

New Wars and New Practices in Contemporary Armed Conflicts

Written by Marianna Albuquerque

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MARIANNA ALBUQUERQUE, MAY 26 2020

In the humanities, stating that something is consensual is in itself a contradiction to the idea of dynamism and subjectivity that this field presents as one of its main characteristics. In its subfields, it is also impossible to state precisely that a certain subject or concept is accepted by everyone. However, in International Relations, there is something that comes close to maximum convergence: the statement that war has played a central role in the formation, expansion, and maintenance of the international order. Historically, being a result of the encounter between different people, war has been an international institution and has helped to consolidate practices and expectations. Still, the agreement is exclusively about the simultaneously creative and destructive role of war, and not about its origins, mechanisms, or effects.

In International Relations, the nation-state system was itself the result of a conflict[1], the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). In the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia, which consolidated the end of the dispute, the observance of the right to religious freedom and nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states gave rise to the concept of sovereignty – which was central to the structuring of the nation-state system. Because it was a war between European empires, in a circumscribed historical context, the myth of the origin of the modern international system is connected to an idea of war that corresponds to a particular manifestation of the phenomenon.

Thus, war on European and Western parameters is not a universal phenomenon, but a specific experience. The universalization of the particularity created a Eurocentrism still prevalent in security studies (Badie, 2014). An example is the classic definition of war, the foundation of International Relations studies, written by Carl von Clausewitz. According to the Prussian military, war is a clash between great powers and an attribute of the State. Because war is related to the conduct of government objectives, it is the continuation of politics by other means – just one of several ways to resolve differences (Clausewitz, 1982). War is a friction of masses, marked by militarization and the logic of a zero-sum game: my victory generates a defeat in the same proportion to my enemy. In this sense, it was the wars of decolonization that introduced a new grammar, a restored lexicon of international conflicts (Badie, 2014).

Another example of the influence of Western thought on the war theory is the debate on possible moral justifications for the conflict. Initially proposed in the pre-Christian era, the modern theory of just war was strongly influenced by St. Augustine and St. Thomas of Aquinas. It had, therefore, a religious and philosophical root: armed conflicts needed to be morally accepted and fall within a certain moral code of conduct (Valença, 2016). In contemporary terms, this means that war must conform to *jus in bellum* (the law in waging war) and *jus ad bellum* (the right to declare war) to be morally accepted. As normative production is also a field in dispute and is commonly concentrated in the hands of those in power, the international humanitarian law and the rules of war legitimacy also derive from a Western and liberal conception of addressees of rights.

As a result, regular wars are those that develop under established rules: between national Armed Forces, with an immediate distinction between combatants and civilians, in obedience to international law, and with a recognizable demarcation of the battlefield. This “Westphalian regularity” (Tenenbaum, 2014) has been contrasted to irregular wars – also called asymmetrical – in which at least one of the parties is a non-state group. Mistakenly, many people

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place the emergency of asymmetrical conflicts in the post-Cold War order. However, irregular conflicts are not a contemporary novelty and were already described in classical works, such as Carl Schmitt's partisan theory (idem, 2014).

The "novelty" of the 20th century is not the irregularity, but the extent of its use. The breakthrough with classical war can be found in the Second World War (1939–1945). After the advent of nuclear weapons, it has become inconceivable to maintain the war between great powers as a recurring practice[2]. The first sign of adaptation was that conflict moved from Europe to the peripheries, illustrated by the emergence of proxy wars. Due to the impossibility of conducting regular wars involving nuclear powers, proxy wars adopted irregular practices. In addition to the devastation of lives, societies, and the economy of developing countries, the transfer of battlefields from the North to the South reinforced the interventionist narrative of *white saviorism*[3].

In the post-Cold War, security studies were influenced by Mary Kaldor's *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (1999). The author considered that new wars would be those conducted inside the state, involving civil groups. As I described above, it is not accurate to consider them as "new" solely because they occur at the domestic level. However, Kaldor has made a groundbreaking contribution by developing the specificities of contemporary asymmetrical conflicts. The author argued that the current proliferation of irregular wars is connected to the weakening of the state as a legitimate source of norms.

Hence, the state's fragility causes social and political deficits that generate anomy. The failure in guaranteeing individual and collective security to citizens culminates in a violation of the state-founding social contract. As a result, individuals fail to identify who enunciates legitimate orders. War is no longer only a product of the clash of interests: we have been testifying the reinvention of war as a social pathology (Badie, 2014). The feeling of state emptiness is maximized in a globalized world, in which comparisons with other societies are easily made. Then, there is an open space for disputes articulated from bottom-up and for the formation of private groups that assume the role of service providers, as the militias. We realize, therefore, the need to develop new grammars to deal with unprecedented forms of conflict. To be applicable, the new lexicon must consider the social character and the human consequences of the diversification of violence.

Despite the reduction in quantity, conflicts between states also persist and are perpetuated. According to Silva and Gomes (2016), we can identify two determining factors for the current and future interstate armed disputes: a) economic issues related to the dispute over natural resources, their scarcity and environmental degradation; and b) ideological, religious and ethnic issues. Both cause indirect effects, such as the intensification of migrations and persecutions that increase requests for refugee status. In both cases, the weakness of state institutions may increase the chances of social polarization and the risk of instability.

There are also forms of aggression that may or may not involve the participation of the state, and that challenge the ability to respond effectively by scaping the standards of international norms. Here, the difference is the close connection between war and technology. We can mention, as an example, cyberwars. These are characterized by acts of war against public services, committed wholly or partially by digital means, for geopolitical purposes. Examples of activities that fall into this category are interference with critical communication networks or infrastructure, sabotage, espionage, and manipulation of public opinion. The first cases were credited to Russia, in an attack on Georgia and Estonia, in 2007, and to the United States and Israel, which implemented the Stuxnet Program (2012) to interfere in the Iranian nuclear program (Douzet, 2014).

In the meantime, cyberwar brings unprecedented challenges, such as the difficulty of personifying the responsibility for the attacks, mainly because the sender may or may not be state-owned. There is also a juridical question: the qualification of a cyberattack as an act of war is a discretionary and subjective act of the State that suffers it, and the response strategies of conventional wars do not apply entirely to cyberspace (Lobato and Kenkel, 2015).

Despite not intending to exhaust the topic, it is worth mentioning other elements related to new wars. With the advance of climate change and the recurrence of cyclic crises, the economic dependence on natural resources is already a potential cause for the emergence of new conflicts. Also worthy of concern is the increased circulation of

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small arms, which are more difficult to monitor. In conflicts, these are the ones that kill the most, and a significant part of the arsenals of non-state groups are obsolete stockpiles deflected from official inventories, without tracking devices or safe handling conditions. Regarding technology, recent interventions in the Middle East highlighted the use of drones and the practice of precision warfare, which are also outside the current legal framework[4]. Finally, it is necessary to consider the development of privatization trends, illustrated the involvement of multinationals companies and mercenaries in war-related activities.

Notes

[1] There is a conceptual distinction between war and armed conflict, based mainly on the number of deaths. According to the definitions used by international security databases, such as Sipri and the Upsala Conflict Data Program, war is an armed conflict that opposes, for the conquest of territory or power, two Armed Forces, and at least one belongs to the State, which causes at least 1000 deaths in a year. As in this text the objective is to show the evolution of the phenomenon, I will use the terms interchangeably.

[2] The United States was the first country to produce nuclear weapons. The first public demonstration was in 1945, in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Soviet Union obtained it a few years later, in 1949. Currently, there are nine nuclear-armed countries. Five of these are considered “legitimate”, because they built their arsenals before the entry into force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): the United States, Soviet Union/Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and China. The other four obtained their arsenals on the margins of the NPT: North Korea, Pakistan, India, and Israel.

[3] In the sense used here, the concept of white saviorism describes practices in which individuals or countries with largely white populations adopt narratives of humanitarian aid providers. This stance, often accompanied by interventionist practices, reifies racial and social inequalities, in a kind of “civilizing mission” to less economically developed countries or regions. According to Aronson (2017), white saviors seek recognition of good deeds and are socially rewarded for their actions. The main criticism is that these specific actions disregard and reinforce the social and political structure that it creates and that maintains the system of oppression and inequality.

[4] Since the early 2000s, the United States has included drone air strikes in its military strategy. Initially a response to the 9/11 attacks, it has been extended to other conflicts. Such attacks have been conducted in Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, for example. To learn more, see Peron and Dias (2018).

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