Fluid Frontiers: Mapping the Geopolitical Fault Lines of Fragmenting World Order

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Abstract

The contemporary international system is undergoing a transition towards a fragmented and polycentric order in which power is increasingly exercised across material, narrative, and technological domains. Conventional approaches to conflict, centred primarily on territorial and military capabilities, are increasingly inadequate for explaining the fluid and non-linear character of contemporary competition. This article introduces the Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework (CTMF) as an analytical tool to examine how conflicts evolve across five phases: Incubation, Activation, Expansion, Stabilisation, and Reconfiguration. The framework integrates three dimensions of power: Material, Narrative, and Technological, enabling a multidimensional assessment of conflict intensity, strategic adaptation, and emerging inflection points. CTMF is applied to six theatres, namely Ukraine, Gaza, the Red Sea/Middle East, India, Türkiye, and Indonesia, from 2024 to 2028. The analysis identifies a growing pattern of managed instability, in which conflicts are

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increasingly contained, redirected, and reconfigured rather than decisively resolved. The study argues that technological innovation, narrative influence, and asynchronous domain management are becoming central to contemporary statecraft and strategic competition.

Introduction: The Age of Fluid Frontiers

The contemporary international system has entered an era of profound geopolitical fragmentation. As the international system transitions from unipolarity through multipolarity towards a polycentric world order, this era can be 'Characterised by coexistence of multiple, differentiated centres of power'.[1] This is exemplified by the protracted hostilities in Ukraine and Gaza, the Red Sea crisis, and the wider turbulence across the Middle East. Modern-day conflicts are no longer confined to traditional territorial borders; they have evolved into Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)[2], across physical territory, digital, and cognitive spaces, where information, technology, and perception act simultaneously as tools of control and arenas of strategic contestation. This modern diffusion of conflict echoes Hedley Bull's observation on the tension between order and anarchy—an international society still bound by rules, yet increasingly unable to enforce them coherently.[3]

Theoretical Foundations: Power and Competition in a Polycentric Order

More fundamentally, this fragmentation embodies not just a restructuring of power; it signals the reconfiguration of how power operates. While structural realism remains relevant in explaining the systemic constraints and the enduring logic of anarchy[4], it cannot alone account for the fluidity of contemporary competition. The security dilemma persists[5], yet its expression now extends beyond territorial defence into the technological and informational domains.[6] This is evident in the behaviour of states—in the shift from traditional competition over territory or resources to the 'Contested spatialities of digital sovereignty'.[7] In this environment, power is no longer defined solely by material capability but by the ability to convert

resources into 'Realised influence and legitimacy'.[8] The social construction of threat and identity increasingly shapes strategic behaviour, as actors seek to shape perceptions of justice, sovereignty, and resistance through sustained contestation.[9]

This dynamic is driven in part by what Amitav Acharya describes as the emergence of a 'Multiplex World' with its overlapping and competing orders, each with its own norms, institutions, and spheres of influence and all contributing towards this fragmentation.[10] The erosion of hegemonic authority within this system has produced what Alexander Cooley and Daniel H Nexon call a world of 'Exit' and 'Substitution', in which states and non-state actors bypass traditional institutions to pursue alternative alignments.[11] [12] James N Rosenau characterised this scenario as creating a 'Patterned Chaos'—in which conflicts mutate rather than conclude and stability is managed rather than restored.[13] The result is an international system defined by fluid frontiers with zones of contestation that shift across geography, technology, and narrative space.[14]

The power shift today is not just happening from one set of states to another, rather the way power shifts, and the domains in which it operates, are themselves changing. Traditional structural realism may still help explain why states worry about existence, relative advantage and uncertainty. However, it falls short of capturing the essence of modern warfare, where competition plays out across domains that are not strictly territorial or military. The spiral model continues to operate, but it increasingly shows up in cyber, Artificial Intelligence (AI), sanctions infrastructure, and information-related operations and not just in troop manoeuvres or weapons emplacement. The battlefield today is not defined by geography or geographic limits but extends to data, the digital space and narrative legitimacy. Under such an evolving scenario of contestation, the operational leverage depends on how a state can best convert its resources into political outcomes through 'Power Projection', 'Legitimacy Generation' and strategic defence.

Within this scenario, 'States with Global Influence' such as India, Türkiye, and Indonesia have emerged as pivotal actors.[15] [16] They navigate between great powers with strategic hedging[17] to consolidate influence and leverage their soft power resources (cultural diplomacy, normative entrepreneurship, institutional leadership).[18] [19] [20]Their statecraft, built on institutional diversification, technological sovereignty, and anticipatory governance[21], offers adaptive and resilient strategies for navigating great power competition.[22] [23] [24] These states exemplify how agency is exercised in a fragmented order-not by 'Picking Sides' but through 'Building a fluid set of partnerships', which can survive and adapt to the stresses and strains of a polycentric order.[25]

Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework

To capture these dynamics, this study advances the Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework (CTMF)—a practical analytical tool introduced to explain how the pathways of power (military, narrative, technological) shift across five phases. It helps to identify what traditional analysis misses: why conflicts that look similar behave differently, and where they are headed next.

Based on the synthesis of structural constraint[26], escalation dynamics[27], and the social construction of legitimacy[28], CTMF integrates material, narrative, and technological dimensions to reveal how states navigate unpredictability and adjust influence under situations of systemic turbulence[29] within a phase-based temporal structure.

The Three Dimensions of Power of Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework

In CTMF, power is operationalised through three integrated dimension, which are distinct yet interconnected aspects of the state's capability and influence.

- **Material Power**. It involves conventional 'Hard Power' resources: military deployments, defence expenditure, weapons systems, economic sanctions, and resource

mobilisation. This dimension traces the 'State versus state, boots-on-the-ground types of conflict'.

- **Narrative Power**. It is the capability to shape perceptions, acceptability and global influence. This includes strategic communications, platform governance, diplomatic communication, coalition-building, and narrative competition. Today, 'Crises, conflicts, and negotiations unfold in digitally saturated environments', where 'Credibility is fragile and audiences are polarised', posing the biggest challenge for operational sustainability.[30]

- **Technological Power**. It captures the operational realities that AI, autonomous systems, and algorithmic targeting have brought to modern warfare. AI is part and parcel of defence deployment, intelligence, and decision-making—emergent, veiled and unknowable.

Dimensions	What it Tracks	Key Indicators
Material	Physical and economic strength	Military deployments, territorial control, sanctions, supply chain disruption, energy leverage, arms transfers, casualty rates
Narrative	Legitimacy and perception	Information operations, diplomatic framing, media dominance, public opinion, alliance justification, identity mobilisation
Technological	Digital and systems power	Cyber operations, drone and AI deployment, surveillance infrastructure, platform control, space assets, critical tech dependencies

Table 1: CTMF's Three Dimensions and Key Indicators.
Source: Created by Author

The Five Phases of Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework

CTMF maps these three dimensions of power across five temporal phases, each characterised by distinct patterns of power deployment:

- **Incubation**. Pre-crisis positioning—resource mobilisation, strategic framing, reconnaissance, and covert configurations.
- **Activation**. Conflict flare-ups—preliminary assaults, embargoes, narrative orchestration, and cyberspace attacks.
- **Expansion**. Escalation—MDO, information operations, and hyper war.
- **Stabilisation**. Controlled de-escalation—ceasefires, defence and deterrence postures, humanitarian diplomacy, and defensive cyberspace operations.
- **Reconfiguration**. Reorganisation—security sector reforms, paradigm shifts, technology transfers, and reconceived structural authority.

To test its validity, the framework is applied to six critical theatres—Ukraine, Gaza, the Red Sea/Middle East, India, Türkiye, and Indonesia, between 2024 and 2028, a period that can be characterised by dynamic deterrence, technological alacrity, and the formalisation of volatility. The analysis recognises a global changeover from escalation to managed instability, where states increasingly rely on technological and narrative infrastructure to contain disturbance rather than resolve it.

The findings suggest that the emerging world order is not post-conflict but post-stability: a system in which uncertainty is entrenched as a structural condition of international politics. Conflicts are no longer predictable and linear but chaotic and non-linear. CTMF offers new diagnostic tools to illuminate the paths of conflict in a global moment where the boundaries of war, peace, and influence are no longer static but in perpetual motion and ambiguity.

Three Analytical Dimensions of Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework

CTMF functions as a diagnostic mapping tool that reveals the current power configurations across material, narrative and technological dimensions, enabling decision makers to identify strategic leverage and provide analytical clarity.

CTMF maps conflict evolution across five sequential but non-linear phases:

- **Incubation**. Structural conditions are present-grievances, resource constraints, and narrative chasms. These have not yet manifested in active hostility.
- **Activation**. A precipitating event or pre-meditated set-up moves latent tensions into direct confrontation. One or more domains become active theatres of conflict.
- **Expansion**. Conflict escalation across domains; new capabilities and actors are integrated. Misperception multiplies and security dilemma dynamics cause escalation spirals that turn chaotic.
- **Stabilisation**. Conflict enters a state of managed instability. States transition into acceptable sustained conflict, deploying capabilities, strategies and instruments to manage and contain rather than resolve conflicts.
- **Reconfiguration**. Conflict transforms- actors set moves, shift domains, retool approaches and realign objectives. This phase appears to be de-escalation but represents strategic transformation; actors are changing how they compete, not whether they compete

How It Is Applied

Each of the six theatres—Ukraine, Gaza, the Red Sea/Middle East, India, Türkiye, and Indonesia—is assessed across all three dimensions and five conflict phases of CTMF, for the 2024–2028 period. This analysis identifies:

- **Inflection points**. The critical junctures of phase transitions or dimensional shifts
- **Vital vertices**. Strategic points within the conflict system where targeted pressure is most decisive in determining conflict outcomes
- **Resilience Indicators**. How actors engage, adjust and recover without fundamental destabilisation

What CTMF Is Not? CTMF is not a predictive model. It is not designed to calculate probability. It is a form of early-warning methodology, intended to enhance interpretation, identify strategic leverage nodes, and enable systemic foresight, by making conflict trajectories visible before they become crises.

Phase	**Material Power**	**Narrative Power**	**Technological Power**
Incubation	Resource mobilisation, covert pact	Strategic framing, StratCom	Reconnaissance, Data mapping
Activation	Initial strikes, sanctions	Crisis specific frames and frame alignment	Offensive CyberOps, data leakage
Expansion	Full spectrum operation, grey-zone operations	Information Operations (Information Operations)	Algorithmic Warfare, Unmanned Aircraft System/ Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle use
Stabilisation	Ceasefire, Deterrence	Cognitive fatigue, humanitarian diplomacy	Cyber defence, eDiplomacy, Twiplomacy

Phase	Material Power	Narrative Power	Technological Power
Reconfigur-ation	Institutional reforms, realignments	Redefining legitimacy, rapprochement	Transfer of Technology, Information technology infrastructure

Table 2: Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework Phases and the Three Dimensions of Power
Source: **Created by Author**

Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework Scoring Methodology

The CTMF Composite Score (0-100) computes conflict intensity through systematic assessment of three equally weighted dimensions (one-third each): Material, Narrative, and Technological. Each dimension is scored 0-100 based on observable indicators from verified sources including the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project[31], Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [32], International Institute for Strategic Studies Military Balance[33], World Bank, United Nations records, threat intelligence platforms, with sub-components evaluated from minimal activity (0-10) to extreme intensity (31-33). Each dimension gets equal weight due to the very nature of modern 'Hybrid' conflicts. Composite scores aggregate dimension scores, with higher values indicating greater conflict intensity.

The current scores are compared to the 2024 baseline, to see if the conflict is escalating or de-escalating. Two elements together: quantitative scores and the qualitative context against which they are assessed to better analyse in which direction the conflict is headed. For instance, if Ukraine's Score is 78 (Material: 85, Narrative: 75, Technological: 75, ↑+12), this may reflect that the conflict is stabilising even though the 'Intensity Score' is high and increasing, because of technological pre-emption.[34] To ensure quality, the framework tests whether different analysts reach similar conclusions, compares results with traditional conflict catalogues and involves

professional review. However, the framework acknowledges limitations in data interpretation, variable data availability, general data quality, and absence of definitive predictions.[35]

The CTMF framework is operationalised through a structured assessment form that guides analysts through inflection point identification, three-dimensional scoring (Material, Narrative, Technological), pattern classification, sustainability assessment, and strategic implications analysis.

Cross-Case Synthesis: Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework Patterns Across Six Theatres (2024-2028)

Based on the analysis of the six conflict theatres mentioned above, the CTMF framework reveals that the complex nature of modern-day wars is unpredictable, sustained by 'Managed Instability', which replaces 'Decisive Victory' as the goal.

A key outcome is that the dimensions of the dimensions of conflict—material, narrative, and technological—lack synchronicity. Each follows its own trajectory—escalating in one dimension while simultaneously de-escalating or stabilising in another dimension.

Moreover, critical turning points now happen without traditional battles. For example, the technology paradox—where technology is both an enabler and a disruptor—has emerged as the unique feature of modern-day conflicts, while the power of narrative has emerged as the battle decider, determining operational sustainability. Ukraine, Gaza, and the Red Sea illustrate these dynamics. Ukraine's drone attacks changed the course of the war without triggering nuclear retaliation from Russia, legitimacy concerns in the Gaza war forced an adjustment in military operations of Israel, and repeated Houthi attacks in the Red Sea generated global economic repercussions.

Projected Conflict Trajectories, 2026–2028. The following assessments apply the CTMF to six theatres, using their assessed phases in 2026 to outline possible trajectories to 2028. Each projection identifies the dominant dimension of power—material, narrative or technological—and the developments that could shape the theatre's course. These are conditional forecasts, subject to

changes in political decisions, security conditions and regional cooperation.

- **Ukraine**. CTMF places Ukraine in the stabilisation phase in 2026 and projects reconfiguration by 2028, with phased operations and technology as the dominant dimension. The projected shift is from active conflict towards preventive deterrence, emphasising drones, digital infrastructure security and diplomatic rebuilding.

- **Gaza**. The framework identifies reconfiguration as Gaza's phase in 2026, while indicating a possible return to expansion by 2028. Renewed flashpoints remain a concern, and competing narratives are likely to exert the greatest influence. Continuing humanitarian distress and political divisions could also delay institutional rebuilding.

- **Red Sea**. Following an expansion phase in 2026, the Red Sea theatre could move towards stabilisation by 2028. Material power remains the dominant dimension, with an encirclement strategy shaping the trajectory. Greater regional naval cooperation may ease maritime and cyber threats and improve the security of energy corridors.

- **India**. India is assessed as being in the stabilisation phase in 2026, with strategic consolidation projected by 2028. Technology is the dominant dimension: advances in defence systems and digital diplomacy could strengthen security and governance.

- **Türkiye**. From a reconfiguration phase in 2026, Türkiye is projected to move towards stabilisation by 2028. Its trajectory of recovery is shaped chiefly by narrative power, as diplomatic manoeuvres and economic diversification could strengthen regional legitimacy and stability.

- **Indonesia**. Indonesia's trajectory points from activation in 2026 towards expansion by 2028, with growing regional leverage driven primarily by material power. A stronger maritime security architecture, investment in digital

infrastructure and Association of Southeast Asian Nations-centric diplomacy could enhance its regional agency and resilience.

Across all six theatres, however, two patterns dominate: high-intensity wars transitioning to managed escalation (Ukraine, Gaza) and grey-zone competition that institutionalises ongoing instability (Red Sea, India, Türkiye, Indonesia). Thus, 'Ordered Chaos' is the essence of this polycentric world order, where conflicts are managed, redirected, and reconfigured rather than resolved.

Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework and Strategic Adaptation in a Polycentric Order

The framework discloses three dynamics that restructure how states steer managed instability. First, conflicts are characterised by a synchroneity; they no longer follow linear trajectories. Aggregate 'Conflict Intensity' metrics no longer hold good as material stabilisation can coincide with technological surge or narrative collapse. The crises in Ukraine, Gaza, and the Red Sea exemplify how technological superiority, narrative framing, and kinetic restraint produce systemic disruption without traditional material dominance. This desynchronisation demands domain-specific monitoring rather than comprehensive 'Aggregate' valuations. Second, the defining feature of the 21st Century warfare is narrative framing. It is evident how Israel's Gaza operations and Moscow's offensive in Ukraine saw massive recalibration under intense narrative pressure. The depreciation of material power and the concurrent intensification of the 'Narrative' is a defining reality of modern-day warfare, determining what actions are politically sustainable, shaping coalition cohesion, arms transfers, and diplomatic manoeuvre space. The third dynamic uncovered relates to the ubiquity of technology Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), autonomous defence systems as the pressure point in preventing a catastrophic escalation. Technology is both the enabler and disruptor in this environment. Ukraine's medium and long-range drone strikes, India's AI-driven defence modernisation, and Türkiye's UAV innovation are revealing how technological capabilities have outmanoeuvred conventional warfare abilities, reshaping responses and outcomes. CTMF's

analytical architecture extends beyond the six theatres examined here. Applying the framework to other contexts such as strategic disputes in the Taiwan Strait, Korean Peninsula, and Sahel conflicts may reveal whether it holds across diverse threat environments. Monitoring these domains longitudinally through a mapping of these phases over time may refine metrics which could potentially enable researchers to identify the conditions favourable to the operation and institutionalisation of grey-zones rather than open conflict intensification. Furthermore, by embedding CTMF metrics within early-warning systems, the framework could evolve from retrospective analysis to anticipatory governance, enhancing real-time conflict monitoring in an era where instability is operational rather than intermittent.

Conclusion: Conflict Trajectory Mapping Framework and Geometry of Managed Instability

What emerges from the analysis of evidence collected across six theatres between 2024 and 2028 is that the international system is 'Routinising' conflict rather resolving it.[36] Conflicts are continual; sustained within 'Simmering' boundaries, through the mechanism of calibrated coercion, narrative rhetoric, and hi-tech adaptation. What appears as discrete crises is actually a continuous condition—a polycentric order in which instability operates not as political failure, but as a governing instrument.

This is where the CTMF illuminates what traditional models leave unexplained. CTMF does not reduce escalation to a single metric, depending on battlefield intensity. Instead, it maps it across three enmeshed dimensions, revealing that contemporary conflicts are not strictly chaotic but structurally managed. Ukraine can sustain material stalemate because technological innovation compensates; Gaza must constrain material operations when narrative costs escalate; the Red Sea can limit kinetic engagement yet still achieve systemic disruption through narrative and technological amplification. In other words, the conflict intensity varies by domain and strategic advantage comes from managing domains asynchronously.

Therefore, seen through CTMF, the period 2024-2026 is not 'Post-conflict'; it is post-stability. The new normal is managed instability: a durable condition in which actors do not aim for decisive victory, but for endurance, leverage, and controlled disruption. As mentioned above, two conflict archetypes coalesce: high-intensity wars that develop into managed escalation (Ukraine, Gaza), and grey-zone competitions that develops into institutionalised instability (Red Sea, India, Türkiye, Indonesia). Both follow the same strategic logic: conflicts metamorphose because the system rewards actors who can keep conflicts simmering without crossing catastrophic thresholds.

As such, CTMF's contribution is not merely descriptive. It is analytical and operational. CTMF does not promise certainty; it offers something more valuable in an age of fluid frontiers: a rigorous technique to perceive how instability emerges, identify how it is managed, and to determine the strategic interventions which can realign trajectories before they cross catastrophic thresholds. If the twentieth century's strategic question was how wars end, the twenty-first century's is how 'Never-ending wars'[37] are managed. CTMF offers the syntax for answering it and, in doing so, reframes the central task of statecraft in a polycentric world—not the restoration of a lost order, but cultivating resilience under perpetual contestation.

Endnotes

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