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The Opposite of War is Not Peace: The Complex Realities of 21st Century Conflict

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving nature of warfare and the fragile pursuit of peace in the 21st century through the lens of Critical Security Studies (CSS). Adopting a qualitative research methodology and relying primarily on secondary sources, the research interrogates how modern conflict has shifted from conventional, state-based wars to multidimensional struggles encompassing cyber warfare, proxy conflicts, disinformation campaigns, and technological militarization. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary security threats are socially constructed and deeply embedded in structures of inequality, thereby challenging state-centric and militarized interpretations of conflict. By drawing on cases such as Ukraine and Gaza, the study highlights how the pursuit of justice through violence perpetuates cycles of instability and undermines sustainable peace. CSS provides a framework for understanding these transformations by de-centering the state, emphasizing emancipatory approaches to security, and foregrounding the lived experiences of individuals and communities. The findings underscore that peace cannot be reduced to the absence of violence but must instead be envisioned as an ongoing process of justice, reconciliation, and emancipation. This research calls for inclusive, multi-stakeholder frameworks to address emerging threats and reimagine global security in an era of fragmentation and technological disruption.

Keywords: Critical Security Studies, Modern Warfare, Cyber Conflict, Proxy Wars, Emancipatory Peace, Global Insecurity

Introduction

The 21st century represents a watershed moment in the evolution of global conflict. Unlike the wars of the 20th century, which were often fought under the premise of restoring peace or preserving sovereignty, contemporary warfare increasingly appears to be waged not in pursuit of peace, but in defiance of it. The conceptual landscape of war has shifted: wars are no longer merely military engagements between nations, they are deeply entangled socio-political crises where justice, peace, identity, and power collide in chaotic and often morally ambiguous ways. Contemporary global conflicts reflect a disturbing pattern: violence is used not to resolve disputes, but to shatter any semblance of stability. Today's wars transcend borders and physical terrains. They are fought not only on battlefields but also across fiber-optic cables, social media platforms, and the collective psyche of populations. Cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and proxy warfare now dominate the arsenal of modern state and non-state actors alike. For instance, cyber warfare has evolved into a key strategic domain, involving tactics such as malware deployment, Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, and cyber-espionage often crippling critical infrastructure and destabilizing economies without a single shot being fired (Gurung, 2025).

The ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza illustrate how modern warfare has evolved beyond its traditional rationalizations. In Ukraine, the struggle began as a defense of sovereignty but has escalated into a geopolitical chessboard involving proxy actors and competing narratives of provocation and victimhood (Yue, 2024). The same complexity pervades the Israel-Hamas war, where atrocities on both sides have fuelled cycles of retaliation that obliterate distinctions between aggressor and aggrieved (Byman, 2024). These conflicts demonstrate that the goalposts have shifted: modern wars are less about achieving peace and more about asserting ideological or territorial dominance regardless of the human cost. In the name of justice, combatants now justify immense civilian suffering, structural destruction, and mass displacement. But justice rooted in vengeance, deprivation, or disproportional violence inevitably rings hollow. As Byman (2024) argues, both Israel and Hamas, despite military actions, are left weakened and strategically compromised, their people caught in the crossfire, their legitimacy increasingly questioned on the global stage. This pattern is not isolated. In Gaza, over 50,000 lives have been lost since October 2023, including thousands of children, journalists, and aid workers. The immense scale of suffering undermines any moral claim to "just war." Civilian spaces such as; hospitals, schools, refugee camps have become battlegrounds. The death toll in Gaza, particularly among children, suggests that any justification rooted in self-defense is severely undermined by the disproportionate humanitarian toll (Harghandiwal, 2025); (Levite & Shimshoni, 2024).

The conflict in Ukraine also serves as another case study in this evolution. There, hybrid warfare has become the norm, combining conventional military force with coordinated cyber offensives, misinformation, and psychological operations to shape global narratives and influence public opinion (Wróblewski & Wiśniewski, 2023). This fusion of tactics has blurred the lines between war and peace, combatant and civilian, and truth and fiction. The widespread weaponization of social media used for both strategic communication and disinformation further exemplifies the "invisible battlefield" on which modern conflicts are increasingly waged (Shamsi, 2023). In this environment, proxy warfare has re-emerged as a preferred tool of global powers seeking to exert influence without direct confrontation. The U.S. engagement with Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS is emblematic of this strategy, which reduces direct military risk but often results in complex entanglements with long-term geopolitical consequences (Michnik & Plakoudas, 2023). Scholars now argue that proxy conflicts, due to their ambiguity and deniability, are likely to be a dominant form of warfare in the decades ahead (Mumford, 2013); (Fox, 2019). However, the evolution of warfare has not been accompanied by a corresponding evolution in the mechanisms for achieving or sustaining peace. When the fighting pauses, the deeper damage often remains. Psychological trauma, social fragmentation, and economic dislocation are persistent scars that can span generations. The modern world teeters in a precarious state of "not-war," a liminal space marked by unrest, unresolved grievances, and latent violence. In conflict zones, this ambiguity is particularly pronounced. Civilians especially children and women bear the brunt of these "peace times," enduring trauma, displacement, and a breakdown of identity and trust in institutions (Siddiqui, 2015); (Kastrup, 2006).

Ironically, the very notion of fighting wars to secure justice has become self-defeating. When both parties claim moral high ground while simultaneously committing violations of international law and targeting civilians, justice becomes a rhetorical shield rather than a substantive goal (Sefriani & Erlangga, 2022). In Ukraine, for example, while the West supports Ukraine's sovereignty, the prolonged conflict and use of proxy engagements have also contributed to the escalation, drawing criticism for both Russian aggression and NATO's strategic posture (Allin, 2023). The Israel-Hamas war highlights this dual failure of justice. Hamas claims to resist occupation and represent Palestinian aspirations, but has done so through brutal attacks on civilians, including the October 7, 2023 assault, killing over 1,100 Israeli civilians (Yue, 2024). On the other side, Israel's military response has devastated Gaza, inflicting widespread civilian casualties and drawing increasing international condemnation for its lack of proportionality and disregard for humanitarian law (Vossole & Uchôa, 2024). Both sides claim they are fighting for justice, yet both are inflicting massive suffering on civilians, proving that war is an ill-suited instrument for securing moral outcomes. This raises a critical philosophical and political dilemma: if neither justice nor peace can be obtained through war, what purpose does war serve in the 21st century? In reality, modern warfare often

serves to entrench divisions, propagate trauma, and perpetuate cycles of retribution. Civilians bear the brunt of this shift. As Levite and Shimshoni (2024) argue, societal warfare, designed to shape the behavior and beliefs of entire populations produces no enduring strategic gain. Instead, it creates deep societal scars, making reconciliation and recovery all the more elusive. The idea that "there will be no victor or vanquished" is not poetic fatalism, it is empirical reality. Whether in Kyiv or Khan Younis, war has ceased to be a mechanism for conflict resolution and has instead become a perpetuator of instability, humiliation, and loss.

This research argues that, the wars of today challenge our traditional definitions of both conflict and peace. As warfare migrates from trenches to terminals, and from physical confrontations to psychological and digital domains, the need for updated ethical, legal, and diplomatic frameworks becomes urgent. In this new era, the opposite of war is not peace, it is a murky, unstable "not-war," where conflict persists in subtler, often invisible forms. This transformation of war in the 21st century has rendered war incapable of fulfilling its historical roles, whether as a means of achieving peace or enacting justice. Today, war often serves to destroy peace, fracture societies, and perpetuate suffering. As global conflicts like Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas continue with no end in sight, the international community must reckon with the uncomfortable truth: war cannot buy justice, nor can it secure peace. A new paradigm is needed, one that centers human dignity, prioritizes diplomacy, and confronts the ethical bankruptcy of war-as-policy.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Security Studies (CSS)

The 21st century has marked a fundamental transformation in the character of warfare and the pursuit of peace. Unlike the state-centric and territorially bound conflicts of the past, modern wars unfold across multiple domains; cyberspace, information, economics, and identity making them increasingly diffuse and difficult to contain. In light of these developments, Critical Security Studies (CSS) provides a powerful theoretical framework to understand these shifts. CSS challenges the narrow, militarized definitions of security that dominated the 20th century and instead offers a more inclusive, people-centered approach. It emphasizes how threats are constructed, how power is distributed, and how insecurities are experienced differently across societies. By interrogating conventional assumptions and amplifying marginalized perspectives, CSS equips us to make sense of the evolving dynamics of warfare and the persistent elusiveness of peace in our time.

Critical Security Studies emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War as scholars sought to transcend the limitations of realism and neorealism. Traditional security theories prioritized state sovereignty, military capabilities, and balance-of-power logics. In contrast, CSS draws inspiration from the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, feminism, and constructivism to question orthodox assumptions about what constitutes security and for whom it is pursued (Booth, 2005). A central contribution of CSS is the concept of securitization developed by the Copenhagen School. This perspective argues that issues become security threats not because of their objective features, but because political actors frame them as existential dangers requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). This framing highlights the political nature of security and draws attention to the consequences of labelling issues as "security" concerns, often justifying coercive or repressive policies. Meanwhile, the Welsh School advances the notion of emancipatory security, which emphasizes dismantling structures of oppression and enabling individuals to achieve freedom and dignity. Another distinctive feature of CSS is its insistence on shifting the referent object of security from the state to individuals and communities. By integrating insights from feminism, postcolonialism, and human security, CSS underscores how insecurity is not experienced uniformly but is mediated through class, race, gender, and geography. This broadened understanding recognizes that traditional state-centric approaches often obscure the insecurities faced by vulnerable populations.

The multidimensional nature of modern warfare underscores the inadequacy of conventional frameworks. Asymmetric conflicts, cyber operations, proxy wars, and disinformation campaigns illustrate the complex and often invisible battlefields of today. CSS provides analytical tools to capture these complexities by interrogating the role of narratives, power, and structural inequalities in shaping both conflicts and their resolutions. Cyber warfare exemplifies this transformation. Unlike conventional battles, cyber conflicts take

place in borderless digital spaces where state and non-state actors can sabotage infrastructure, manipulate financial systems, and destabilize democracies with relative anonymity. These operations often unfold below the threshold of open war, complicating traditional notions of sovereignty and deterrence. From a CSS perspective, cyber threats are not only technological but also deeply political, reflecting contests over power, ideology, and governance (Khan, 2025; Gurung, 2025). The securitization of cyberspace has allowed governments to justify increased surveillance and digital militarization, often at the expense of civil liberties. Non-state actors, too, play a pivotal role in reshaping contemporary security landscapes. Insurgent groups, terrorist networks, and cyber militias operate across borders, challenging state authority while often aligning with global power struggles (Sigholm, 2013). CSS highlights how such groups are situated within broader historical injustices and structural inequalities, while also questioning the selective application of labels such as "terrorist." The outsourcing of violence to private contractors and irregular forces further blurs the lines between legitimate and illegitimate forms of conflict. Technological advances, particularly in artificial intelligence, drones, and autonomous weapons, raise pressing ethical and political dilemmas. The automation of violence risks reducing accountability and widening inequalities in how wars are fought and suffered. CSS emphasizes the importance of critically examining whose interests these technologies serve and whose lives are devalued in algorithmic calculations of security (Johnson, 2018).

While conventional wars may appear to be waning in frequency, conditions of insecurity remain entrenched. Ceasefires and treaties often fail to resolve the underlying structural grievances, economic exclusion, political repression, and cultural marginalization that perpetuate cycles of violence. CSS critiques the notion of negative peace, or the mere absence of fighting, and instead advocates for a vision of positive peace rooted in emancipation and justice (Dahl, 2013). In many societies, "not-war" conditions persist: environments where overt hostilities have ceased but unresolved tensions and systemic inequalities sustain fragile and volatile peace. Post-conflict contexts like Syria, Gaza, and Ukraine illustrate how frozen conflicts and unaddressed grievances can quickly reignite violence. CSS insists that durable peace requires addressing these everyday insecurities by empowering communities, promoting inclusive governance, and dismantling oppressive structures (van der Veen & Datzberger, 2020). The global diffusion of power complicates this process further. Corporations, economic alliances, and digital platforms now wield enormous influence over international security. Their roles in controlling data, enabling surveillance, or shaping narratives highlight the need for peace processes that extend beyond states and incorporate multi-actor engagement (Scott, 2024). CSS's pluralist orientation and bottom-up approach are especially valuable in this multipolar and fragmented context. Conclusively, in a world characterized by hybrid warfare, technological disruption, and fragile peace, Critical Security Studies offers an essential framework for rethinking both conflict and resolution. By shifting attention away from state militarism and toward the lived experiences of individuals, CSS enables a more holistic understanding of insecurity. It highlights the politics of framing threats, exposes the structural roots of conflict, and pushes for emancipatory peace grounded in justice and inclusion. As warfare continues to evolve into digital, decentralized, and asymmetrical forms, CSS remains indispensable in guiding ethical, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to global security.

The Complex Realities of Modern War in the 21st Century

The conduct of warfare in the 21st century has undergone a profound transformation, departing sharply from the conventional interstate wars of the 20th century. Contemporary conflicts are no longer confined to defined battlefields or initiated through formal declarations. Instead, they are increasingly dispersed, asymmetrical, and embedded in political, digital, and cognitive spaces. These evolving conflict modalities present new challenges to international law, diplomacy, and peacebuilding, as traditional paradigms of war and peace no longer suffice to capture the complexity of modern conflict. One of the most pervasive trends in current warfare is the widespread use of proxy conflicts. In lieu of direct confrontation, powerful nations often support local militias, armed insurgents, or secessionist groups in other countries to advance strategic objectives. In wars such as those in Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen, global powers including the United States, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have provided material and logistical support to factions whose objectives align with their geopolitical interests. This external backing intensifies the scale and longevity of conflicts,

transforming local disputes into arenas for great power rivalry (Suzen, 2024). Proxy wars dilute accountability, complicate ceasefire negotiations, and create multi-layered humanitarian crises. As Rauta (2020) argues, the nature of these wars not only escalates violence but undermines post-conflict recovery by fragmenting state authority and politicizing aid.

In tandem with proxy warfare, cyber operations have become a central pillar of modern statecraft. Cyber warfare enables states to conduct aggressive acts; espionage, sabotage, infrastructure disruption without engaging in kinetic violence. Notably, countries such as Russia, China, and North Korea have been linked to high-profile cyberattacks targeting power grids, financial institutions, and electoral systems across Europe and North America (Nestoras, 2018). The strategic advantage of cyber warfare lies in its stealth and ambiguity. Because it blurs the line between war and crime, attribution becomes difficult, enabling perpetrators to operate with minimal consequences. As Khan (2021) notes, this "fifth domain" of warfare allows actors to destabilize adversaries and influence global politics with a few lines of malicious code. A parallel battlefield exists in the domain of information warfare where perception becomes a weapon. The proliferation of social media, AI-generated content, and deep-fake technologies has amplified the capacity for disinformation. Governments, intelligence agencies, and non-state actors now deploy sophisticated propaganda campaigns to shape public narratives, erode trust in democratic institutions, and inflame divisions within societies (Fiero, 2025). During the Russia–Ukraine war, for example, the Kremlin's state-run media ecosystem was used to distort facts, vilify adversaries, and disorient both domestic and international audiences (Mecková, 2024). In this "war of truths," facts are contested, and objectivity itself becomes a battleground. As Stoakes (2024) argues, democratic societies face a structural vulnerability when their information environments are weaponized, making media literacy and institutional resilience key pillars of national defense.

Hybrid warfare, which combines conventional military strategies with cyberattacks, economic pressure, and psychological operations, is another defining feature of 21st-century conflict. Its strength lies in its ability to obscure the source and intent of aggression, forcing targeted states into reactive positions. In many hybrid conflicts, civilians are both targets and instruments of war. Disinformation campaigns radicalize populations, while economic manipulation undermines public trust in governance (Ioannou, 2022). Civilian infrastructures such as hospitals, schools, and internet platforms are often co-opted for military or political ends, collapsing the boundaries between combatants and non-combatants. This weaponization of civil space not only prolongs conflicts but alters the lived experiences of those caught within them. The re-emergence of ideological warfare further complicates the security environment. Modern wars are often framed as moral or civilizational struggles, driven by religious fundamentalism, nationalism, or exceptionalist ideologies. These narratives embolden actors to pursue absolute objectives while undermining diplomacy and compromise. In the case of the war in Gaza or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, deeply entrenched identity politics and ideological justifications have exacerbated violence and marginalized peace initiatives (Perepelytsia, 2021). As Mecková (2024) notes, when conflicts are justified through binary worldviews of good versus evil, the potential for negotiated resolution diminishes drastically.

Moreover, non-state actors now play increasingly central roles in the dynamics of global conflict. Groups like Hezbollah, ISIS, and the Taliban challenge the traditional state monopoly on violence by functioning both as insurgents and de facto governing authorities. Their agility, ideological coherence, and use of irregular tactics make them formidable adversaries, while their connections to state sponsors blur legal boundaries and complicate international responses (Suzen, 2024). Unlike traditional armies, these actors are not constrained by international norms or formal rules of engagement, making them unpredictable and difficult to deter. Another crucial dimension of modern warfare is the blurring of the boundary between war and peace. Many contemporary conflicts do not conclude with clear victories or treaties. Instead, they fade into a state of post-conflict fragility, a condition marked by unresolved grievances, physical devastation, and psychological trauma. Even when hostilities subside, affected societies often remain in a state of latent tension, susceptible to political violence, radicalization, and renewed conflict (Fiero, 2025). The notion of "not-war, not-peace" is becoming the default setting in many conflict zones, where neither reconciliation nor reconstruction is fully realized (Perepelytsia, 2021). Without targeted investment in justice, governance, and

social cohesion, these fragile environments become breeding grounds for future unrest. Conclusively, the 21st-century warfare is defined by its ambiguity, asymmetry, and deeply intertwined social and technological dimensions. The rise of proxy warfare, cyber aggression, disinformation, and ideological polarization has transformed how conflicts are waged, understood, and resolved. As global actors continue to navigate this complex terrain, the imperative is not merely to develop better weapons or defenses, but to innovate ethically and institutionally, building frameworks that recognize and adapt to the changing face of war.

The Changing Weapons of Power and Destruction in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, the face of warfare is undergoing a profound transformation driven by technological innovation. Modern battles are no longer defined solely by tanks, trenches, and troops on the ground. Instead, they are increasingly shaped by digital algorithms, drones, cyber tools, and scientific advancements that have made violence more accessible, precise, and difficult to trace. This shift is not merely tactical, it reconfigures power itself, enabling new actors and methods to challenge traditional structures of state-based conflict. Unmanned aerial systems (UAS), or drones, have become one of the most transformative elements of modern warfare. No longer exclusive to powerful militaries, these tools have been democratized and adopted by insurgent groups and small nations alike. In conflicts such as the Ukraine-Russia war, drones have been extensively used for surveillance, targeted strikes, and asymmetrical attacks, granting actors with limited resources outsized strategic impact (Radovanović et al., 2024), (King, 2024). Their affordability and accessibility have lowered the threshold for armed conflict, allowing non-state actors and individuals to conduct military-grade operations from modest platforms.

Artificial intelligence (AI) further expands the scope and speed of modern warfare. Autonomous weapon systems (AWS), from missile defense networks to combat drones, are now capable of decision-making and targeting with minimal human oversight. These systems can drastically enhance military responsiveness, but they also raise grave ethical concerns. Who is accountable when an AI-driven drone misfires? What if an algorithm is manipulated? The delegation of lethal force to machines is destabilizing long-standing norms of warfare and accountability (Geetha & Gomathy, 2025), (Vallor, 2013). Perhaps more disturbing is the potential weaponization of biotechnology and nanotechnology. These domains offer new, often invisible, methods of aggression. Advances in synthetic biology could lead to genetically targeted bioweapons or pathogens that damage ecosystems and food systems without ever being linked to a known attacker. Such attacks blur the lines between natural disaster and deliberate harm, making them nearly impossible to deter or attribute (Krieg & Rickli, 2018). These technologies also empower individuals in ways never before imagined. With the rise of 3D printing, commercially available drone kits, and downloadable malware, lone actors now possess the tools to cause widespread disruption. A determined hacker could shut down a city's power grid, interfere with an election, or crash financial systems from their home. This decentralization of destructive capacity marks a seismic shift in global security, eroding the traditional state monopoly on violence (Joshi et al., 2024).

This changing nature of warfare is forcing scholars, ethicists, and policymakers to reassess the foundational rules of international conflict. Traditional laws of armed conflict were not designed to address autonomous weapons, cyberattacks, or synthetic bioweapons. As a result, there are serious gaps in accountability, regulation, and enforcement. Autonomous systems may lack meaningful human oversight, and AI-generated decisions are often inscrutable, even to their creators (David et al., 2019), (Johnson, 2020). Moreover, the moral and psychological toll of this new era of war cannot be ignored. The increasing reliance on machines to make life-and-death decisions can lead to what some scholars call "moral deskilling," a degradation of military ethics and responsibility as technology takes over the burdens of choice and consequence (Vallor, 2013). The distancing effect of remote warfare, killing via drones or cyberattacks from thousands of miles away can desensitize combatants and obscure the human cost of violence. Summarily, 21st-century warfare is being shaped not just by new tools, but by new paradigms. Conflicts are increasingly asymmetric, decentralized, and technologically mediated. The ability to inflict harm or project power is no longer limited to nation-states, and the boundaries between peace and war, civilian and combatant, have grown

dangerously ambiguous. This evolving landscape demands urgent, global cooperation to update ethical standards, legal frameworks, and international security strategies.

The Opposite of War and the Illusion of Peace

In the 21st century, warfare and peace have undergone a profound redefinition, diverging sharply from the frameworks that governed global conflicts in the 20th century. Wars are no longer waged merely for territorial conquest or the pursuit of peace. Instead, they have become instruments of disruption, coercion, and often destruction, pursued in the name of justice or ideological supremacy. Modern conflicts, as seen in the Russia-Ukraine and Hamas-Israel wars, expose the fallacy of the "just war" narrative, underscoring that in many contemporary theaters, there are neither victors nor vanquished, only deepened grievances and prolonged human suffering (Smetana & Ludvík, 2018). Unlike the post-WWII conflicts that centered around conventional militaries and clear state actors, current wars are often asymmetrical, involving a fusion of state and non-state forces, cyber warfare, misinformation campaigns, and autonomous weapons. Drones, for example, have transitioned from tools of surveillance to instruments of precision strikes, now accessible to insurgents and lone actors alike (Horowitz, 2016). Cyberattacks can paralyze entire economies, while biotechnology holds the potential to weaponize genetic data, unleashing invisible and targeted destruction. These developments have drastically lowered the threshold for conflict initiation and escalated the risks of global instability (Fidler, 2016).

Artificial intelligence (AI) has further complicated the ethical landscape of war. AI-driven targeting systems and autonomous combatants raise critical questions about accountability, proportionality, and the role of human judgment in life-or-death decisions. Although such systems may enhance operational efficiency, they can also magnify the speed and scope of violence, bypassing human safeguards traditionally embedded in rules of engagement (Sagan, 2016). This transformation is not only technological but also ideological. Where the 20th century saw war as a means to secure peace through treaties and reconstruction, 21st-century conflicts often revolve around the pursuit of justice, justice for perceived historical wrongs, religious identity, or political legitimacy. Yet, justice delivered through violence has proven elusive. The war in Ukraine exemplifies this paradox: Western support for Ukrainian sovereignty, while rooted in international law, is seen by Russia as provocation; Russia's invasion, while justified domestically as existential self-defense, is internationally condemned for its brutal disregard for civilian life (Cuppuleri, 2020). Similarly, the Hamas-Israel conflict reveals the intractable nature of justice-driven warfare. Hamas claims resistance against occupation, but its actions have inflicted terror and suffering on civilians. Israel seeks security and justice for its citizens but does so through policies that often perpetuate Palestinian disenfranchisement. In both cases, the quest for justice through violence leads only to cyclical retaliation, not resolution (Connolly, 2012).

Peace, as traditionally understood as the absence of war has thus become a fleeting and insufficient concept. Post-conflict societies such as Syria, Colombia, and Gaza exist in a state of "not-war" rather than peace, where hostilities may be paused, but the root causes of conflict remain unaddressed. These frozen or simmering conflicts highlight a critical truth: peace is not merely the cessation of violence but the resolution of structural grievances, economic disparities, and historical injustices (Seijo, 2014; Smetana & Ludvík, 2018). Moreover, new forms of conflict have emerged in this "not-war" paradigm. Economic sanctions, cyber infiltration, misinformation, and psychological operations are used to achieve geopolitical objectives without formal declarations of war. These quieter, more insidious conflicts have no clear endpoint and often escape the scrutiny of international law. Yet, their societal impacts from economic collapse to political polarization are deeply destabilizing and enduring (Fidler, 2016). To achieve meaningful peace in the 21st century, the global community must go beyond conflict resolution and address the root causes of war: inequality, exclusion, state failure, and contested identities. As Orakzai (2011) and van der Veen & Datzberger (2020) argue, peacebuilding requires inclusive development, political accountability, and cultural reconciliation, not just ceasefires and military withdrawals. Without such efforts, humanity may find itself trapped in a perpetual state of "not-war," where overt violence is momentarily suspended, but the

engines of future conflict continue to turn. In this precarious landscape, the illusion of peace may be more dangerous than war itself, providing a false sense of security while sowing the seeds of future unrest.

The Future of Power in a Fractured World

The 21st-century global landscape has undergone a seismic transformation, witnessing the decentralization of power from the traditional confines of the nation-state to a more diffuse and complex matrix of influence. Power today is increasingly distributed among multinational corporations, non-state actors, cyber entities, and transnational economic alliances. This shift has not only complicated the architecture of global governance but has also introduced new fault lines that make modern conflicts more difficult to resolve, predict, or prevent (Beznosov, 2024; Ekmekçi, 2024). One of the most profound developments in this shifting terrain is the meteoric rise of corporate power, particularly among technology conglomerates. Corporations such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Palantir are no longer merely economic entities; they are geopolitical actors in their own right. These firms possess massive data reservoirs, dominate the development and deployment of artificial intelligence, and control cloud infrastructure that underpins both civilian and military operations. In geopolitical crises, these entities can influence outcomes by controlling information flows, mediating digital access, or even determining which states get preferential access to advanced technological tools (Beznosov, 2024). The increasing reliance of governments on private-sector infrastructure during wartime, especially in the cyber domain, underscores a new kind of dependency that blurs the lines between public sovereignty and private power.

Simultaneously, the landscape has been disrupted by the emergence of powerful non-state actors who challenge traditional authority with asymmetric tools. Cybercriminal syndicates, hacktivist groups, and ideologically driven militias now possess tools once reserved for militaries. Cyber warfare has become an accessible weapon for disruption, one that does not require physical borders, can be launched remotely, and is often difficult to trace. Groups such as Lazarus, reportedly affiliated with North Korea, exemplify how rogue actors can influence global financial stability through coordinated cyberattacks (Ekmekçi, 2024; Khan, 2025). Similarly, militant ideological movements utilize encrypted digital channels to spread propaganda, recruit followers, and organize attacks transforming cyberspace into a decentralized battlefield beyond the reach of conventional governance. Adding another layer of complexity, economic alliances and transnational trade blocs are increasingly acting as instruments of geopolitical influence. Entities like the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and economic mechanisms such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have evolved into power centers that shape resource access, investment flows, and diplomatic alignments. These institutions have the ability to exert coercive pressure on global politics without firing a shot, through sanctions, tariffs, or strategic investment initiatives (Minko, 2024). Economic diplomacy has effectively replaced armed aggression in many areas, yet its outcomes can be just as destabilizing when weaponized in geopolitical rivalry.

These shifts collectively underscore the increasing fragmentation of global power structures. In contrast to the 20th century where the international order was largely defined by state-centric realpolitik, today's world is far more multipolar and volatile. Corporate influence, decentralized warfare, and the weaponization of economics create a networked system of influence in which power is harder to trace and conflicts are more difficult to mediate (Ramjit, 2025). No longer do military alliances or treaties between sovereign states suffice in containing geopolitical crises; instead, multi-stakeholder diplomacy involving corporate, economic, and civil actors is becoming essential. Moreover, this evolving power matrix raises urgent concerns about accountability and oversight. With private corporations wielding control over critical infrastructure and digital ecosystems, questions arise about regulation, ethics, and national security. Who holds technology firms accountable when their platforms are weaponized for disinformation? How can states maintain sovereignty in a world where their digital infrastructure is outsourced to private vendors? And how can international law adapt to address the ambiguous status of non-state cyber actors operating across borders with impunity? As the traditional architecture of international relations is challenged by these shifts, global stability is becoming increasingly fragile. The absence of centralized authority in many of these new domains, cyberspace, digital infrastructure, global finance has created fertile ground for persistent

low-intensity conflict and systemic vulnerabilities (Ashraf, 2023). The diffusion of power calls for equally innovative models of diplomacy and governance that are flexible, inclusive, and tech-savvy. In this fractured world, securing peace and cooperation will require reimagining not just the instruments of statecraft but also the assumptions underpinning global power. Whether it is negotiating cybersecurity treaties, regulating AI development, or restraining corporate overreach, the international community must respond to this new reality with coordinated and forward-thinking strategies.

The New Faces of War and Conflict in the 21st Century

The 21st century has introduced a radical reconfiguration of how wars are initiated, conducted, and experienced. Far removed from the conventional image of uniformed armies and battlefield confrontations, contemporary conflicts increasingly unfold in cyberspace, financial systems, and algorithmically influenced media landscapes. These are not merely extensions of traditional warfare, they represent a paradigm shift, wherein power is wielded through digital code, economic leverage, and artificial intelligence rather than tanks or troops. These "non-wars" are less visible yet no less devastating, and they challenge every traditional assumption about warfare, peace, and international stability. At the forefront of this transformation is cyber warfare. Digital aggression has become a strategic instrument for both state and non-state actors seeking to cripple adversaries without engaging in physical combat. Cyberattacks have the power to disable energy grids, hijack government communications, corrupt critical infrastructure, and compromise national security often with little to no physical footprint. Recent incidents such as Russia's cyberattacks on Ukraine’s power systems and the ransomware attack on the Colonial Pipeline in the United States have revealed the profound vulnerabilities of digital infrastructures in technologically advanced societies (Semenenko & Nozdrachov, 2025). Unlike traditional forms of warfare, cyber conflict operates in the shadows, thrives on anonymity, and often unfolds before anyone realizes a war has even begun (Khan, 2024). Parallel to cyber conflict is the rise of economic warfare, where national rivalries are expressed not through military invasions but through market disruption, sanctions, tariffs, and financial manipulation. Economic instruments have evolved into potent geopolitical tools used to isolate adversaries, destabilize regimes, and enforce foreign policy objectives. The escalating U.S.–China technology rivalry marked by sanctions on semiconductor trade, restrictions on AI research, and competitive control over critical supply chains illustrates how strategic industries have become theaters of conflict (Singh, 2024). Similarly, Russia’s economic marginalization following its invasion of Ukraine demonstrates how financial sanctions and trade embargoes have been weaponized to exert international pressure. These forms of economic warfare may lack bombs or bullets, but they can devastate national economies, displace millions, and erode global cooperation.

A third and increasingly insidious front is AI-driven conflict, particularly in the information and cognitive domains. Artificial intelligence now underpins disinformation campaigns, deepfake generation, and social media manipulation at a scale previously unimaginable. Autonomous bots and algorithmically amplified content are deployed to erode trust in institutions, polarize societies, and influence elections without firing a single shot (Polcumpally & Patel, 2026). During recent conflicts, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, AI-generated content was used to disseminate conflicting narratives, undermine democratic processes, and weaken societal cohesion. The weaponization of digital narratives has blurred the lines between persuasion and coercion, journalism and propaganda. These algorithmic wars do not merely alter perception, they reshape reality. What binds these non-traditional modes of conflict is their invisibility, deniability, and decentralization. Cyber hackers, economic decision-makers, and AI developers now hold as much sway in warfare as generals and diplomats. As noted by Gerhardy (n.d.), hybrid warfare no longer necessitates boots on the ground but rather bots in the cloud and influence operations embedded in civilian communication platforms. This erosion of the boundaries between war and peace, soldier and civilian, and offense and defense, has made the global security environment more unpredictable than ever before.

Moreover, the impacts of these “invisible wars” are not only immediate but deeply enduring. Cyberattacks can leave governments digitally incapacitated for weeks; economic sanctions can displace entire working populations; AI-generated propaganda can rupture social trust that takes years to rebuild. These forms of

conflict often go unacknowledged until their consequences become uncontainable, leaving societies vulnerable to long-term destabilization and slow erosion of democratic institutions (Upadhyay, 2024). The essential challenge for international leadership today is to recognize and adapt to this distributed, decentralized, and technologically mediated landscape of war. Traditional arms control frameworks, diplomatic protocols, and military doctrines are ill-equipped to manage conflicts that do not involve traditional weapons. A new strategic vision is needed, one that integrates cybersecurity, digital ethics, economic foresight, and AI governance into the very definition of national defense.

Avoiding a Future of Constant Conflict

The accelerating transformation of global conflict through technology demands an urgent rethinking of how the international community addresses disputes and promotes peace. The conventional mechanisms of conflict resolution rooted in treaties, ceasefires, and state-centric diplomacy are increasingly inadequate in a world where enemies are not clearly defined, borders are porous, and attacks are often silent, stealthy, and synthetic. From cyber warfare to algorithmic propaganda and autonomous weaponry, the tools of modern conflict have outpaced the institutional frameworks meant to regulate them. Traditional governance structures such as the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Conventions were forged in an era dominated by visible armies, traceable acts of aggression, and formal declarations of war. Today, these models are ill-equipped to respond to the subtleties of AI-generated disinformation, digital sabotage, and decentralized actors operating anonymously across virtual borders (Khan, 2025). This mismatch has resulted in a governance vacuum, wherein new technologies operate largely without oversight, enabling a landscape of continuous, low-grade conflict with immense destabilizing potential (Budacu, 2024). Cyberattacks and autonomous systems, for instance, are often launched without attribution, making retaliation legally ambiguous and politically hazardous. Global agreements on cyber conduct remain fragmented, and efforts to build consensus are often hampered by strategic competition among major powers (Haroon, 2024). Without unified norms or enforceable treaties, the threshold for escalation continues to erode. According to Kolade (4998), the unregulated spread of AI-based attack systems risks accelerating arms races and increases the probability of miscalculated confrontations, especially in regions with preexisting tensions.

In response to these growing challenges, a new generation of conflict mediation tools powered by artificial intelligence is emerging as a critical supplement to traditional diplomacy. These tools offer the potential to monitor emerging crises, model escalation pathways, and recommend real-time de-escalation strategies based on vast geopolitical and behavioral data (Pasupuleti, 2025). While not without limitations such as the risks of algorithmic bias or overdependence, AI-assisted mediation can significantly enhance early warning systems and improve the speed and accuracy of diplomatic interventions (Sangay, 2024). Beyond tools, what is needed is a reconfiguration of the architecture of global cooperation itself. New coalitions must be built that transcend the Westphalian model of state-only diplomacy. Given the increasing involvement of corporations, technology platforms, and even decentralized communities in both conflict and peacebuilding, multi-stakeholder coalitions are essential. These could include tech firms, civil society organizations, international courts, and even cybersecurity alliances co-governed by states and private entities (Kritika, 2025). This inclusive approach reflects the distributed nature of modern power and provides a more accurate basis for accountability in digital domains.

Complementing these efforts must be the expansion and modernization of international legal frameworks. Existing laws of war and humanitarian codes do not adequately address cyber espionage, autonomous weapon use, or algorithmic manipulation of civilian populations. As Pauwels (2024) argues, the absence of enforceable norms regulating generative AI and cyber capabilities increases the likelihood of abuse by both state and non-state actors. Legal innovations must therefore articulate clear red lines, attribute accountability for digital aggression, and develop enforcement mechanisms for violations in virtual space. Still, governance alone is not enough. To truly prevent a future of perpetual conflict, the global community must reimagine diplomacy as an anticipatory and collaborative process, rather than merely a reactive one. This includes embedding ethics, transparency, and inclusivity into the development of emerging technologies. As Roumate (2024) highlights, AI does not have to be weaponized, it can also be institutionalized as a guardian

of peace, enabling better prediction of unrest, optimized allocation of peacekeeping resources, and enhanced cross-cultural dialogue in tense regions. The choice facing the global order is stark. Either societies commit to building proactive systems of governance and diplomacy capable of managing digital-age threats, or they resign themselves to a future of chronic instability, opaque aggression, and fractured cooperation. Innovation, then, must not only serve the machinery of war, it must be directed toward peace. If the international community can channel the same ingenuity that created algorithmic weapons into crafting algorithmic mediators, and if it can convene alliances as swiftly as it deploys sanctions, then a new era of tech-enabled peacebuilding is still within reach.

Final Reflections: A Future at the Crossroads

Since the early 2000s, and more distinctly after 2008, the nature of conflict has undergone a profound metamorphosis. War is no longer confined to conventional battlefields with boots on the ground and bullets in the air. It now operates through digital backdoors, economic levers, algorithmic surveillance, and psychological manipulation. Modern conflicts are increasingly conducted in shadowy, non-kinetic domains where cyberattacks can paralyze entire societies, disinformation erodes trust, and sanctions are deployed as instruments of coercion rather than diplomacy (Beznosov, 2024; Ashraf, 2023). These contemporary manifestations of warfare are inherently more insidious. They are difficult to trace, challenging to regulate, and often go unnoticed by the broader public until significant damage has already been inflicted. Technologies designed for progress, AI, machine learning, drones, and blockchain are now repurposed as strategic assets in geopolitical competitions. They amplify the ability of not just states, but also corporations and non-state actors, to exert influence in ways that bypass traditional checks and balances (Ramjit, 2025; Khan, 2025).

As the mechanisms of war evolve, so too must the systems of peacekeeping. The world today stands on a precipice: caught between the immense promise of technological innovation and its capacity for harm. The critical challenge is whether societies and institutions can keep pace with these changes, not just technologically, but ethically, legally, and diplomatically. Without frameworks to govern cyber warfare, regulate digital weapons, and mediate new forms of geopolitical competition, the international community risks entering an age of "perpetual not-war" a fragile liminal space where hostilities remain dormant but unresolved, and peace exists only as a façade (Ekmekçi, 2024; Minko, 2024). This era of "not-war" undermines the illusion that peace merely requires the absence of violence. True peace is not passive; it is an active and continuous process of reconciliation, justice, and inclusion. It requires nations and institutions to address root causes such as inequality, exclusion, territorial disputes, and technological exploitation. Peace must be intentionally cultivated through inclusive governance, resilient legal norms, investment in peacebuilding infrastructures, and multilateral cooperation on emergent global threats (van der Veen & Datzberger, 2020; Connolly, 2012).

We are at a historic inflection point. Decisions made in the coming years on how we regulate AI, mitigate cyber threats, and address power asymmetries will shape whether the future tilts toward sustainable peace or deeper fragmentation. The growing fragmentation of global power, coupled with the decentralization of violence, challenges humanity to redefine what security means in a digitally interconnected world (Beznosov, 2024; Ashraf, 2023). The path forward will not be easy, but the alternative, a world defined by low-intensity, high-tech conflict and systemic instability is far more perilous. Ultimately, the future is not predetermined. It is being shaped every day by policy choices, technological developments, diplomatic decisions, and the willingness of communities to build bridges rather than deepen divides. To navigate this complex future, humanity must embrace bold, cooperative solutions that match the pace and scale of technological change. The question is no longer whether we can build such systems but whether we will choose to.

Concluding Remarks

The 21st century has ushered in a transformation of warfare that challenges the very foundations of how conflict and peace are understood. No longer confined to territorial disputes or traditional battlefields,

modern wars manifest in digital networks, economic sanctions, proxy engagements, and disinformation campaigns that blur the lines between war and peace, soldier and civilian, truth and propaganda. These conflicts resist neat resolutions, leaving societies suspended in fragile states of "not-war," where overt violence may pause but insecurity, injustice, and trauma persist. In this sense, the contemporary era is marked not by the absence of conflict but by its evolution into subtler and more insidious forms, ones that are embedded within everyday life and global structures of inequality. Critical Security Studies (CSS) provides an essential framework for interpreting these dynamics. By questioning the narrow, militarized, and state-centric assumptions of traditional security theories, CSS highlights how threats are socially constructed, how insecurities are distributed unevenly across societies, and how structural inequalities perpetuate cycles of instability. This people-centered approach underscores the fact that contemporary wars are not only about geopolitical rivalry or military dominance, they are also about narratives, justice claims, and technologies that reconfigure power and insecurity in unprecedented ways. CSS emphasizes that insecurity is not an abstract condition but an everyday lived reality for millions who remain marginalized and vulnerable even when formal hostilities subside.

The cases of Ukraine and Gaza epitomize these shifts. Both conflicts expose the moral bankruptcy of pursuing justice through violence. Each side claims legitimacy while perpetuating disproportionate suffering, revealing that modern warfare produces no victors, only weakened societies and shattered lives. Proxy wars, cyber conflicts, and algorithmic propaganda reinforce this tragic pattern, ensuring that violence entrenches divisions rather than heals them. The manipulation of information, the global reach of digital platforms, and the speed of technological militarization contribute to environments where polarization thrives and reconciliation becomes ever more elusive. Likewise, the weaponization of technology, from drones to AI-driven systems, has decentralized violence, empowering non-state actors, corporations, and even individuals in ways that destabilize global security and defy conventional governance frameworks. What was once the prerogative of nation-states has now become accessible to smaller groups and lone actors, marking a dangerous shift in the diffusion of destructive capacity.

At the same time, the persistent illusion of peace that halting gunfire or signing ceasefires equates to stability must be challenged. True peace cannot be reduced to the absence of visible fighting. It requires dismantling the deep-rooted causes of insecurity: economic exclusion, political repression, identity-based marginalization, and technological exploitation. CSS reminds us that sustainable peace is only possible when justice and emancipation are prioritized, when structures of oppression are dismantled, and when those most affected by conflict are empowered to shape their futures. It also demands global cooperation in redefining governance structures to address cyber threats, regulate AI, restrain corporate overreach, and create multi-stakeholder coalitions capable of managing distributed power in a fractured world. Without such re-imaginings, humanity risks remaining trapped in a perpetual liminal state of "not-war," where conflict is never resolved but only transformed into subtler, more insidious forms. Ultimately, humanity stands at a crossroads. The path chosen will determine whether the tools of innovation continue to fuel cycles of instability, or whether they can be redirected toward reconciliation, justice, and sustainable peace. The choice lies not only with states but with corporations, civil societies, and transnational institutions, all of whom now wield power in shaping the global order. The challenge ahead is to recognize that the opposite of war is not merely the silencing of guns, it is the construction of inclusive systems that heal divides, empower communities, and prioritize human dignity. Only then can peace transcend illusion and become an attainable reality in the 21st century. This requires not only political will but also a profound shift in imagination: to envision peace not as the end point of war but as a proactive, ongoing practice of emancipation, solidarity, and global justice. Without such a transformation, the world will continue to oscillate between fragile ceasefires and simmering hostilities, forever mistaking the absence of open violence for genuine peace.

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