

A World of Persistent Conflicts: Trajectories, Fault Lines, and India's Strategic Moment

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Abstract

This article argues that the global security landscape today is defined by overlapping conflicts, spanning land, sea, and cyberspace. From Ukraine and Gaza to the Red Sea, the Sahel, and the Indo-Pacific, these crises are not isolated but interconnected, reflecting deeper shifts in the international order. Wars now take several forms—long, grinding battles, volatile flashpoints, and regions plagued by chronic instability. Technology, geopolitics, and economic pressures fuel this turbulence, making conflict more persistent, networked, and accessible. This lowers the barriers for outbreak of a conflict while complicating efforts towards peace. Looking ahead, the world may face drawn-out limited wars, regional spill-overs, and a fragmented multipolar system where power is more diffused. For India, these changes bring both challenges and openings. It must prepare for the possibility of a two-front confrontation, safeguard maritime routes, and manage vulnerabilities in energy and supply chains. Simultaneously, India is uniquely positioned to act as a strategic balancer and a 'Geo-Moral Anchor', leveraging its diplomatic credibility, economic weight, and normative voice to shape a more stable and inclusive global order amidst deepening uncertainty.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLVI, No. 644, April-June 2026.

The World on Edge: From Episodic Wars to Persistent Conflict Systems

The contemporary international system is no longer defined by discrete wars punctuating periods of peace; rather, it is characterised by the simultaneous persistence of multiple conflicts across regions and domains. From Eastern Europe to West Asia, from the Sahel to the Indo-Pacific, the global security environment reflects a condition of continuous strategic friction, where crises overlap, reinforce, and evolve in real time.

This transformation marks a departure from the post-Cold War expectation of a progressively stabilising order. Instead, the world has entered into what may be termed as an 'Age of Persistent Conflict'—a condition in which the boundaries between war and peace increasingly blur, and where states operate in a spectrum of competition that spans kinetic, economic, technological, and informational domains.¹

The Russia–Ukraine and the Israel– Hamas conflicts, regional spillovers in West Asia, the Red Sea security crisis, and the ongoing instability in regions such as Sudan and Myanmar are not isolated phenomena. They represent interconnected manifestations of deeper structural tensions—geopolitical rivalry, technological disruption, economic fragmentation, and the erosion of global governance mechanisms.² In such an environment, conflict is no longer an exception to international order; it is one of its defining features.

The Changing Character of Warfare: From Industrial to Networked Conflict

Warfare today is changing in ways that go beyond geography—it is being reshaped by technology and new doctrines. Precision weapons, autonomous systems, cyber tools, and information operations are converging to transform conflict. One of the most striking shifts is the widespread use of unmanned aerial systems and loitering munitions. In Ukraine, low-cost drones have destroyed tanks and artillery, overturning traditional cost equations in conflicts.³ In West Asia, non-state actors have used drones and missiles to strike infrastructure and maritime assets, showing how advanced capabilities are spreading beyond state militaries.⁴

The rise of precision missile systems is equally important. Ballistic and cruise missiles are now more accessible, enabling both states and insurgents to carry out accurate long-range strikes. This 'Democratisation of Precision Warfare' erodes the monopoly once held by advanced militaries.⁵ Alongside these kinetic tools, cyber and information warfare have become central to conflicts. Cyberattacks on infrastructure, finance, and communication networks are now routine, while disinformation campaigns and psychological operations shape perceptions at home and abroad.⁶

Together, these trends have created networked, multi-domain wars that spill into societies, economies, and digital ecosystems. Such conflicts are easier to start, harder to trace, and far more difficult to end, making the future of global security more uncertain and complex.

Typologies of Contemporary Conflict: A Structured Framework

To make sense of today's complex conflicts, they could be grouped into overlapping categories. This framework provides a clearer view of their dynamics and possible future directions:

- **Protracted Attritional Conflicts.** Conflicts like Russia–Ukraine and the civil wars in Myanmar and Sudan illustrate attritional warfare—long, exhausting struggles with high costs and little chance of quick resolution. In Ukraine, the conflict has become a grinding contest of endurance, defined by trench battles, artillery duels, and slow territorial shifts.⁷ Myanmar's conflict is fragmented in a similar fashion, involving state forces, ethnic militias, and resistance groups, creating a drawn-out and unstable security environment.⁸ Such conflicts are likely to persist, with outcomes shaped less by decisive breakthroughs and more by endurance, resource mobilisation, and external support.
- **Escalation-Prone Flashpoints.** Some conflicts are volatile by nature and prone to sudden episodic spikes. The Israel–Iran shadow war, Israel–Hezbollah tensions, and instability in the Red Sea fall into this category. They flare up through assassinations, targeted strikes, or attacks on infrastructure, often staying below full-scale war but carrying high risks of miscalculation.⁹ The Red Sea crisis, driven by attacks on commercial shipping, illustrates how localised

conflicts can have global economic repercussions, disrupting supply chains and maritime trade routes.¹⁰

- **Chronic Instability Zones.** Regions like the Sahel, Haiti, and parts of Afghanistan–Pakistan suffer from chronic instability. Weak governance, fragile economies, and armed groups fuel persistent insecurity. In the Sahel, jihadist insurgencies, coups, and poor governance have steadily eroded state authority.¹¹ Haiti faces severe internal turmoil, with criminal networks controlling territory and undermining governance.¹² These regions are unlikely to witness conventional wars but will continue to experience prolonged instability, humanitarian crises, and external interventions.

- **Strategic Rivalries and Grey-Zone Competition.** Finally, major power rivalries—especially in the Indo-Pacific—define another category. Competition between the United States (US) and China, alongside regional frictions involving India, China, and Pakistan, plays out through grey-zone tactics. These include military signalling, economic coercion, cyber operations, and diplomatic manoeuvres, all designed to avoid outright war while advancing strategic aims.¹³ The India–China border tensions and maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific exemplify this form of conflict, where deterrence, signalling, and incremental advantage are central to strategic behaviour.

Global Conflict Ecosystem as a Structural Condition

Today's conflicts are increasingly interconnected, forming what can be described as a global conflict ecosystem. Events in one region often ripple across others, creating a web of interdependencies that magnifies instability. The situation in Ukraine, for example, has reshaped global energy markets, disrupted food supplies, and altered defence alignments.¹⁴ Meanwhile, tensions in West Asia have spilled into maritime security in the Red Sea, affecting international trade routes and supply chains.¹⁵ External powers, directly or indirectly involved in multiple theatres, further bind these conflicts together into what may be described as a 'Global Conflict Ecosystem', where local conflicts are embedded within broader geopolitical competitions.

This interconnectedness highlights a deeper reality: conflicts today are not a temporary disruption but structural conditions of the international system. The world is shifting toward multi-polarity, technological competition, and institutional fragmentation, all of which sustain instability. In this environment, wars and crises are symptoms of systemic transformation rather than isolated events. The challenge for states is not to eliminate conflict altogether—an unrealistic goal—but to manage its persistent presence. Navigating this condition will define global security strategies in the decades ahead.

The Deeper Fault Lines: Structural Drivers of Contemporary Conflict

Beneath the visible spread of wars lies a set of deeper structural fault lines that are reshaping the global order. These divisions are not only geopolitical but also economic, technological, and normative in nature. One of the most prominent trends is the growing divide between the established Western-led order and revisionist or non-Western powers—particularly Russia and China—with Iran acting as a disruptive regional force. This divide is more than ideological; it reflects competing visions of governance, sovereignty, and security frameworks.¹⁶

At the same time, the Global North–Global South divide has become sharper. Many developing nations see current international institutions as inequitable and unresponsive to their needs. India has voiced these concerns repeatedly, especially during its G20 presidency, calling for a more inclusive and representative global system.¹⁷ Energy and maritime chokepoints constitute another critical fault line. Strategic waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Malacca Strait are vital for trade and energy flows. Disruptions, as seen during the Red Sea crisis, expose the vulnerability of global supply chains to regional instability.¹⁸

The rise of techno-strategic competition is equally significant. Control over semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and cyber infrastructure now defines national power. This has led to a gradual bifurcation of technology ecosystems, with far-reaching consequences for economic integration and strategic autonomy.¹⁹ Together, these overlapping fault lines show that today's conflicts are not isolated events but symptoms of systemic transition in the international order.

The Fragmentation of Global Order: From Multilateralism to Competitive Multi-polarity

The post-Cold War period carried hopes of liberal multilateralism, anchored by institutions like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization, and Bretton Woods's structures. Yet, these institutions are increasingly strained. Their inability to prevent or resolve major conflicts—whether in Ukraine, Gaza, or elsewhere—has deepened perceptions of inadequacy and weakened global governance.²⁰ This erosion has accelerated the shift toward competitive multi-polarity, where multiple centres of power coexist but lack a shared framework for cooperation.

India has consistently highlighted the need for reform, particularly of the UN Security Council, to reflect today's geopolitical realities.²¹ Without such changes, Indian strategic thought warns that legitimacy and effectiveness will continue to decline. In this emerging order, states are turning to issue-based coalitions, mini-lateral arrangements, and strategic partnerships rather than universal frameworks. The rise of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the expansion of the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, and regional security groupings illustrate this trend. The result is a fragmented yet fluid system, where alignments are dynamic, contingent, and shaped by immediate interests rather than fixed commitments.

Possible Future Trajectories: Four Scenarios of Conflict Evolution

Given the complexity of the current security environment, it is useful to conceptualise potential future trajectories through scenario-building. While not predictive, these scenarios offer analytical frameworks for understanding possible pathways.

Scenario 1: The Age of Endless Limited Wars

In this scenario, conflicts remain largely contained but persist over extended periods without decisive resolution. Wars in Ukraine and ongoing conflicts in West Asia continue as managed but unresolved confrontations. This scenario is characterised by:

- Sustained but controlled violence.
- Limited escalation between major powers.
- Continued reliance on proxies and indirect engagement.

Such a trajectory reflects a stable instability, where the international system adapts to a constant level of conflict without systemic breakdown.

Scenario 2: Regional Escalation and Spill-over Conflicts

A more volatile trajectory involves the escalation of existing conflicts into broader regional wars. For instance, a direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, or a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, could trigger wider military engagement involving multiple actors. The risks in this scenario include:

- Disruption of global energy supplies.
- Large-scale displacement and humanitarian crises.
- Increased probability of great-power confrontation.

Indian strategic assessments have highlighted the potential for regional conflicts to generate global consequences, particularly in interconnected domains such as energy and trade.²²

Scenario 3: Fragmented and Polarised Multi-polarity

In this scenario, the world evolves into a highly fragmented multipolar system, characterised by competing blocs and limited cooperation. Economic decoupling, technological bifurcation, and political polarisation define the global landscape. The key features include:

- Weak global institutions.
- Regional spheres of influence.
- Increased economic nationalism.

This trajectory aligns with concerns expressed in the Indian policy discourse regarding the risks of global fragmentation and its impact on development and stability.²³

Scenario 4: Managed Multipolar Stability

The most optimistic trajectory involves the emergence of a managed multipolar order, where major powers recognise the costs of uncontrolled conflict and engage in mechanisms to stabilise competition. This would entail:

- Strengthened crisis management mechanisms.
- Limited but functional multilateral cooperation.
- Norm-building in emerging domains such as cyber and AI.

India has advocated for such approach, emphasising dialogue, respect for sovereignty, and adherence to international law as the basis for global stability.²⁴

Economic and Strategic Consequences: Conflict as Systemic Transition

The persistence of conflicts and widening geopolitical divides are reshaping the global economy and strategy, challenging the old belief that interdependence would reduce tensions. Energy markets have become highly volatile, with conflicts in West Asia and disruptions in maritime chokepoints driving fluctuations in oil prices and supply uncertainties.²⁵ For energy-importing nations like India, such instability directly affects fiscal planning and economic resilience. Similarly, maritime disruptions—most notably in the Red Sea—have forced costly rerouting of shipping, exposing the vulnerability of global supply chains to geopolitical shocks.²⁶

Another defining trend is the weaponisation of economic instruments. Sanctions, export controls, and technology restrictions are increasingly deployed as tools of strategic competition, blurring the line between economic policy and security.²⁷ India's response has been to pursue diversification, resilience-building, and strategic autonomy, particularly in energy security and supply chains.²⁸

These developments point to a deeper reality: conflicts today are not isolated events but part of a systemic transition in the international order. They reflect shifts in power distribution, technological rivalry, and institutional legitimacy. For policymakers, the challenge lies not only in managing individual crises but in navigating the broader structural dynamics that sustain them. In this emerging landscape, conflict has become a condition of global politics—one that must be managed rather than eliminated.

India's Strategic Environment and Economic Pressures: Navigating Overlapping Risks

For India, the emerging global landscape of persistent conflicts and deepening fault lines creates a uniquely complex strategic environment. Unlike many major powers, India must simultaneously manage continental, maritime, and extended neighbourhood challenges, all of which are being reshaped by instability. On the continental front, the two-front challenge posed by China and Pakistan remains the most immediate concern. Tensions along

the Line of Actual Control, combined with China's expanding military and infrastructural presence, highlight the enduring nature of the India–China rivalry.²⁹ At the same time, the volatile India–Pakistan relationship continues to carry risks of escalation through both conventional and sub-conventional means.

In the maritime domain, India's interests are tied to the stability of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), now a critical theatre of global competition. Growing Chinese naval activity, the presence of extra-regional powers, and vulnerabilities in sea lanes of communication present both challenges and opportunities for India's maritime strategy.³⁰ Beyond its immediate neighbourhood, India's calculus is shaped by developments in West Asia, where energy security and diaspora welfare are at stake. Escalating tensions, particularly involving Iran and Israel, have direct implications for India's economy and strategic posture.³¹

These geopolitical pressures are compounded by economic vulnerabilities. As a major energy importer, India is exposed to disruptions in chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea.³² Recent maritime disruptions have underscored the fragility of global supply chains through increasing costs and disrupting trade flows. Meanwhile, the weaponisation of economic interdependence—through sanctions, export controls, and technology restrictions—adds further strain.³³ India's response has focused on diversification, strengthening domestic manufacturing, and building resilient supply chains. Initiatives like *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) and integration into trusted global networks reflect its effort to adapt to a fragmented and uncertain order.

Strategic Opportunities: India as a Balancer and Bridging Power

While the evolving global environment presents significant risks, it also creates opportunities for India to enhance its strategic role. One of India's key strengths lies in its ability to engage with multiple actors across geopolitical divides. India maintains strategic partnerships with the US and its allies, while also sustaining long-standing ties with Russia and engaging constructively with countries such as Iran. This positions India as a credible balancing power, capable of navigating complex alignments without being constrained by rigid bloc politics.³⁴

Moreover, India's growing economic weight, demographic advantage, and technological capabilities enhance its ability to shape global outcomes. Its role in forums such as the G20 and leadership in initiatives like the International Solar Alliance demonstrate its capacity to contribute to global governance. Importantly, India's approach has been characterised by a commitment to strategic autonomy, allowing it to pursue its national interests while contributing to broader stability.³⁵

India as a 'Geo-Moral Anchor': Normative Leadership in Fragmented World

Beyond material capabilities, India's potential role as a 'Geo-moral Anchor' represents a distinctive dimension of its strategic identity. In a world marked by polarisation and competing narratives, India can offer a framework rooted in dialogue, inclusivity, and respect for sovereignty. India has consistently advocated for the interests of the Global South, highlighting issues such as development, climate justice, and equitable access to resources. Its diplomatic initiatives, including the Voice of Global South Summit, reflect an effort to amplify the concerns of developing countries within global discourse.³⁶

In emerging domains, such as cyber governance, AI, and maritime security, India could contribute to norm-building and rulemaking, helping to shape the future architecture of global governance. This role does not imply neutrality or passivity; rather, it reflects an approach that seeks to bridge divides, mitigate tensions, and promote cooperative solutions in an increasingly fragmented world.

Security Provider in the Indian Ocean: From Net Security to Net Stability

India's maritime strategy is central to its broader strategic role. The IOR, which carries a significant proportion of global trade and energy flows, is increasingly vulnerable to disruptions arising from piracy, state competition, and regional conflicts. India has already demonstrated its capacity to act as a net security provider in the region through anti-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and maritime domain awareness initiatives.³⁷

Going forward, India's role is likely to evolve towards that of a 'Net Stability Provider', encompassing not only security operations but also capacity building, infrastructure development, and regional cooperation. This expanded role will require sustained investment in naval capabilities, enhanced partnerships with regional actors, and a proactive approach to maritime governance.

Policy Imperatives: Navigating the Age of Persistent Conflict

To effectively navigate the emerging strategic environment, India must adopt a set of following integrated policy approaches:

- **Strengthening Deterrence.** Enhancing military capabilities, particularly in border infrastructure and maritime power projection, to address immediate security challenges.
- **Deepening Strategic Partnerships.** Expanding engagement with key partners while maintaining flexibility and autonomy.
- **Building Economic Resilience.** Reducing vulnerabilities through diversification, innovation, and domestic capacity building.
- **Leading Normative Initiatives.** Actively participating in shaping global norms in emerging domains.
- **Investing in Diplomacy.** Leveraging diplomatic channels to manage crises and build coalitions.

Indian strategic thought has increasingly emphasised the importance of multi-alignment, recognising that flexibility and adaptability are critical in a rapidly changing world.³⁸

Conclusion: India's Strategic Moment in an Age of Uncertainty

The contemporary international system is defined not by a single dominant conflict but by the coexistence of multiple, overlapping crises. These conflicts, shaped by deeper geopolitical fault lines and systemic transitions, are likely to persist and evolve in complex ways. In such an environment, stability will not emerge from the elimination of conflict but from its management and containment. The challenge for states is to navigate this landscape with a combination of resilience, adaptability, and strategic foresight.

For India, this moment represents both a test and an opportunity. The convergence of global instability and India's rising capabilities creates the conditions for a more influential role in shaping international outcomes. India's success will depend on its ability to balance competing pressures, leverage its strategic advantages, and articulate a vision that resonates beyond its borders. As both a balancing power and a potential geomoral anchor, India is uniquely positioned to contribute to a more stable and inclusive global order.

In a world of persistent conflicts and shifting fault lines, India's strategic moment lies not in choosing sides but in shaping the equilibrium.

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