



**The continued
failure of collective
security to prevent
or resolve conflicts**

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INTRODUCTION

No single issue has caused more trouble throughout the history of humankind than that of war and conflict, and in particular our inability to prevent or resolve disputes in a peaceful and timely manner.

Since 1945, and even more so since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, there has been a widespread belief that wars and other armed conflicts are becoming an increasingly rare phenomena, confined now only to parts of the world where democracy is in short supply, and posing no real danger to global or even regional stability.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a misguided tendency in international political thinking and policymaking to follow the “End of History” paradigm proposed by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who argued: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such; that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government¹.”



Since common wisdom has it that democracies do not fight one another, this was also supposed to represent the era marking the end of wars².

But for evidence of the failure of our system of global collective security, established in the aftermath of the Second World War along with the accompanying mechanisms to ensure its success, one need look no further than the ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine and Syria.

The war between Israel and Hamas is a direct consequence of more than 75 years of

Families pours into the main train station, seeking refuge from the eastern city of Kramatorsk in the strife-torn Donbas region. Mass exodus ensued as Moscow intensified its assault on southern and eastern Ukraine, following its invasion in February 2022. AFP



failure to secure peace between these two antagonists, which allowed the conditions that ultimately led to the deadly events on, and since, Oct. 7 to fester.

To make matters worse, since the start of this war that has already claimed many thousands of innocent lives and threatens to spread throughout the Middle East, no international body or mechanism has been capable of bringing it to a quick conclusion.

Ukraine recently marked the second anniversary of a Russian invasion that had been brewing for at least eight years before escalating into a full-blown war. And then there is the long-running civil war in Syria, which since 2012 has claimed the lives of more than half a million people.

These three wars are but the tip of an iceberg of global conflict and suffering. The Conflict Data Program at Uppsala University in Sweden estimates that there are 189 active armed conflicts around the world³. More states are involved in violent conflicts, most of them categorized as “Non-International Armed Conflicts,” than at any time since 1946.

The number of deaths each year caused by this organized violence almost doubled from 121,000 in 2021 to 238,000 in 2022. Much of the increase resulted from the conflicts in Ukraine and in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, which together accounted for more than

Locals chat by damaged buildings in Daraa al-Balad, part of Syria’s southern city of Daraa. The area, once opposition-held, has returned to state control under a surrender deal that allowed fighters to join a reconciliation process to stay in the city. AFP

100,000 battle-related deaths.

There is little likelihood that we will see any improvement in this dire situation when the statistics for 2023 are compiled and analyzed. As the war in Gaza continues to rage, 2024 is on course to continue the trend⁴.

In addition to the cost of these conflicts in terms of human suffering, they also have an immense impact on the global economy. According to one assessment, in 2022 the global economic impact of violence, which includes the money spent on managing, preventing, and dealing with the aftermath of conflicts, amounted to a staggering \$17.5 trillion in terms of purchasing power parity exchange rate, a method used to compare the value of currencies between different countries. This figure is “equivalent to 12.9 percent of the world’s gross domestic product, or \$2,200 per person, and reflects an increase by 6.6 percent from the previous year.”

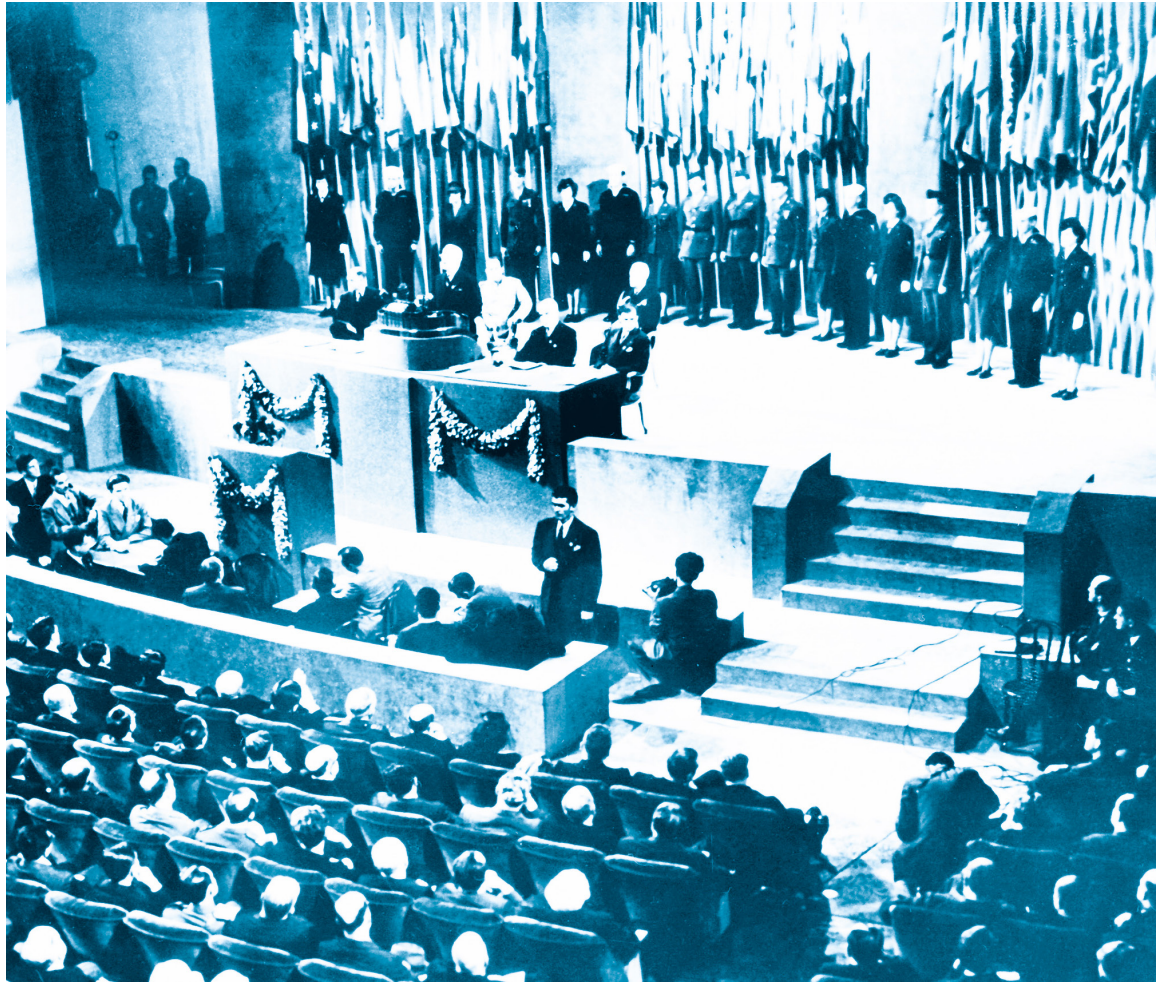
All of this points to the fact that wars are still endemic to our societies and that we are nowhere close to eradicating them. This is telling evidence that these extremely costly conflicts rather than being resolved, are merely being managed, albeit inadequately, given their protracted durations.

Many ongoing conflicts have become open-ended⁵: more than 75 years of conflict

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US President Harry Truman concludes the International Organization conference in San Francisco in 1945, where delegates from fifty governments unanimously approved the Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the new International Court of Justice. AFP



between Israel and Palestine; the endless disputes over Kashmir or Taiwan; more than 30 years of fighting in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq; more than 10 years of war in Libya and Syria; and almost 10 years of conflict in Yemen and Ukraine.

The UN and its main mechanism for collective security, the Security Council, have failed repeatedly to prevent these wars or bring them to a swift end, as have other international bodies.

This series of reports will argue that these failures are not coincidental. Rather, they are intrinsic to a complex international system in which the basic component remains the nation-state⁶.

This state of affairs points not only to failures on the bilateral or regional levels, but to global systemic failure. Throughout history, opinions about our propensity for war have been divided.

“Realists” believe conflict is an inherent part of human behaviour and therefore inevitable or even necessary to establish and maintain national, regional and global stability⁷.

A more liberal school of thought holds that wars and other conflicts are the result of flawed domestic and international institutions and that “perpetual peace” would prevail if these could only be perfected⁸.



Certain domestic conditions are more conducive to conflict, and less so to prevention and resolution

There are also those who blame conflicts on global structures and the capitalist system.

However, what emerged after the Second World War was a mixed system of powerful nation-states that are now effectively competing with the international organizations tasked with maintaining peace.

The stated objective of the world’s main mechanism for collective security, the UN, is: “To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace⁹.”

And yet rather than preventing or resolving conflicts, this international system, its agencies and the nation-states that comprise them have concentrated more on managing wars and their effects through humanitarian responses, peacekeeping operations and diplomatic means, including coercion.

This situation is the result of various factors, among them a strong collective sense of despair that, given current international structures and conditions, the prevention or resolution of conflicts has become impossible.

Add to this a lack of effective decision-making instruments, military limitations and a vast humanitarian machine, and the

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(L-R) UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, Secretary-General António Guterres, President of the UN General Assembly Dennis Francis, and Chef de Cabinet Courtenay Rattray observe a moment of silence to honor colleagues lost in Gaza during the Israel-Hamas conflict. AFP

entire international system has become more invested in conflict management rather than prevention or resolution.

A crucial aspect of this troubling situation is that the international community lacks not only a vision for how conflicts could and should be more effectively prevented or resolved, but also the courage to develop or implement policies that go beyond conflict management.

Those who during the Second World War envisaged a “United Nations” as a mechanism for world peace might not have had all the practical answers on how to achieve it but they did at least have their vision and a desire to build a strong international community out of the ruins of global war.

Their successors have been neither as bold nor as courageous in their efforts to ensure the vision of the founders became a reality¹⁰.

We also need to recognize the fact that certain domestic conditions are more conducive to conflict, and less so to its prevention and resolution. Political instability, economic hardship, leadership crises and even the effects of climate change can all make the prevention or resolution of conflict more of a tall order.

However, as we shall explore in subsequent reports in this series, there are several reasons why, despite the rhetoric of many

politicians and diplomats who proclaim support for conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, the actors on this stage all too often resort to a familiar toolbox of conflict management. This includes open-ended diplomatic negotiations, sanctions, regional initiatives or third-party mediation, with no clear objectives or deadlines. Engagement often takes place through the auspices of the UN Security Council, which is frequently paralysed by the power of veto held by its five permanent members¹¹.

It can hardly be disputed that conflicts can best be prevented or resolved through diplomatic efforts, and that humanitarian aid is essential to mitigate the effects of international political violence while it is happening and in its aftermath.

Yet none of the international institutions and instruments that should be playing a key role in preserving peace and security — including the UN’s General Assembly and Security Council, NATO, the International Criminal Court, the International Court of Justice, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, among others — can effectively do so.

One major obstacle that prevents these institutions from making a significant difference to the world by helping to ensure



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peace and rights for all, is that they have not been given enough independent power to take action by the nation-states that comprise their membership and empower them. As a result, their remits are always limited by member states, and deliberately so¹².

To acknowledge the important role of diplomacy and humanitarian aid in dealing with the effects of wars and reducing their impact, and the need to respond quickly when conflicts do arise, is to acknowledge the shortcomings of the current international system and its mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of war and peace building.

But this should not be mistaken for an endorsement of the situation as a sustainable approach¹³. The result of such an approach is that the destructive roots and results of conflicts are allowed to persist and fester, at best tamped down until the next inevitable conflagration.

The Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords, the Bosnian Dayton Accords, the Geneva Declaration on Cyprus and the conflicts in the Sahel region of northern Africa are just a few examples of conflicts that are at best on hold, and at worst exacerbated, storing up even more trouble for the future as the various participants prepare for the next round of hostilities. Another pitfall to avoid in efforts to prevent or peacefully resolve conflicts is

the fallacy of the “unique” nature of each one. This results in each of them being addressed in isolation, rather than building a body of knowledge based on recognition and exploration of the common features and shared reasons for the occurrence of war, and for the repeated failures to bring conflicts to an end in a satisfactory, sustainable manner.

Building an international regime for peace requires not only a comparative study of conflicts but also collaboration with those on all sides who have experienced and studied the horrors of war within their own societies, and bringing everyone together to share their views and discover the commonalities and differences among them, while building mechanisms for prevention and resolution.

Fortunately, the threat that has hovered over our heads since the end of the Second World War, of another direct confrontation between major world powers, especially those armed with nuclear weapons, has failed to materialize.

Nonetheless, war and conflict remain a part of the lives of so many people around the world, and leave in their trail death, devastation and prolonged misery. Yet humanity still has not found a formula to prevent them or bring them to an end. Some of the reasons for this will be further explored in subsequent reports in this series.

Top: US President Bill Clinton (C) mediates as PLO leader Yasser Arafat (R) and Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin (L) shake hands for the first time in 1993 at the White House, marking the signing of the historic Israel-PLO Oslo Accords for Palestinian autonomy. Below: People walk past destroyed buildings in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip amid the Israel-Hamas conflict. AFP



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