russia and China.

Pakistan's propensity to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks in India, which New Delhi says would be considered “acts of war” from now on, is also rationalised by the active military and economic support Islamabad receives from Beijing. Operation Sindoor in 2025 was relatively short but saw high-intensity war-like clashes because Pakistan was emboldened by Chinese weaponry, intelligence, economic and diplomatic sympathies. As India grows economically faster than China and is likely to reduce the power gap with

China in years to come, their Asian Cold War is likely to trigger more India-Pakistan wars or mini-wars by proxy association.

Apart from complex multipolarity, the other reason why inter-State wars are growing and lasting longer is the shift in modern military technology. Stronger attackers believe they have the upper hand and initiate wars, but defensive weaponry and tactics are improving. Drones, anti-tank, anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles and counteroffensive strike capabilities have prevented easy walkovers for the attackers. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump have found that weak opponents can withstand land invasions or aerial bombardments for years due to this change in the structure of warfighting.

Given these underlying structural shifts, is there no light at the end of the tunnel and are we condemned to suffer “forever wars”? The good news is that as multipolarity solidifies, and once power transitions are completed, a new stable equilibrium could be ushered in, in which States realise it is too costly to attack other States, since attacking will not alter the balance of power in their favour. And with time, as defensive military technology advances further, it too may deter offensive States from daring to attempt invasions and regime changes. For instance, China may decide not to attack or to delay attacking Taiwan after seeing the way Ukraine and Iran warded off Russia and the US for years.

The bad news is that until we reach stable equilibrium points that deter attackers, more inter-State wars that grind on by attrition are possible. It is a scary thought, but one we must brace for.

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