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Revisiting the Debate on the Obsolescence & Changing Character of Wars: Schools, Arguments & Critiques

Savaşların Geçerliliğini Yitirmesi & Değişen Karakteri Tartışmasına Yeniden Bakış: Ekoller, Argümanlar & Eleştiriler

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REVISITING THE DEBATE ON THE OBSOLESCENCE & CHANGING CHARACTER OF WARS: SCHOOLS, ARGUMENTS & CRITIQUES

Abstract

This study examines the debate on the obsolescence of interstate wars and the new wars paradigm. Since the end of the Cold War, peace and conflict studies have explored the evolving characteristics and potential decline of interstate wars. Some scholars argue that (major) interstate wars have become obsolete due to economic, social, and political progress and technological advances. Others highlight the increasing prevalence of intrastate wars characterized by privatization and demilitarization of violence, asymmetry, and identity orientation. This debate centers on the dichotomy between "old wars" and "new wars," emphasizing their economic dimension and post-Clausewitzian nature. In accordance with the critiques of the new wars paradigm, the recent conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, and Ethiopia underscore the continued relevance of interstate wars and the enduring significance of Clausewitzian warfare in contemporary conflicts. By tracing the origins of the new wars paradigm, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the future of interstate wars and Clausewitzian warfare, concluding that these remain significant in contemporary conflicts as well as international politics.

Keywords: *Clausewitzian Warfare, Interstate Wars, New Wars, Obsolescence of War, Ukrainian War.*

SAVAŞLARIN GEÇERLİLİĞİNİ YİTİRMESİ & DEĞİŞEN KARAKTERİ TARTIŞMASINA YENİDEN BAKIŞ: EKOLLER, ARGÜMANLAR & ELEŞTİRİLER

Öz

Bu çalışma, devletler arası savaşların geçerliliğini yitirmesi ve yeni savaşlar paradigması üzerine olan tartışmaları incelemektedir. Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesinden bu yana barış ve çatışma çalışmaları, devletler arası savaşların değişen özelliklerini ve olası gerilemelerini araştırmaktadır. Bazı akademisyenler; ekonomik, sosyal ve politik ilerlemeler ile teknolojik gelişmeler nedeniyle (büyük) devletler arası savaşların geçerliliğini yitirdiğini savunmaktadır. Diğerleri ise şiddetin özelleştirilmesi ve demilitarizasyonu, asimetri ve kimlik yönelimi ile karakterize edilen devlet içi savaşların artan yaygınlığına dikkat çekmektedir. Bu tartışma, "eski savaşlar" ve "yeni savaşlar" arasındaki ikiliğe odaklanarak bu savaşların ekonomik boyutunu ve post-Clausewitzyen doğasını vurgulamaktadır. Yeni savaşlar paradigmasının eleştirilerine uygun olarak Ukrayna, Filistin ve Etiyopya'daki son çatışmalar, devletler arası savaşların devam eden önemini ve Clausewitzyen savaşın çağdaş çatışmalardaki kalıcı etkisini vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, yeni savaşlar paradigmasının kökenlerinin izini sürerek devletler arası savaşların ve Clausewitzyen savaşın geleceğine kapsamlı bir inceleme sunmakta ve bunların çağdaş çatışmalarda olduğu kadar uluslararası politikada da önemli unsurlar olarak kalmaya devam ettiği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Clausewitzyen Savaş, Devletler Arası Savaşlar, Yeni Savaşlar, Savaşın Geçerliliğini Yitirmesi, Ukrayna Savaşı.*

INTRODUCTION: *QUO VADIS?*

The second decade of the 21st century has witnessed a notable surge in state-based violence,[1] both internationally and domestically. Between 2020 and 2023, the number and intensity of state-based conflicts increased steadily, with 2023 recording the highest number of state-based conflicts since 1946 (Rustad, 2024, p. 7). In this period, notable conflicts include Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine conflict in Gaza, and the renewed civil war in Ethiopia between Addis Ababa and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which collectively resulted in nearly 600,000 deaths (Rustad, 2024, pp. 9-10). This resurgence of violence prompts scholars re-consider the possibility of interstate wars and Clausewitzian/conventional warfare, while leaders like Trump, Biden, and Putin warn of potential regional wars and even a new world war (Overy, 2024; Racker, 2023).

Given that "2023 was the third most violent year since 1989, with approximately 122,000 battle deaths," surpassing the previous years in terms of battle deaths across 59 active conflicts, and that "[t]he only other period since 1946 where more than 50 state-based conflicts have been recorded was during the early 1990s" (Rustad, 2024, pp. 7-8, 10), it seems pertinent to revisit post-Cold War queries regarding the obsolescence of war. Beginning with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalating into a full-scale invasion in 2022, the Ukrainian War has reignited debates on the relevance of interstate wars and the future of conventional warfare. This conflict, alongside those in Palestine and Ethiopia, highlight the intricate dynamics of geopolitical interests, national identities, and regional (in)stability, illustrating the enduring significance of interstate wars, characterized by conventional warfare, in shaping international relations (Biddle, 2023; Robinson, 2022).

The collapse of the Soviet Union positioned the United States as a victorious "hyperpower" (Mandelbaum, 2022), marking a period known as the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990). This period of "liberal optimism" (Mann, 2018) fostered expectations of a future dominated by liberal democratic idea(l)s and peaceful dispute resolution through international organizations. Conversely, others anticipated new conflicts arising from antagonistic ethnic, cultural, and religious identities within and across societies, alongside non-traditional

[1] The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) defines state-based violence as "[a] contested incompatibility over government and/or territory, where at least one party is a state and the use of armed force results in at least 25 battle-related deaths within a calendar year" (Rustad, 2024, p. 7).

security threats such as natural disasters, infectious diseases, and refugee flow. These conflicting predictions have fueled a scholarly debate in peace and conflict studies, focusing on two key questions: whether major wars are obsolete, and what the nature of future wars might be.

The debate regarding the obsolescence of interstate wars suggests that major wars have become rare due not only to the "balance of terror/threat" (Organski, 1968; Walt, 1985) between nuclear superpowers during the Cold War but also due to other significant factors. These include changes in norms and attitudes toward violence, democratization, free trade, economic interdependence, cosmopolitan ideas, social rights movements, and the growing importance of international organizations in global governance. Empirical data support the notion that major wars have declined in the post-World War II period, particularly after the Cold War, with only minor fluctuations due to conflicts in developing countries (Rustad, 2024).

Parallel to the decline in interstate wars, there has been a rise in (internationalized) civil wars, especially in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia. In these conflicts, states often reassert themselves as the sole authority with the right to use violence domestically. These wars are marked by high levels of violence against civilians, blurred lines between combatants and non-combatants, economic incentives for participation, and the prominent role of non-state actors. Scholars have accordingly labelled them as "third kind of warfare" (Holsti, 2004), "hybrid wars" (Hoffman, 2007), "new wars" (Kaldor, 2012; Mueller, 2004; Münkler, 2003), "degenerative war" (Shaw, 2008), "risk-transfer war" (Shaw, 2002), "war amongst the people" (R. Smith, 2007), "low-intensity conflict" (van Creveld, 1991), and "postmodern war" (Gray, 1997). Despite the variety of labels, there is a scholarly consensus on common characteristics of these wars, which can be categorized as (i) demilitarization, (ii) privatization, (iii) asymmetry, and (iv) identity orientation.

In this context, this study aims to revisit the extant literature on the obsolescence of wars and examine what forms of warfare might prevail in the future. By analyzing the major and contemporary pieces from a compartive perspective, the study specifically investigates the underlying causes of the decline in interstate wars and the concomitant rise of so-called new wars. By analyzing the origins and features of new wars, the study concludes that interstate wars with Clausewitzian characteristics still remain possible.

The paper is organized as follows: The first section critically evaluates the scholarly debate on the obsolescence of (major) wars, detailing reasons for their perceived obsolescence and supporting arguments. The second section critically examines the new wars paradigm, asserting that the post-Cold War conflicts are not fundamentally distinct from previous ones. The final section assesses the validity of these arguments, presenting some critiques and concluding remarks.

1. ON THE OBSOLESCENCE OF WARS

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the US emerged as a "hyperpower" (Mandelbaum, 2022), marking what was often referred to as the "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990). This period was characterized by optimism, envisioning a future liberal utopia, where democratic idea(l)s, economic liberalism, and peaceful resolution mechanisms would become the norm. Some scholars predicted that nations would adopt the liberal model (Fukuyama, 1989) and less violent resolution mechanisms (Goldstein, 2011; Mueller, 2001; Pinker, 2011), while others sought to understand why the world seemed more peaceful (Gartzke, 2007; Gat, 2017; Keohane & Nye, 2012; Oneal & Russett, 1999; Russett et al., 1993). This ongoing debate features three distinct but interrelated schools of thought (Malešević, 2014): constructivism, liberalism, and realism. This section critically analyzes each school, highlighting how certain social, economic, and political processes, as well as technological advancements, have led some to believe wars have become obsolete.

1.1. Constructivist Perspective

Constructivist scholars such as Mueller (2001) and Pinker (2011) argue that the decline in violence is primarily due to changing social norms. Over centuries, humans have become more adept at controlling their "demons," or impulses toward violence. Pinker (2011) attributes this decline to progress in rationality and civilization, leading humans to increasingly rely on peaceful means ("angels") to settle disputes through a six-stage evolutionary process.[2] Human psychology is pivotal in explaining this process, encompassing not only wars but all forms of violence, including homicide, genocide, rebellion, and the slave trade. Although Pinker (2011) supports his thesis with quantitative data, this

[2] The six-stage evolutionary process includes (i) the "pacification process" in the early periods of humanity, (ii) the "civilizing process" between the Middle Ages and the 20th century, (iii) the "humanitarian revolution" or the European Enlightenment, (iv) the "long peace" during the Cold War, (v) the "new peace" in the post-Cold War era, and (vi) the "rights revolutions" or movements since the 1950s (Pinker, 2011).

broad approach occasionally renders his arguments complex and unclear (Mann, 2018).

Mueller (2001) adopts a similar but more focused stance, emphasizing the role of ideas in changing people's behavior and attitudes toward violence over a relatively short period. Mueller (2001, p. ix) views war as "an idea – an institution, like dueling or slavery, that has been grafted onto human existence [but not] required by the human condition or by the forces of history" and believes it can "shrivel up" or "disappear" as social norms evolve, like duelling and slavery, which were well-established social institutions in Europe prior to the 20th century (Mueller, 2001, pp. 9–12). Despite emphasizing normative change, Mueller (2001, pp. 8-9) acknowledges the functionalist/cost-benefit rationale: the costs and diminishing returns ("blood and treasure") exacerbated by advances in military technology and economic interdependence make warfare increasingly irrational and thus immoral over time (Malešević, 2014).

1.2. Liberal Perspective

In contrast, the liberal perspective underscores relatively recent developments in the decline of interstate wars, including the growth of free trade and finance (Gartzke, 2007; Oneal & Russett, 1999; Rosecrance, 1986), economic interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012), democratization (Doyle, 1983a, 1983b; Russett et al., 1993), and international organizations (Goldstein, 2011). Some scholars, including Duffield (2001), Holsti (2004), Keen (2000), and Reno (2000), caution that rapid economic liberalization and globalization can erode state capacity, creating avenues for non-state actors to operate as quasi-states through illicit markets and criminal networks. Nonetheless, liberal scholars assert that open and free trade benefits the global economy by fostering economic interdependence (Gartzke, 2007; Keohane & Nye, 2012; Oneal & Russett, 1999; Russett et al., 1993), where "trading states" (Rosecrance, 1986) and the "capitalist peace" (Gartzke, 2007) deter interstate wars. Rosecrance (1986, pp. 155–162) explicitly articulates the rationale for "trading states:" as long as the costs of engaging war exceed its benefits, war will never be a rational choice for decision-makers. Economic relations provide a platform for resolving disputes without high military expenditures, achieving a pacifying effect through close social, cultural, and political ties, or "complex interdependence" between states (Keohane & Nye, 2012). These linkages prompt parties to view each other as allies or, at the very least, as economic partners, rather than adversaries or competitors.

The liberal perspective also encompasses political factors, particularly focusing on democratic regimes. This viewpoint asserts that democratic regimes are inherently less likely to engage in conflict with each other, with the global expansion of democracy seen as a pathway to world peace (Doyle, 1983a; cf. Gartzke, 2007, pp. 167-171; Russett et al., 1993). Doyle (1983a) presents a compelling argument ("liberal peace"), positing that warfare in foreign affairs is largely avoidable in a "pacific union," where liberal democracies maintain a cooperative foundation based on shared democratic values and mutual respect for states' rights, with mutual economic benefits being secondary. Similarly, Russett et al. (1993) highlight the role of shared common norms and values, as well as mutual economic benefits, through economic interdependence. Their argument stresses domestic institutional constraints like transparent decision-making, checks and balances, and public accountability. However, liberalism's success in promoting peace is limited to the liberal world due to (i) ideological incompatibility with non-liberal states, often leading to ideological crusades or imperial overstretch, and (ii) the existence of an international state of war, or "anarchy," characterized by conflicts over security, resources, and prestige (Doyle, 1983b).

Goldstein (2011), on the other hand, highlights the growing influence of international organizations in reducing conflicts worldwide and promoting normative changes regarding violence. He attributes the decline in armed conflicts to international efforts, particularly UN peacekeeping missions. However, linking this argument to the long-term decline is problematic. As Fearon (2017, pp. 25–26) observes, while UN peacekeeping missions have significantly reduced conflicts after the Cold War, this is not the case before this time period (Hartzell, 2016). Anachronism also effects the arguments of Mueller (2001) and Pinker (2011), as they fail to address why the downward trend is observed after a certain point in time but not before.

1.3. Realist Perspective

The last school of thought focuses on states' security concerns, emphasizing state capacity/capabilities (Gat, 2017), threat perceptions (Organski, 1968; Schelling, 2008; Walt, 1985), and the role of advanced military technologies (Boot, 2006; Krepinevich, 1994). Despite the contributions of international trade, economic interdependence, democratization, normative changes, and the UN peacekeeping operations to the observed decline, Gat (2017) posits that the key mechanism is the rise of the "state-Leviathan." Contrary to Tilly's (1985)

argument that warfare and state formation are mutually reinforcing processes, Gat (2017) argues that the bureaucratization of states through warfare does not necessarily lead to an increase in interstate wars (cf. Levy & Thompson, 2011). As the bureaucratic and military capacity of states has grown, wars have become an institutionalized social phenomenon, with their frequency and death rates decreasing. Additionally, the exponential increase in the destructive capacity of weapons and armies since the Industrial Revolution has made warfare irrational due to diminishing returns relative to required resources. The bureaucratization of states and the subsequent emergence of modern states are critical for managing organized violence and reducing of its criminal forms, but this process requires centuries to establish. Modern states emerged approximately between the 16th and 18th centuries, continuing into the 19th and 20th centuries. Consequently, this explanation, alongside Pinker's (2011) and Mueller's (2001) arguments, fails to address why conflict decline became significant after World War II, particularly in the post-Cold War era.

To address this, some realist scholars examine the significance of the emergence and proliferation of nuclear weapons (Boot, 2006; Krepinevich, 1994; Waltz, 1981) and related balance of power/terror/threat arguments (Organski, 1968; Walt, 1985; Waltz, 1981). The intertwined evolution of sophisticated military technology and concurrent social, economic, and political developments has been a subject of considerable debate (Boot, 2006; Levy & Thompson, 2011; Malešević, 2014; Mann, 2018). The emergence of nuclear weapons since World War II has led to a new concept, "strategic stability," suggesting that states, as rational actors, are expected to act strategically to protect their existence and vital interests under conditions of mutually assured destruction ("MAD") (Organski, 1968; Schelling, 2008; Walt, 1985; Waltz, 1981; cf. Sagan & Waltz, 1995). The balance of power/terror/threat created by nuclear weapons, coupled with annihilation fears, has compelled decision-makers to avoid open confrontations with other nuclear powers. This strategic behavior results in the "stability-instability paradox" (e.g., Korean War, Vietnam War, Afghan War), where major states engage in small or proxy wars in peripheral countries (Early & Asal, 2018; Krieg & Rickli, 2019; Rauchhaus, 2009).

2. ON THE NEW WARS PARADIGM

The previous discussion indicates that while the nature of wars has significantly changed, the complete obsolescence of war remains debatable. Parallel to this,

another significant debate within peace and conflict studies centers on the new wars paradigm. This debate explores the characteristics of contemporary warfare, especially where conventional interstate wars are considered obsolete. Empirical studies (Rustad, 2024) indicate that (internationalized) civil wars have emerged as substitutes for interstate wars. These conflicts are often characterized by non-state actors perpetrating excessive violence against non-combatants, frequently with external support, in fragile or failed states in the developing world (Holsti, 2004; Kaldor, 2012; Kaplan, 2000; Münkler, 2003; Shaw, 2002; R. Smith, 2007). Violence in these settings typically involves insurgent groups, warlords, militia forces, proxies, jihadists, and even mercenaries operating alongside state security forces (Kaldor, 2012; Mueller, 2000; R. Smith, 2007; Walter, 2017).

These groups engage in excessive asymmetric violence to exploit resources, capture states, or pursue personal, ethnic, and religious vendettas (Kalyvas, 2006; Kaplan, 2000; Keen, 2000, 2011; Mueller, 2000; Reno, 2000; Walter, 2017). To achieve their objectives, they conduct protracted conflicts and exhibit criminal behavior, including indiscriminate targeting of combatants and non-combatants, using of child soldiers, committing sexual violence, exploiting natural resources and humanitarian crises for their own advantage, and even committing genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass killings, and other forms of war crimes (Hoffman, 2007; Shaw, 2008; van Creveld, 1991; R. Smith, 2007). These groups typically fund their operations through small arms from state sponsors, diaspora remittances, and regional and transnational crime networks, engaging in the drug trade, human trafficking, and looting (Berdal, 2003; Duffield, 2001; Kaldor, 2012; Mueller, 2000, 2004; Shearer, 2000).

Critics argue that the "new wars" paradigm lacks a unified theoretical framework, has a limited historical perspective, is ambiguous in their conceptualization, and, most importantly, is not novel in their approach to violence (Berdal, 2003; Henderson & Singer, 2002; Kalyvas, 2001; Keegan, 1993). Nonetheless, proponents like Kaldor (2013) highlight its practical utility as a paradigm in understanding contemporary conflicts, particularly in evaluating the complex interplay of non-state actors, external interventions, economic incentives, excessive violence in cases such as the Rwandan Genocide, the Bosnian War, and the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Despite these problematic aspects, the paradigm's features can be categorized into four key themes: (i) privatization, (ii) demilitarization, (iii) asymmetry, and (iv) identity

orientation (Kaldor, 2012, 2013; Mello, 2010). The following sub-section provides a detailed examination of each theme.

2.1. Privatization of Violence

Numerous intrastate conflicts have arisen within weak or failing states unable to maintain their social contracts due to their exploitative nature, as exemplified by predatory states. These states also struggle to assert their legitimate use of violence within their territories, particularly in regions like the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia. Two factors particularly stand out in explaining this phenomenon. First, the perpetuation of the colonial legacy through institutional incapacity has posed significant challenges for many newly emerging states, particularly in Africa (Holsti, 2004; Kennedy & Waldman, 2014; Newman, 2014). Second, the third-wave globalization has had a detrimental impact on the economically vulnerable agrarian economies of the developing world (Brzoska, 2004; Duffield, 2001; Münkler, 2003).

The post-colonial perspective posits that problematic state and nation-building processes (e.g., illegitimate governments, controversial national identities, territorial disputes within and between states) should be the primary focus of analysis (Kennedy & Waldman, 2014; Newman, 2014), In contrast, another view underscores the disruptive effects of globalization on states' capacity/capabilities in the developing world (Duffield, 2001; Münkler, 2003). In such countries, weak and/or failed states are unable to provide even the most basic needs of their constituents. Consequently, non-state armed groups (e.g., warlords, insurgent/rebel groups, terrorist organizations, bandits) establish their social base by providing basic social services to marginalized groups, in turn engaging in exploitative activities for their gain. As this vicious cycle of weak state-rebel service provision entrenches within societies, non-state armed groups become regarded as legitimate actors by the public. Their continued existence relies on perpetuating violence rather than achieving decisive military victory or negotiating peace with government forces (Keen, 2000, 2011, 2012; Krieg & Rickli, 2019; Mueller, 2000, 2004).

The privatization of violence can be defined as a state of affairs in which several armed groups, competing for a broader social base, operate for their parochial interests while maintaining the discourse of high political, social, ethnic, and/or religious objectives. In this context, the act of fighting itself becomes the aim, as the perpetuation of violence provides tangible benefits for warring parties through external support, diaspora remittances, and the war

economy consisting of illicit markets, trafficking, and banditry. Even regular armies, paramilitaries (e.g., the Janjaweed in Sudan), and mercenaries (e.g., the Wagner Group's Africa Corps) stand to gain from prolonged wars. The primary mechanism at play is the transfer of risks to proxy groups in exchange for tangible benefits, aiming to minimize the resources required for a military victory or a mutually beneficial agreement (Krieg & Rickli, 2019; Shaw, 2002). The Bosnian War provides a clear illustration of this mechanism, with numerous formal and informal armed groups advancing their parochial interests through prolonged conflicts while simultaneously pursuing their ostensibly high-value goals (Kaldor, 2012; Mueller, 2000, 2004).

2.2. Demilitarization of Conflicts

Demilitarization of violence (Münkler, 2003) departs from Clausewitz's concept of "trinitarian warfare," where three distinct yet interrelated components of war (i.e., the government, the public, and the army) play pivotal roles in overcoming the fog of war and regulating the use of force to achieve politically defined goals (Clausewitz, 1989). In contemporary "non-trinitarian" conflicts (van Creveld, 1991), distinctions between war and peace, civilian and military, political and economic, public and private, and even domestic and international blur, rendering the analysis of any one factor alone inadequate. The dissolution of conventional boundaries in contemporary conflicts allows non-state armed groups to emerge due to state decay and permits excessive violence against civilians for economic gain.

Unlike conventional warfare's direct confrontation between two clearly defined military forces, contemporary non-trinitarian warfare represents a hybrid form (Hoffman, 2007). It is distinguished by the involvement of informal actors, such as rebels, terrorist organizations, insurgents, and warlords, unbound by conventional warfare norms. These actors employ indiscriminate violence against both combatants and non-combatants, using non-conventional means like terrorism, ethnic cleansing, mass expulsion, rape, and even genocide (Shaw, 2008). Moreover, they employ a range of unconventional tactics, including the use of child soldiers, suicide bombers, and small drones, across diverse operational environments like urban areas. Evidently, these actors cannot be considered ordinary armed forces, given their characteristics that set them apart. Instead, these actors are more analogous to bandits, gangs, or mercenaries. Despite their rhetoric that they are driven by a desire to advance specific, often ethnic, religious, or ideological agendas, they utilize

indiscriminate violence and eschew the law of war in pursuit of parochial interests, whether wealth accumulation or personal vengeance (Kalyvas, 2006; Keen, 2000, 2011, 2012; Mueller, 2000).

2.3. Asymmetric Warfare

The features discussed prompt consideration of the third component of new wars: asymmetry (Münkler, 2003). Scholars have proposed various designations for contemporary conflicts, such as "third kind of warfare" (Holsti, 2004), "war amongst the people" (R. Smith, 2007), "low-intensity conflict" (van Creveld, 1991), and "postmodern war" (Gray, 1997), all characterized by asymmetry, whereby the conflicting parties are qualitatively distinct in terms of their actor type (i.e., state versus non-state) and capabilities (i.e., armament, training, and recruitment). In most new/intrastate wars, states contend with non-state actors relying on external support (e.g., external actors, diaspora communities) and war economies (e.g., illicit markets, trafficking, looting) to finance and sustain their operations over an extended period. Non-state actors are typically disadvantaged in military technology and financial resources, making asymmetric warfare the most effective means of resistance for the weaker party against a more powerful adversary whose material resources are beyond their reach but whose resolve remains vulnerable.

The psychological exhaustion of relatively powerful actors by the weaker side is the essence of asymmetric warfare. The weaker side exploits the psychological vulnerabilities of powerful actors, aiming not for decisive military victory but to erode the stronger adversary's will until the public is no longer willing to bear high casualties and economic costs associated with protracted wars. Powerful actors, however, seek decisive victories, using advanced military technology and financial resources in short, intense battles. In contrast, weaker parties prolong conflicts, employing guerrilla warfare tactics to instill fear and hatred (Freedman, 2013, Chapter 14; Mello, 2010). Given the psychological dimensions of contemporary conflicts, particularly attrition in prolonged conflicts, most Western states avoid protracted engagements, transferring conflict risks to peripheral countries through "surrogate warfare," minimizing casualties and economic costs (Krieg & Rickli, 2019; Münkler, 2003; Shaw, 2002).

Nevertheless, asymmetry is not the only strategic element in new wars; high military technology also plays a pivotal role. The advent and proliferation of nuclear weapons during and after World War II have unequivocally transformed

warfare. The speed, scope, and lethality of weapons now determine war outcomes.[3] The lethality of conflicts, for example, has increased six-fold in terms of firepower in the post-World War II period (Gray, 1997, p. 171). The speed, precision, and delivery of weapons have blurred distinctions between conventional and unconventional weapons, leading to unconventional effects from conventional arms on adversaries. Therefore, protecting the military-industrial complex has become as crucial as defending capitals. Military success in contemporary conflicts depends on gaining and maintaining a technological edge, assuming military victory can only be achieved through sophisticated weaponry rather than older technology's quantitative advantage (Gray, 1997, Chapter 9).

2.4. Identity Orientation

The last characteristics of new wars is the emphasis on belligerents' identity traits, encompassing specific culture, ethnicities, religions, or ideologies. The 1990s witnessed two contradictory post-Cold War predictions. Optimists envisioned a utopian world where liberal democracy and capitalism would be the decisive norms (Fukuyama, 1989; Gartzke, 2007; Russett et al., 1993), while others were cautious about such rosy pictures, foreseeing the potential for new conflicts, arising from antagonistic identities within and across societies, as well as from non-traditional security threats such as natural disasters, infectious diseases, and refugee flows (Huntington, 1993; Kaplan, 2000; Lake & Rothchild, 1996; Mearsheimer, 1990). The Rwandan Genocide (1994) and Bosnian War (1992-1995) fulfilled some of these predictions for many scholars. Both Kaldor (2012) and Mueller (2004), for instance, use the Bosnian War to illustrate their arguments concerning the emergence and conduct of new wars.

Scholars have sought to explain these ethnic wars from three different perspectives (Mello, 2010). Early arguments linked the immediate cause of contemporary conflicts to "ancient hatreds," conceptualizing ethnic identities as immutable group traits (Kaplan, 2000). Instrumentalist scholars rejected these identity-based arguments, seeing conflicts as means for decision-makers to gain personal wealth (Lake & Rothchild, 1996; Mueller, 2000). Constructivist scholars and those from the social-psychology school underlined the evolving nature of identities as well as emotional reactions of participants in the process

[3] Although the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) posits that technological advancements have changed warfare (Krepinevich, 1994), scholars like Biddle (2023) argue that deploying weapons and tactics defines military victory, not technology.

of war initiation (Horowitz, 1985; Kaufman, 2001). New wars scholars, particularly Kaldor (2012) and Mueller (2000, 2004), take an instrumentalist view, considering identity-emphasis as a "banal" way of explaining complex conflict dynamics (Mueller, 2000). They instead argue that contemporary conflicts are best analyzed through an economic lens, where the primary objective is the accumulation of wealth rather than the pursuit of intangible, high-value ends. In this view, identity traits play a limited role in contemporary conflicts, motivating individuals to join armed groups. The identity-orientation of new wars is perceived as political elites' discourse disguising their economic objectives.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION: *A COME BACK?*

While the aforementioned schools emphasize norms, organizations, trade, democracy, interdependence, nuclear threats, and military technology in rendering interstate wars obsolete, they face significant critiques (Malešević, 2014). For instance, although Mueller (2001) and Pinker (2011) utilize an expansive lens encompassing all forms of violence, they fail to definitively conclude that interstate wars are becoming obsolete. Their frequent transitions between different violence forms to substantiate their theories results in complexity and incoherence, undermining the persuasiveness of their arguments. A significant issue with Pinker's (2011) thesis on the decline in violence is his reliance on problematic quantitative data, where figures are often unreliable and historical cases are exaggerated. Moreover, Pinker's (2011) unsystematic case selection, frequently focusing on supportive instances, also leads to case selection bias (Mann, 2018). On the other hand, norm-centered explanations like that of Mueller (2001) give rise to unfalsifiable hypotheses, raising causality questions. It remains unclear whether changing ideas/norms lead to a reduction in violence and war, or vice versa, resulting in tautological claims unfalsifiable in the Popperian understanding of science (Popper, 2002, p. 10).[4] Ahistoricism is another common critique of the constructivist school, particularly evident in Goldstein's (2011) analysis, attributing the historical decline in violence to increased UN peacekeeping operations in the post-Cold War period. This rationale overlooks that such operations occurred exclusively

[4] The falsifiability of a theoretical system does "not require a scientific system that it shall be capable of being singled out, once and for all, in a positive sense; but […] shall require that its logical form shall be such that it can be singled out, by means of empirical tests, in a negative sense: it must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience [sic]" (Popper, 2002, p. 18).

in the post-Cold War era, not prior to it, making the argument anachronistic by explaining the historical decline with recent factors.

Second, despite a substantial body of evidence, the liberal democratic model's role in fostering peace remains contentious. While liberal democracies are less prone to engage in conflict with one another, it is unclear whether democracy or capitalism is the predominant peace-promoting factor (Doyle, 1983a, 1983b; cf. Gartzke, 2007; Oneal & Russett, 1999). The causal mechanism remains ambiguous, and the impact of complex interdependence, particularly open and free trade through globalization, remains a contentious topic. As Tilly's (1985) war-makes-state argument points out, increased economic and military competition in the post-Westphalian era led to the bureaucratization of pre-modern polities, giving rise to the emergence of modern states. Economic globalization and growing military apparatus, therefore, have advanced state formation process (Malešević, 2008; Gat, 2017; Keohane & Nye, 2012). However, the same economic processes weaken state capacity in the developing world, generating economic and military dependencies on the Global North, fostering non-state armed groups, and war economies (Brzoska, 2004; Duffield, 2001).

Third, the existence of nuclear weapons, the most sophisticated and destructive weapons since World War II, also raises questions about their deterrent role, preventing decision-makers from irrational steps leading to the mutual annihilation of societies. While nuclear weapon proloferation and second-strike capability are expected to engender strategic stability among states, thereby reducing wars, they can also ignite strategic instability and create a more dangerous world (Waltz, 1981; cf. Early & Asal, 2018; Sagan & Waltz, 1995). This stability-instability paradox occurs when nuclear states can engage in low-intensity conflicts to avoid mutual annihilation. Furthermore, it remains uncertain how states should structure their nuclear posture, oscillating between an assured destruction (i.e., strategic weapons, all-out war) and flexible response (i.e., tactical weapons, limited war) (Jervis, 1979). Nuclear stability depends on states' risk-taking and credibility (Schelling, 2008), making it crucial to ascertain the startegies and weapons decision-makers would choose to define their nuclear posture.

Clearly, the debate surrounding the obsolescence of interstate war is complex and challenging. It is not yet evident whether major interstate wars are relics of the past. However, one thing is clear: the nature of warfare has

undergone a substantial transformation, with interstate wars still prominent in contemporary conflicts (Malešević, 2014; Mann, 2018). Whether future wars will align with the predictions set forth by the new wars paradigm remains unanswered. Critiques reveal that future wars may exhibit some post-Clausewitzian characteristics but may not represent an entirely novel form of warfare. First and foremost, the conceptualization of new wars is problematic as there is no clear delineation between "new wars" and "old wars." Proponents of the new wars paradigm have constructed an artificial conceptualization to differentiate a new era emerging in the post-Cold War period (Henderson & Singer, 2002; Kalyvas, 2001; Mello, 2010). This problematic conceptualization inevitably leads to ahistorical and reductionist claims, ignoring or minimizing historical cases and non-economic factors to substantiate the arguments pertaining to the post-Cold War period.

Kaldor (2012) and Mueller (2000, 2004) highlight the Bosnian War following the breakup of Yugoslavia as a primary case, illustrating new wars' characteristics: criminalized violence, excessive violence against non-combatants, and paramilitary group involvement. However, these characteristics have been observed in past conflicts as well, albeit to varying degrees (e.g., the Condottieri in Renaissance Italy, the atrocities of the Mughal Empire, the right of booty in Islamic empires). Furthermore, an excessive focus on economic logic in new wars overlooks other psychological, social, and political elements in the initiation and conduct of warfare (Kaufman, 2001; Stewart, 2008). As Berdal (2005) notes, understanding violence requires a comprehensive approach beyond the "grievance" or "greed" dichotomy. It is, therefore, beneficial to investigate additional factors, such as illegitimate governments, controversial national identities, and territorial disputes within and between states (Kennedy & Waldman, 2014; Newman, 2014).

In brief, the new wars paradigm, particularly Mueller's (2000; 2004; cf. Mann, 2018) arguments, is overly reductionist, often ignoring factors beyond neo-liberal globalization and its underlying economic logic. These factors include geopolitics, organizational dynamics, ideological dimensions, ecological factors, and, most importantly, significant structural transformations in world politics. Moreover, contemporary globalization and the privatization of violence in weak or failed states are not exclusive to the contemporary era. Analogous cases can be identified in earlier periods of world history as well (B. Smith, 2018; Keegan, 1993; Malešević, 2014; Mann, 2018). The new wars paradigm offers valuable insights into contemporary conflicts; however, it is

essential to address its conceptual and empirical limitations. It is, therefore, recommended that future research adopts a more comprehensive but nuanced approach, incorporating historical cases and non-economic factors to gain a full understanding of contemporary conflicts' complexities.

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