

War, war everywhere but it's the same old blood-letting

Mankind has been waging war against itself for so long that we should by now know, almost innately, about how each conflict is similar, yet different from another. Take the war between Russia and Ukraine and the most recent one, between Israel and the United States against Iran.

When Russia, a nuclear-armed power with one of the world's most formidable fighting forces, sent its army across the border into Ukraine, the easy money was on a quick and decisive victory. What was up for debate was whether the Russians would seek to overrun the whole of Ukraine and install a favourable regime, or whether they would be content with territorial gains to create a buffer against the threat of a Nato invasion.

Four years later, the war continues, an organ grinder with one of the grimmest death tolls per territory captured. The support that Nato and European countries brought to bear in the aid of Ukraine has helped, but so has the asymmetric drone warfare that Ukraine used to hold off Russia's more conventional weapons.

It has been so successful that drones and drone warfare, of both the offensive and defensive type, have now become key force multipliers that change battlefield dynamics.

Once the preserve of traditional powers, cheaper armed drones are shifting power dynamics in conflicts in Sudan, DR Congo and now, in the war against Iran. The ability to mass-produce and deploy cheap armed drones recalibrates war considerations by imposing high economic costs of containment while maintaining high psychological impacts by those that evade air defences.

Yet while the weapons and the theatres of conflict might change, the rules of war remain almost boringly the same. Examples of asymmetric warfare, for instance, can be found in

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Daniel K. Kalinaki
In My View



David's sling in the Bible, as well as in more ancient Greek war stories.

Even geography and terrain, the subject and substance of Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, are basic considerations in the conduct of war. That anyone would be surprised by Iran leveraging its proximity to choke global oil supplies is evidence, not of Persian ingenuity, but of human forgetfulness.

The two World Wars in the last century and the absence, thus far, of a third, give us a frame of reference of a world that is more peaceful. But this is only relative. And if the absence of war does not necessarily mean the presence

of peace, the absence of major wars does not denote a peaceful world either.

There are about 130 armed conflicts going on in the world, 30 of them classified as major, and the *Acled* conflict index shows that 240,000 people were killed in the last 12 months because of armed conflicts.

Four of the 10 countries with the most intense political violence are in Latin America, but the Great Lakes region and sub-Saharan Africa are not dovish, either, with active conflicts in the two Sudans, Somalia, DR Congo, Burundi, as well as several countries in the Sahel and West Africa.

There is an ebb and flow to things; countries that were in the grip of war or armed conflict a few years ago like Angola, Liberia, Ivory Coast and others are now peaceful, while some like Mozambique have relapsed. Thus, the theatre and tactics might change but at least three truisms remain about war.

The first, as famously first espoused by the Prussian Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder in the 19th Century, is that no military plan survives the first contact with the enemy. We can see that in the two major on-going conflicts, and in many before and to come.

The second, provenance unknown by factually cogent then and now, is that wars are easy to start but notoriously difficult to end.

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Mr Kalinaki is a journalist and poor man's freedom fighter.
write2kalinaki@gmail.com; @Kalinaki