More Conflicts, More Deaths—Everyone Talks about Winning the War, but No One Talks About Achieving Peace

Ashok Swain

This article examines the multifaceted challenges posed by the current global conflict landscape, emphasizing the interconnectedness of development, security, and peace. Firstly, the article highlights the increase in both state and non-state conflicts, with fatalities nearly doubling from 2021 to 2022. This escalation is marked by significant conflicts like the Russia–Ukraine war and the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, contributing to the deterioration of global security. The analysis also touches on the failure of regional and international organizations such as the African Union, ASEAN, and the United Nations in effectively managing these conflicts and maintaining peace. Secondly, the article delves into the evolving nature of warfare, including the rise of digital attacks and hybrid warfare, which blend conventional and unconventional tactics. This section underscores the need for a new, comprehensive peace architecture to address the array of modern threats, including climate change and pandemics, which extend beyond traditional military concerns. Finally, the article discusses the concerning decline of anti-war movements in the West, particularly in light of recent conflicts like the Ukraine war. This decline is attributed to various factors, including the perception of Western military actions as inherently benevolent and the shift in activism focus to issues like climate change and social justice. The article argues that this decline has profound implications for democratic processes and the global pursuit of peace.

Keywords: *conflicts, peace, development, new wars, global security, anti-war movements*

Ashok Swain is a Professor and Head of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at the Uppsala University, Box 514, SE-75120 Uppsala, Sweden. He can be contacted at ashok.swain@pcr.uu.se.

Global Conflict Landscape

The world is currently going through an extremely challenging period, and it is critical for all of us to play our parts in surviving this crisis. The Department of Peace and Conflict Research at the Uppsala University produces the most widely used global data on violent conflicts. The 2022 data on conflicts was released in the summer of 2023. While the number of armed conflicts involving states increased from 54 in 2021 to 55 in 2022, the number of deaths in these armed conflicts has nearly doubled. In 2021, 120,000 people had died in armed conflicts, and in 2022, the number reached 237,000 (Uppsala Conflict Data Program [UCDP], 2023a).

The Russia–Ukraine War and the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia are primarily responsible for the massive increase in fatalities in 2022. During the year, the world also witnessed a rise in non-state conflicts, one-sided violence, and the number of actors carrying out such violence. The world had not seen such deadly conflicts as it is witnessing now since the Rwandan genocide in 1994 (UCDP, 2023a). A relatively peaceful period prevailed in the world during the rest of the 1990s and the first decade of this century. This "peace window" even led some peace researchers and public intellectuals such as Steven Pinker to conclude about a decade ago that violence had declined, and the world was becoming more peaceful (Pinker, 2011). The so-called Arab Spring shattered these optimistic assertions, and the number of armed conflicts has risen since 2010 (World Bank, 2023). In 2009, I was the lead author of a report for the Swedish Armed Forces about the emerging security scenarios in the Middle East. However, I also failed to anticipate the widespread anger that burst in the region at the time (Swain, Öjendal, & Schulz, 2009). The world in recent years has also seen a significant increase in the number of non-state armed actors, including rebels, militias, armed traffickers, and violent extremists.

The global security situation has continued to deteriorate for over a decade now. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 started a major inter-state war after a gap of almost two decades since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. While the world focused more on the war in Ukraine, the most deaths that occurred in 2022 was in Tigray due to Ethiopia's armed actions against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) (UCDP, 2023a). Although a ceasefire agreement has brought an uneasy cessation of violence in Tigray since November 2022, another violent conflict has erupted in the Amhara region in Ethiopia (UCDP, 2023b). In the Tigray conflict, Amhara forces, together with the Eritrean Army, were the main accused of committing violence (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023). Also in Sudan, a violent conflict has started since April 2023 (CDP,

2023a). The conflict between the Sudanese Army and the paramilitary force has already resulted in the deaths of almost 9000 people (United Nations [UN], 2023a). Violent conflict and state collapse have become common in many West African countries as well. Military coups have occurred in the Sahel region of Africa as they used to be during the Cold War days. The coups in Gabon and Niger in 2023 and along with previous coups in Burkina Faso and Mali highlight a significant shift in the political landscape of Africa.

After the surprise and ominous attack by Hamas on October 07, 2023 in southern Israel, Israel's military operation in Gaza has already killed more than 26,000 people (UN, 2024). Israel has not only been bombing Gaza for weeks, but it is also carrying out large-scale ground operations to occupy the Palestinian territory. However, violent conflicts, unlike a decade ago, are no longer confined to the Middle East and Central Asia regions. Instead, except for the escalating violence in the Israel–Hamas war, these regions are experiencing a transition toward cessation of hostilities, particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. On the other hand, conflicts and displacements have spread to Africa, Europe, Central America, and parts of Asia. Conflicts in the 21st century are also not limited to poor low-income countries, which before 2011 were the major representatives of deaths due to political violence. Since then, the majority of deaths from political violence has occurred in middle-income countries such as Syria, Libya, and Ukraine (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, ethnic and religious violence is spreading all over the world. In Manipur, India, images of minority women being paraded without clothes and sexually abused by majoritarian mobs emerged in 2023 (Suri, Sud, Farooqui, John, Akbarzai, & Chen, 2023).

Regional organizations, which were praised a decade ago for having the needed institutional capacity for conflict management in their regions, have failed to perform. For instance, The African Union has incorporated the catchy slogan "African Solutions to African Problems," coined by the Ghanaian economist George Ayittey in the 1990s (African Union, 2022). However, it struggles with its limited capacity and capability to overcome a history of conflicts on the continent and find answers to newly emerging violent episodes. It has failed in Tigray, Sudan, and Amhara (Swain, 2023a). It has also failed to help its member states reach an agreement over the sharing of Nile water between Ethiopia and Egypt, particularly since 2020. Though the slogan sounds good and legitimate, it is not even a preferred option for all parties to the African conflicts. In some cases, when it has happened, the interventions of African states have also become controversial, if not, more than foreign interventions. Many African troops lack the basic training and equipment to participate in a peace operation effectively (Oladipo, 2015). Moreover, most of the conflicts in Africa have international dimensions. Thus, it is not viable to expect these conflicts to be managed by Africans without international assistance or intervention.

The so-called ASEAN Way has also failed to resolve the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar. Even the member states of the European Union failed to reach an agreement during the peak of the migration crisis in the last decade. UN peacekeeping

operations, which were relatively successful in maintaining and building peace in war-affected countries in the post-Cold War period, have become almost ineffective in carrying out their mandates in the last decade.

While regional organizations have primarily failed in managing conflicts, the increasingly bipolar world has also reduced the UN Security Council, with its mission to ensure international peace and security, to a talking shop. Unanimity among the permanent members of the Security Council has become almost impossible for a decade now, preventing the UN from taking an effective and unified position on any conflict (Swain, 2023b). As the international community remains divided, several conflicts are also becoming intractable and dangerous due to the involvement of international actors supporting their proxies. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, out of the 55 active armed conflicts in 2022, 22 were internationalized, meaning one or both parties in these conflicts had received troop support from a foreign country (UCDP, 2023a).

Proxy wars were common during the Cold War years, and that phenomenon has returned as major and emerging powers directly engaging in conflicts to pursue their strategic and regional interests, from Ukraine to Niger to Sudan to Myanmar. Conflicts have become more complex and resistant to resolution due to the flow of money, ideology, arms, and troops from external sources. In many cases, old conflicts are also resurfacing. To summarize why the world is witnessing more violent conflicts as I see it: three broad and interrelated factors have increased the number of violent conflicts worldwide and led to more fatalities: (1) Big power rivalry and a divided Security Council, (2) Active transnational involvement, and (3) The spread of violent extremism and the rise of populism (Swain, 2023b).

More violent conflicts have also contributed to causing more famines and displacement on the planet, as they are intricately connected. In many cases, established norms of not targeting civilian facilities and infrastructure are not being adhered to during conflicts. These actions are leading to more civilian deaths and suffering. The threat of using nuclear weapons in war had disappeared for several decades, but that threat is now being used more often (UN General Assembly, 2023). The UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force on January 22, 2021. At present, 93 member states have signed the Treaty, and 69 of them have ratified it to be bound by its provisions (UN Treaty Collection, 2023). However, none of the nine declared and assumed nuclear powers—the US, Russia, the UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel—are yet to sign or ratify this critical Treaty. Moreover, NATO member states and other powerful and wealthy countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia have also stayed out of the Treaty (UN Treaty Collection, 2023).

Despite the TPNW, the US President Joe Biden warned the world in 2022 of a possible nuclear Armageddon (Hart, 2022). He is correct in his assessment that the world is now facing a real threat of a nuclear catastrophe since the Cuban Crisis. Nine countries possess 12,705 nuclear warheads and are spending billions of dollars to modernize these mass-killing weapons and their delivery systems

(Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2023). However, the presence of all these powerful nuclear weapons on the earth has miserably failed to establish global peace, security, and stability. The risk of cyberattacks on nuclear weapon command-and-control networks and the danger of access to nuclear arsenals by non-state actors have made the world a more insecure place. The reasons for this are that there is almost a complete breakdown of dialog among competing powers and a lack of understanding of each other's strengths, capabilities, and limits. Those who had planned that they could gain security and status by acquiring and modernizing nuclear weapons are, in reality, pushing themselves and the rest of the world into an extremely dangerous situation. The irresponsible rhetoric increases the risk of a nuclear catastrophe further as it leads to possible misunderstanding, miscalculation, or mistakes.

The costs of violent conflicts, whether human, health-related, or economic, have reached staggering proportions. The increasing insecurity has also led countries to spend more on their military. The world's military expenditure went up by 3.7% in 2022 compared to 2021 (SIPRI, 2023). After the end of World War II, a collective desire led to the establishment of an international system to prevent violent conflicts by establishing laws, norms, values, and peace mechanisms. However, after nearly eight decades, this international system appears fragile and highly divided, not only failing to prevent conflicts from turning violent but also struggling to bring an early end to violent conflicts.

Wars Must End for Development and Security

The concept of development has become closely linked with the concept of security in this century. This development security nexus is not only present in academic literature but has also become the main focus of international development assistance. While focusing on this interrelationship is important, a key question arises: whose development and security are prioritized when rich industrialized countries provide aid and assistance? Unfortunately, in most cases, the aid-givers' development and security take precedence over the needs of the countries that truly require assistance. This issue is not limited to the US, UK, or France; even countries like Sweden have fallen into this agenda.

While every international organization and multilateral institution claims to work for development and security, the world is rapidly entering an era of conflict and violence. The UN Secretary-General recently warned that global peace is more threatened now than it has been in the last eight decades since the end of World War II (UN, 2023e). Although the world is currently witnessing the highest number of violent armed conflicts since 1945, one-fourth of its population lives in conflict-affected areas (UN General Assembly Security Council, 2022).

The UN peace operations are also becoming longer in duration, and their outcomes are becoming more uncertain. Multilateral peacekeeping is not as effective today as it was during its golden period in the 1990s (Day, 2020). Almost 120 million people have been displaced due to conflict and violence, and the UN estimates

that 360 million people worldwide will require humanitarian assistance in 2023 (UN 2023c, 2023d). Peace is a prerequisite for development to be sustainable and security to be comprehensive. Generally speaking, the more peaceful a society, the more affluent and secure it is. Peace creates an environment for a society to progress and prosper. The absence of armed conflicts helps the states to free up human and economic resources to provide critical infrastructure, improve health and education sectors, and emphasize and strengthen the rule of law. A conflict-ridden country can never provide a healthy business environment. A vibrant business sector plays a central role in keeping the peace as its growth depends on a conflict-free environment and the market's long-term stability (Peschka, 2011).

Peace is Much More than the Absence of Wars

Given this context, it becomes necessary to ask: what is peace? Is it merely the absence of war? If the absence of war defines peace, then the world may appear more peaceful than in the previous century. In recent decades, before 2022, countries other than the US have rarely waged war against each other. The troops of the US and Russia have not fought each other for over a century. India and Pakistan have not gone to war for more than half a century. If the world is indeed that peaceful, why do countries feel so insecure, accumulate weapons, and invest so heavily in their armed forces? Furthermore, why are so many people dying and being displaced due to violent conflicts?

The world spends $2.24 trillion annually on military expenditures, and the amount spent on armed forces in 2020 was nearly 10% higher than in 2011 (SIPRI, 2023). The US Congress approved a military expenditure of $816.7 billion for 2023, the largest defense spending bill in the country's history (Garamone, 2022). In 2021, China increased its defense budget by 6.8%, and in 2022, India increased its budget by 9.8% compared to previous years (SIPRI, 2023). There is a substantial gap between the actions or claims of countries to maintain peace and the actual threats to peace, both existing and emerging.

Peace does not belong exclusively to countries or solely in the context of war. Although countries are not engaged in as many wars, the threat of war has not disappeared. It is premature to predict that the decline in the number of wars is permanent, and the wars that are being fought have also become deadlier. Most nuclear-armed countries have reduced the number of their nuclear weapons but have made them more lethal (Park, 2023). Although the last century witnessed two World Wars, if another World War were to occur in this century, there might be no survivors to fight another war.

The nature of war is rapidly changing. Digital attacks are often carried out on a limited and controlled scale by conflicting countries. However, a full-scale cyberwar between enemy countries can cause comparable or even greater harm than a traditional war. Moreover, combat in cyberspace is highly unpredictable, difficult to measure, and nearly impossible to prevent. The international community is seriously concerned over growing threats to cyber security. However, the big power politics

and ongoing blame game between the two camps have made it almost impossible to expect a united approach at the global level. Since 2013, the UN Group of Government Experts on Cyber has accepted that international law should apply in cyberspace (UN, 2013). Still, the modalities of its application are yet to be agreed upon. Thus, there is no such international agreement on how to govern cyberspace.

Since the beginning of this century, the emergence of hybrid warfare has also further blurred the distinction between war and peace. Hybrid warfare integrates cyberspace into warfare, combining conventional and unconventional forces and tactics. Non-state actors play a critical role in hybrid warfare (Bilal, 2021). Wars are no longer confined to or controlled solely by countries, and armed forces are no longer the sole actors. The new wars in their hybrid forms have become diffusive, combining state and non-state actors. It has become almost impossible to differentiate the bilateral interactions, whether peace or conflict. The key attraction for the state actors to engage in a hybrid war against their enemies is hostile actions that are largely unattributable as they fight via proxy non-state actors (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015). This tactic helps the states to limit military casualties, and it carries low political risks. On the other hand, proxy groups get financial, political, and military support from state actors to advance their agendas.

For those who have chosen to overlook the bigger picture and continue to measure peace solely in the context of war, the changing nature and actors of warfare have compelled them to reconsider their definition of peace. Peace is not merely the absence of war. In 2014, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, "We know that peace cannot be decreed solely through treaties—it must be nurtured through the dignity, rights, and capacities of every man and woman" (UN, 2014). Peace is not exclusive to nations; it is primarily about people. Peace encompasses both negative aspects, such as the absence of war, and positive aspects, such as the absence of the causes of war (Galtung, 1969). Peace exists both externally and internally, and the two are interdependent. Internal peace serves as the core foundation for a country to act and promote peace with others. External peace enables a country to work toward internal peace by focusing on providing rights, justice, and equal opportunities to its people.

The modern globalized world has created an environment that gives rise to new challenges for countries striving for both external and internal peace. Unconventional threats such as climate change, environmental scarcity, large-scale human migration, food and water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, and increasing pandemics pose serious challenges for countries aiming to achieve both external and internal peace (Swain, 2013). These nonmilitary threats are also interconnected, and a threat to one country or region often becomes a threat to all. Peace is difficult to localize in a globalized world. The new threats to an inclusive concept of peace have made the world mutually vulnerable, regardless of strength, wealth, or geographical location. The increasingly ambiguous and inclusive nature of measuring peace is now unavoidable. The world and its problems have become complex and diffusive, demanding a more comprehensive approach to addressing these challenges.

Finding an inclusive approach to working for peace is necessary, as maintaining security through nuclear or military deterrence has lost much of its significance. While the threat of interstate wars cannot be denied, the new reality presents numerous other and more complicated challenges. The newly emerging threats are not conventionally armed but have a global reach with severe consequences. Countries need to adopt a more complex and comprehensive approach to analyze their strategy for achieving peace and security beyond the traditional prism of military power. Increasing military strength and spending is neither sufficient to win new types of wars nor capable of effectively addressing emerging unconventional security threats. Therefore, the challenge for countries is to create a new sustainable and people-centric peace architecture that effectively and inclusively deals with the complex challenges to global peace in the twenty-first century.

Peace is a prerequisite for sustainable development and comprehensive security. In general, more peaceful societies tend to be more prosperous and secure. Peace creates an environment for a society to progress and thrive. The absence of armed conflicts allows states to allocate human and economic resources to critical infrastructure, improve healthcare and education, and strengthen the rule of law. A conflict-ridden country can never provide a conducive business environment (Peschka, 2011). A thriving business sector plays a central role in maintaining peace, as its growth depends on a stable and conflict-free environment.

Violence significantly contributes, both directly and indirectly, to food insecurity in conflict-affected regions. In 2022, 117 million people were forced into acute food insecurity due to armed conflicts (UN Security Council, 2023). Peace is crucial not only for food security but also for water, energy, and health security. Armed conflicts disrupt water systems, both accidentally and intentionally, which are essential for human and environmental well-being. The strong connection between conflicts and energy supply has been established for over a century, and the Ukraine War has once again highlighted why peace is vital for global energy security (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023). It is evident that during violent conflicts, health security is compromised for affected populations.

The causes of violent conflicts vary greatly between countries and regions, but their impact on development and security is consistently negative. Conversely, the link between peace, equitable development, and comprehensive security is straightforward. While international development agencies and multilateral institutions prioritize Sustainable Development Goals, the world is witnessing increasingly violent conflicts. The international community's focus should be on ending all armed conflicts if it genuinely aims to make progress in promoting development and security in the Global South. Rich industrialized countries are directly or indirectly involved in almost every ongoing armed conflict in the world. Every effort should be made to end wars where one country fights against another. The US has been engaged in wars continuously since 2001, and Russia has been at war since the previous year. No war is justifiable, regardless of the parties involved or the reasons presented. Armed conflicts only bring death and destruction; they preclude any

possibility of development and security. Additionally, vital resources are diverted to warfare instead of being invested in a society's sustainable growth and well-being.

Disappearance of Anti-War Movements in the West: An Alarming Trend

In an interview in the Summer of 2023 with the British news magazine "Unheard," which garnered more attention than expected, I was asked by its Editor-in-Chief about the vanishing anti-war movement in the West (Unheard, 2023). This is an incredibly important question that necessitates careful consideration and explanation. During the 1960s and 1970s, the US and Europe witnessed a rapid rise in anti-war movements that opposed the Vietnam War. These movements garnered widespread support from various socio-economic groups and acted as a potent check against governments prone to favoring war and militarization over diplomacy and negotiation (Howlett, 2003). The end of the Cold War did not extinguish anti-war activism. The anti-war protests were particularly pronounced during the Iraq War, particularly in the US.

The world has recently experienced a dangerous escalation in violent armed conflicts. More people, including a substantial number of civilians, are dying due to war; the number of refugees is increasing annually. Countries are acquiring weapons on an unprecedented scale, and the threat of nuclear weapon use has become a regular occurrence. Most concerning of all, for the first time in the past 60 years, the world is witnessing a confrontation unfolding between NATO and Russia. The Ukraine War, which began in February 2022, not only persists but has also resulted in devastating destruction. While there is no end in sight to this human tragedy, the involvement in the conflict raises genuine concerns about the outbreak of another global war.

While the war in Ukraine has failed to revive the anti-war movement, the Israeli military operation in Gaza that resulted in large numbers of deaths of civilians has brought a large number of people to the streets in different parts of the world demanding a ceasefire (UN, 2023b). The protests against Israel's bombing of Gaza cannot be seen as an anti-war movement as the Israeli military operations were more punitive than a war between two sides. For all practical purposes, it was a one-sided military operation of Israel against Hamas. The groups, those who came out to protest in different parts of the world, were less anti-war activists, rather more supporting the Palestinian cause or moved by the large number of deaths of children and women.

Thus, amid the world teetering on the brink of self-destruction, particularly due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the disappearance of the genuine anti-war movement in the West is deeply troubling. Those who oppose war and violence are now being portrayed as supporters of authoritarianism and dictatorship. Even those who are protesting almost one-sided Israeli military strikes in Gaza are being branded as antisemites or terrorist sympathizers. Individuals who are against Western military alliances or escalating military expenditures are labeled as traitors or foreign agents. However, these accusations and labels have

not deterred many from protesting against wars in the past, whether in Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq. So, what makes the war in Ukraine different? Is it the location of the war or the current time that has discouraged peace advocates from taking to the streets?

If the war in Ukraine, being in the backyard of Europe, dissuades peace activists in Europe and Sweden, such reasoning does not adequately explain the absence of anti-war activism in North America. The racial and religious affinity with the perceived victims should not be a convincing argument either, as these divides are not present between the conflicting parties in this war. What makes more sense in understanding the silence of peace proponents is that civil society is largely convinced that Western liberal democracies are forces for good. These democracies can do no wrong, particularly when it comes to protecting democracies from authoritarianism and dictatorship. Thus, for those who used to protest against wars, this particular war has become a "good" war.

It is worth noting that no war can truly be labeled as "good." The supposed war on terror by the US over the last 22 years has directly caused the deaths of nearly a million people and indirectly led to the deaths of about four to five million, primarily innocent civilians. War is not the only solution to conflict. While Western countries have increased their military expenditures substantially, they have concurrently reduced budgets for diplomatic missions, diplomacy, and development aid (International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, [IIRR], 2023). In Sweden, funding for research on developing countries has even been abolished (Vetenskapsrådet, 2023). The explanation is the Ukraine war.

The pursuit of victory in war has become so addictive that Western liberal democracies seem to have forgotten the fundamental principles of humanitarian laws and norms. They have no qualms about supplying, using, and threatening to use weapons of mass destruction. In the summer of 2023, the US even supplied cluster bombs to Ukraine for use within Ukrainian territory, a decision that would result in deaths and injuries to Ukrainians for generations (Hudson & Khurshudyan, 2023). The absence of anti-war activism has granted liberal democracies in the West free rein to wage wars in the name of protecting democracies from authoritarianism. However, it is contradictory to claim to fight for democracy while the West tends to align with anti-democratic regimes.

The decline of anti-war protests is not emblematic of a general trend in activism within the West. While peace activists have become a rare breed, Western societies are witnessing a surge in protests against climate change, gender inequality, and racial discrimination (Ortiz, Burke, Berrada, & Saenz Cortés, 2021). Many activists and organizations that were once part of anti-war demonstrations are now mobilizing people around environmental and identity issues. Youth climate activist Greta Thunberg's attempts to demand a ceasefire in Gaza have alienated her from many of her "green" supporters (Mishra, 2023). This change in strategy by activists is likely a safer option than being labeled foreign agents, particularly as nationalist sentiments surge within liberal democracies in Europe and North America. However, these activists must recognize that no society or country can

prioritize sustainable development, gender and racial equality, and economic well-being while being embroiled in long-lasting wars.

While nearly everyone in the West talks about winning wars, regrettably, very few speak about achieving peace. Even if anti-war voices cannot prevent wars, their presence is vital to keeping war-inclined political leaders in check and limiting the scope and perils of broader conflicts. Above all, diverse voices are essential for a functioning democracy. Democracy loses its essence without dissenting perspectives. Anti-war protests are crucial not only for peace but also for the preservation of democracies in the West. Peace is an essential prerequisite for social development, human progress, and sustainable development. The time has come for us to raise our voices for peace.

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