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Intertwined logics: How nationalism and the changing international order have shaped patterns of war and peace since 1816

Andreas Wimmer[1]

Abstract

This essay explores how domestic and international dynamics conjointly shaped wars in the modern world, including those fought in the contemporary period. Building on an institutionalist theory of war and distinguishing between domestic and international transformations of the institutional order, I argue that nationalism provided the main motivations for many conflicts in the past and the present, and their dynamics broadly follow an established pattern of transitioning from an imperial to the nation-state order. This logic intertwines with a changing international system, however, that follows its own but related rhythms, influencing war ends as well as alliance patterns and providing the ideological frames that give nationalist ideals of self-rule a more specific content. Early twenty-first century wars—in Ukraine, Palestine–Israel, or Ethiopia—follow the nationalist patterns of the past quite closely but are also uniquely shaped by the emerging, multipolar international environment within which states narrowly focus on their national interests and pursue raw-realist goals.

Keywords

nationalism, war, international system

[1]Department of Sociology, Columbia University, USA

Corresponding author:
Andreas Wimmer, Department of Sociology, Columbia University, 606 West 122nd Street, New York, NY 10027, USA.
Email: andreas.wimmer@columbia.edu

Many observers of contemporary world politics wonder if we have just walked over the threshold into a new era of multipolar geopolitics that brings with it new forms of war, perhaps returning back to imperial wars of conquest (as in the case of the Russia's assault on Ukraine) or back to hegemonic spheres of influence as manifested in the Israeli–American wars against Iran, American saber rattling in the Caribbean, or the increasingly threateing stance of China towards Taiwan. In this essay, I would like to address this question by first looking into the past 200 years of international and domestic conflicts and try to decipher their varying logics. With this as a background, we can then return to the current moment and try to identify its most salient contours.

Some theoretical principles

To understand the logics of wars during the past 200 years, I suggest combining international and domestic dynamics, each following their own yet interconnected patterns and rhythms. Theoretically, I assume an institutionalist point of view focused on the role of legitimacy in both international and domestic politics, including in the pursuit of political ends with violent means. This perspective, in the way that I have conceived it previously (Wimmer, 2013, Chapter 1), is not anti-rationalist, but assumes that political actors seek to maximize their self-interests within ideologically specific frameworks and the corresponding institutional orders that together define which interests they consider worth pursuing, what kind of wars they think are justified and at what costs, what types of political systems they envision as desirable, and who they see as actors to be taken into serious consideration. Such guiding ideological–institutional principles can be found at the domestic as well as the international, global level. The most violent periods, at both of these levels, are those when political actors fight to establish new ideological–institutional orders against those who seek to preserve the existing ones. In other words, revolutionary periods are more war prone than when actors struggle within established, taken-for-granted frameworks.

This approach contrasts with dominant literatures in both international relations and comparative politics. Considering institutional–ideological templates that motivate and legitimate wars is obviously at odds with the dominant realist tradition in international relations, which disregards such factors altogether and instead assumes that all states, independent of their internal structures or the ideological frames their leaders believe in, primarily maximize security (for an overview of how various international relations paradigms, including realism, analyze the causes of war, see Jervis, 2002; for a recent statement on the superior explanatory power of realism, see Mearsheimer, 2019). It is also at odds with the long dominant political economy approach in comparative politics that looks at civil wars as a fight over economic resources or as the inevitable result of state weakness, rather than a struggle over the legitimacy of the institutional order (for a review of the literature before it took a turn towards a subnational and disaggregated perspective, see Blattman and Miguel, 2010)[1]. Also departing from the standard approach in political science, I will not classify wars mostly as inter-state or civil and treat them as entirely separate universe of cases but look at the broader ideological–institutional transformations that influence both conjointly.

Finally, much of international relations scholarship has a well-known Western bias (Hobson, 2012) in both its empirical focus (leaving out most of the Global South from consideration until independence is achieved) and its conceptual apparatus, which has little space for considering colonial subjugation as an important part of the global order during much of modern history.

Domestic dynamics: Empire versus nation-state

Greatly simplifying the complexities of world history, the past 200 years can be seen as a struggle between two opposing institutional frames that establish legitimate rule at the domestic level (the following draws on Wimmer, 2013, and a series of related articles). In empires and dynastic regimes, noble rulers are succeeded by their offspring or by other noble rulers. The borders of empires don't trace linguistic, religious, or other social boundaries but seek to expand as far as they can through marriage alliances or wars of conquest, subjecting the conquered population to various forms of indirect rule through local nobilities, tribal leaders, or religious notables combined with various degrees of direct administration by an imperial bureaucracy. Ideologies of civilizational superiority (from the Chinese to the Islamic Sahel to the colonial empires of the nineteenth century), racial distinctiveness, or religious missions (as in the Ottoman empire or imperial Spain) complement dynasticism as the ideological basis of rule.

Nation-states, in contrast, rule over co-national populations, rather than ethnic or religious others, and derive legitimacy from representing that nation, rather than a dynasty, God, or a civilizational mission. Wars of dynastic succession and territorial conquest give way to wars of national liberation, irredentist wars over co-ethnic territories beyond the borders of the state, and campaigns of ethnic cleansing meant to create nationally homogenous populations and prevent the emergence of fifth-columns loyal to other nation-states.

Seen over the long run, the struggle between nationalism and empire unfolded from the American and French revolutions onward and followed two opposing trends: Empires first expanded during the nineteenth century throughout the global South, leading to the absorption of Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, parts of East Asia as well as Central Asia into the expanding European seaborne empires, Romanov Russia, and imperial Japan. At the same time and elsewhere in the world, empires began to break down under the weight of nationalist demands for self-rule (Hiers and Wimmer, 2013) and in the wake of lost inter-state wars (Wimmer and Feinstein, 2010). These demands reinforced each other through chains of diffusion within imperial domains and across neighboring territories (Wimmer and Feinstein, 2010), leading to waves of nation-state formations first in the Americas, then on the Habsburg and Romanov territories after World War I, in the European colonial empires from the Second World War onward, and finally on the realms of the Soviet empire. The following graph illustrates these various waves, truncating the picture somewhat by starting at the end of the Napoleonic wars, rather than with the American revolution.

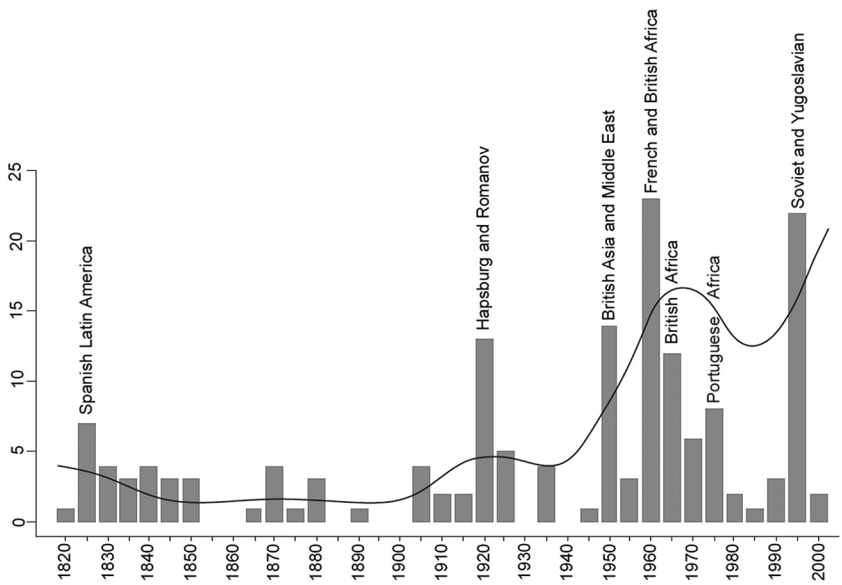


Figure 1. Number of nation-state formations per 5-year period (from Wimmer, 2013).

According to the theory offered here, periods of ideological–institutional struggle—first the expansion of empire and then the formation of nation-states—should be particularly war prone compared to other periods during which the ideological–institutional principles of statehood were not at stake. To assess this claim empirically, we need to use fixed territorial units of observation that remain constant throughout the entire period of observation, independent of the type of state that ruled over them. For the sake of simplicity, I rely on the grid of states as they existed around 2000 and keep these as stable units of observation from 1816 onward. Next, we need to define when ideological–institutional principles of statehood are at stake. An easy, feasible way is to focus on the two corresponding transition points: the year when a territory became incorporated into an empire and the year in which an independent nation-state was established that constitutionally defined sovereignty as deriving from a nation, rather than a dynasty or a mandate from heaven. As the following graph shows (Figure 1), wars peak before and after these two turning points, in other words when actors struggled over the institutional-ideological principles of statehood (see Wimmer and Min, 2006, for details).

A closer look at these two waves and the war aims pursued by the aggressors reveals a distinctive pattern: before the imperial incorporation turning point, war mostly aimed at conquest, and the corresponding ideological motivation is access to natural resources and control over population, strategic advantages vis-à-vis other expanding empires, civilizational grandeur, or the spread of true faith. After the turning point, the empire further expands through conquest into the hinterland and subdues various insurrections by subjects who resent having lost political autonomy to a new imperial polity.

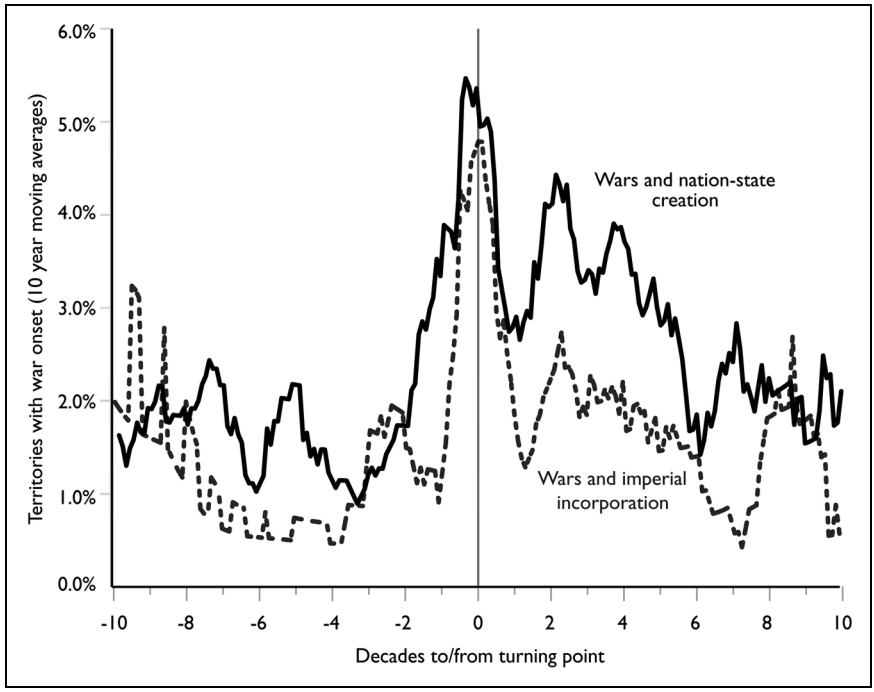


Figure 2. War probability during the transition into empire and from empire to the nation-state.

The second wave of war begins with anti-imperial wars of "national liberation," fueled by the ideology of nationalism, resentment against what is now viewed as "foreign rule," and the political ambition of sub-imperial elites who would like to emulate the power and prestige of the first modern nation-states (the United States and France) in a similarly structured polity to be ruled by themselves. After the transition to the nation-state, we see irredentist wars fought between competing post-imperial polities over control of ethnically mixed territory to which different newly formed states can lay claim or over co-national territory outside of the new states' borders. These are again driven by the nationalist ideology that makes nation-states responsible for the political fate of co-nationals abroad, often mixed with the strategic aim to expand one's own territory.

Newly born nation-states often see the escalation of political competition between various ethnic elites over who controls the new center of power, again driven by nationalist ideals of self-rule according to which ethnic likes should rule over ethnic likes—and of course by the sheer desire for political power. Minorities (or sometimes majorities) excluded from central-level government often rise up in arms (Wimmer et al., 2009), under additional scope conditions (Lindemann and Wimmer, 2018), to fight for a seat at the table of government. Some of these ethno-political conflicts lead to the establishment of new break-away states where the former minority now represents the dominant,

state-owning majority. To put it briefly, war aims during the second transition to the nation-state are mostly motivated by nationalist ideologial principles.

The international system

So far, I have focused on the struggle over the domestic political order, and I reduced this struggle to the opposition between the principles of empire and the principles of the nation-state. I specified an internal logic of political development that unfolds at different points in chronological time in different parts of the world: the transition from empire to nation-state occurred in 1831 in Belgium but in 1991 in Armenia. Overlying and intertwining with these struggles are those related to the international order that follows its own rhythms and logics. As this order comprises the entire international system, its dynamics unfold within a uniform time frame and we now assume a world historical perspective.

For the sake of brevity, I rely on a simple and straightforward periodization, blending approaches that focus on shifts in war aims (pioneered by Holsti, 1991, and Luard, 1987) with those that emphasize major wars as breakpoints changing the hegemonic powers and ideologies that dominate the global system (see Ikenberry, 2001). I don't rely on but will briefly mention realist periodizations that distinguish between various degrees of polarity in the international system.

From the end of the Napoleonic wars to the outbreak of the First World War, the ideological–institutional order commonly known as the Concert of Europe delegitimized the construction of empire in Europe by freezing state borders, stabilizing the monarchical, dynastic regimes against bourgeois–nationalist insurrectionaries, and maintaining a balance of power within this multipolar system meant to prevent a recurrence of expansionist imperial projects such as Napoleon's (Ikenberry, 2001; Schroeder, 1994; Chapter 3). At the same time, it legitimized and encouraged the imperial expansion *outside* of Europe by defining all non-Christian populations without states already diplomatically recognized by the European great powers as legitimate targets of imperial expansion (Gong, 1984). In other words, the international system prevented imperial incorporation in Europe and encouraged it outside of it.

From the First World War to the end of the Cold War in 1989, we enter the period of ideological confrontations, pitting communism, fascism, and liberalism against each other, leading to a series of cataclysmic wars between great powers with different ideological orientations (Luard, 1987). The goals of international war shift towards establishing the global hegemony of one's preferred institutional order, regime change in other states to ensure the expansion of one's own sphere of influence, and pushing back against the gains of one's enemy as in the various proxy wars during the Cold War. The relationship towards imperial formations becomes more complex. Fascist powers such as Germany and Japan embark on their own projects of empire building in Eastern Europe or East Asia, explicitly modeled after the already established colonial empires of the West. The Communist Soviet Union, meanwhile, re-conquers much of the Romanov domains after a first wave of nation-state creation on its Western and Southwestern flanks after the Bolshevik revolution. In the liberal–democratic bloc, the

principle of empire loses legitimacy once the United States assumes a hegemonic position after World War II and begins to nudge the allied Western colonial empires towards decolonization (Louis and Robinson, 1994).

From 1989 to roughly 2017, the beginning of first Trump presidency, the international system enters a brief period of unipolarity (Ikenberry, 2009; Krauthammer, 1990/91) during which the liberal–democratic model of statehood becomes hegemonic, under the military, economic, and political leadership of the United States and institutionally supported by a range of international institutions, from the more coercive International Monetary Fund and the World Bank all the way to the human rights wing of the United Nations. Empire is no longer a legitimate form of statehood in this order (Fazal, 2007); the conquest of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq is forcefully reversed; a range of nationalist self-determination struggles are actively supported by international coalitions (as in Kosovo or East Timor).

Around 2022, we enter a new era of multipolarity with China assuming the status of an established rival of equal political and economic clout as the United States, expanding its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative throughout Central and Southeast Asia and, with lesser intensity in the developing world via an alliance with Brazil, Iran, Russia, India, and South Africa (BRICS). Russia begins to reassert dominance in parts of its former empire, and its mercenaries and soldiers interfere as far away as Western Africa and Syria. India becomes a regional hegemon and so does Brazil in South America. Israel, with military, financial, and political backing of the United States, acts as a regional hegemon in the Middle East, as the 2026 wars against Iran, the campaigns in Syria and Lebanon, and the destruction of Gaza illustrate.

In contrast to the bipolar world of the Cold War, these spheres of influence are not defined by clearcut ideological–institutional principles, as illustrated by the heterogeneous composition of the American sphere of influence which includes, among others, the liberal–democratic European Union, the socialist regime of Venezuela after the forced ouster of its president Maduro in 2025, and the dynastic, authoritarian Gulf states. The BRICS alliance includes democratic Brazil, totalitarian China, and theocratic Iran. The liberal international order is replaced by the realist principle of national interest, which is now pursued without regard to any other ideological or institutional goals than establishing as much control over resources, strategic territory, and military–technological power as possible. A resurgent nationalism, which we see rising to power in all major states, including China, the United States, India, Brazil, and Russia, gives this raw pursuit of competitive advantage a veneer of legitimacy. This neo-nationalist, raw-realist period in international relations resembles older periods of multipolarity but, as mentioned above, lacks the ideological–institutional competition that characterized the period from 1914 to 1989 or the coordination mechanism to prevent escalation of inter-state tensions into war that represented the hallmark of the multipolar Concert of Europe (and the long peace that it established). By the time of writing (in 2026), it is too early to tell if such coordination devices will eventually come about or if multipolarity will continue in its current anarchic form.

Intersections

The global and the domestic political logics intersect in manifold ways into a complex system with multiple feedback loops that defy an easy analysis in terms of cause and effect. Some of these intersections can nevertheless be teased out. First, and as already hinted at in the above description, the international system provides more or less support for either side in the struggle between empire and nation-state, and it often leans to different sides in that struggle in different parts of the world simultaneously: The Concert of Europe system discouraged empire in Europe and encouraged it everywhere else. The system of ideological blocs built or maintained empire in the fascist and communist spheres but gradually shifted to supporting nationalists in the Western world. In the unipolar system of liberal internationalism, empire had no longer a place in the world order, and wars of conquest were met with violent, coordinated response. In the new multipolar order of neo-nationalism and raw realism, there is again no support for building territorial empires—I will come back to this statement in a concluding section where I will have a closer look at the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

How decisive this varying international support for empire or nationalists was in the domestic struggles over the ideological–institutional order is hard to tell and awaits a systematic empirical investigation. Simply adding period dummies to pooled cross-sectional times series of nation-state formation, as I have done in earlier work (Wimmer and Feinstein, 2010), clearly isn't nearly precise and informative enough. What is also clear, contrary to expectations derived from world polity theory (Meyer et al., 1997), is that a lin-early growing international legitimacy of the nation-state model is not a major factor in determining when nationalists win the upper hand in struggling against empire (see the response by Wimmer and Feinstein, 2016 to Li and Hicks, 2016). Some more recent qualitative studies (by Lynn Tesser, 2024) suggest that the influence of great power was decisive in the process of decolonization, while the role of nationalist movements and struggles was negligible. But these examples are cherry-picked to support the point (for a comparative analysis of the role of nationalists in breaking apart empires, see Hiers and Wimmer, 2013). A systematic study of the role of the international system in decolonization struggles awaits the future.

Second, the international order also influenced the ideological content that nationalist movements against empire and dynastic regimes adopted. During the Concert of Europe period, the European nationalists, such as during the failed 1848 revolutions, faced the monarchical regimes that the Concert sought to keep in power. Nationalists thus embraced precisely the liberal and democratic principles derived from the French revolution that the Concert suppressed. Later waves in the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov empires combined these liberal principles with those of cultural romanticism, a move against the Concert's principle that multi-ethnic empires were as viable as mono-ethnic kingdoms as long as they adhered to anti-revolutionary principles and refrained from expansionist projects.

During the period of ideological confrontations, nationalists adopted the ideological frames of their imperial center's enemies, in a classical logic of opposition: Nationalists in European colonial empires often turned to communist ideologies and

sought the support of the Soviet Union and China. Nationalists in the Communist sphere, in turn, embraced liberal democratic principles and were tacitly supported by the West, as during the Czechoslovak or Hungarian uprisings. Anti-fascist nationalists in the Japanese and Nazi empires chose between either liberal democratic or Communist orientations and allies, as the Korean case illustrates. These orientations were obviously both driven by ideological affinity—one's adversary's ideas appear less attractive because they are also used to suppress one's demand for self-governance—and by military–political opportunity as the Soviets were willing to support (often via their Cuban proxies) nationalist liberation struggles, for example, in Moçambique or Angola, while the West encouraged nationalists in the Soviet sphere of influence. This hypothesis also awaits an encounter with solid empirical data—which would demand a time-varying coding of the ideological orientation of different nationalist movements, their alliances with international actors, including other nationalist movements, as well as the ideological orientation(s) of the imperial centers against which they mobilize.

Third and conversely, the struggle between empire and nationalism, which unfolds within different temporal spaces in different parts of the world, has aggregate consequences for the international system because it determines the very nature of its constituent units and thus the logics of how they relate to each other. As the following graph shows (Figure 2, from Wimmer, 2013), the past 200 years has seen a gradual shift in the composition of the international system away from dynasticism and empire to the nation-state model.

The contemporary international system, composed almost entirely of nation-states (with the notable exceptions of the dynastic regimes of the Gulf and the theocracy of Iran), has a different dynamic than the system of earlier periods. The Concert of Europe, for example, emerged precisely because most states during this era were either dynastic or imperial regimes whose interest in domestic stability and international peace converged and who allowed each other to use their military might, acquired in previous periods of constant warfare between themselves, to conquer everyone else around the world who was not a member of the club. The logic of the international system and the internal character of its component units are thus, I am afraid to say, endogenously related (as already noted by Buzan and Little, 2000; Ruggie, 1983).

Fourth, the interrelation between domestic and international dynamics also means that at the level of individual polities, there is no binary distinction between empires and nation-states. In the seaboard states of Northwestern Europe, nationalism and imperialism went hand in hand and fed into each other during the Concert of Europe period. Domestic nation-building was enhanced by the expansion of the overseas empire since the domestic public saw the civilizing mission in the colonial peripheries as proof of national greatness —often in competitive comparisons with European rivals. Conversely, nationalism at home made imperial expansion overseas easier since it provided a clearcut distinction between those who belonged to the metropolitan citizenry—the British, the French, the Belgian, or the Germans—and those less civilized peoples without any standing in the domestic politics of the imperial core. Domestic nationalism (and colonial racism) thus legitimized the "rule of difference" (Ann Stoler, 1995) on which the colonial enterprise rested (for case studies of these interrelations, see, e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2008; MacKenzie 1986).

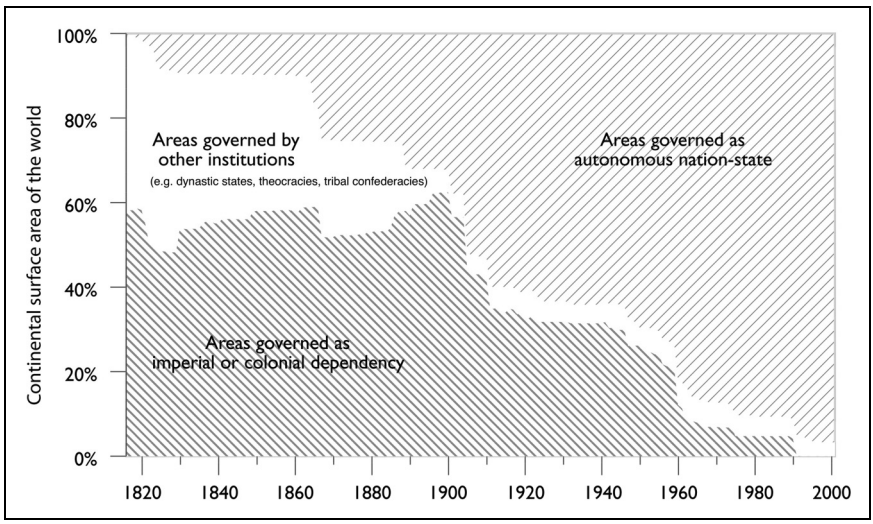


Figure 3. The shifting composition of the international system, 1816–2000.

Needless to say, nation-states and empires are thus not mutually exclusive political formations, unlike what some of my critics assume my approach to imply (Hall, 2024; Kumar, 2010). The British empire operated as a nation-state within the United Kingdom and as an empire in the colonies (and in Ireland until independence). Some nation-states even embarked on an imperial adventure after they had themselves broken free of imperial rule and had consolidated as nation-states, as the American occupation of the Philippines after the Spanish–American war and the continued semi-colonial rule over Puerto Rico illustrate. Israel is ruled as a modern nation-states within its borders but dominates in a colonial style of indirect rule over the occupied territories, via the Palestinian authority in the West Bank and via Hamas in Gaza before the October 7th massacre.

The current moment: Ukraine, Israel–Palestine, and Ethiopia

The current period of international relations—after the end of the unipolar moment when liberal internationalism was the dominant game in the global town—is too young to clearly see what shape it will take in the future. But perhaps what I have termed the neo-nationalist, raw-realist international system will indeed further solidify and stabilize. Making this assumption, some of the recent conflicts can be interpreted as examples of how the empire-to-nation-state dynamics intersect with this new global regime.

The Ukraine war has often been seen as the prime example of the resurgence of (the Russian) empire. However, as I have argued elsewhere in more detail (Wimmer, 2022), the conflict fits the empire-to-nation-state pattern of conflict quite well. After the end of the Soviet empire and Ukrainian independence, an ethno-political struggle over who controls the new independent state of Ukraine emerges, in line with the general pattern. Two

major contenders for representing the nation emerge: Western-oriented individuals ethnically identified as "Ukrainians," mostly the descendants of those educated in Ukrainian by Habsburg or nationalized as Ukrainians under the early Soviet nativization policy. The other group of politicians and citizens are Russian-identified and mostly Russian-speaking individuals, the descendants of those educated in Russian by the Romanov empire or assimilated into Russian identity under the later Soviet policy of Russification. After independence, we see a back and forth between "Ukrainian"- and "Russian"-dominated governments, each expelling representatives of the other region/group from government positions when in power.

With Maidan revolution, the "Ukrainian" forces achieve a decisive victory, purge Russian-identified individuals from government, and pass a language law that acknowledged only Ukrainian as official language—but not Russian. This is perceived as a violation of nationalist principle of self-rule by Russian-oriented politicians and citizens. A civil war starts after Eastern ("Russian") provinces, who resent being ruled by Western-oriented "Ukrainians," declare themselves independent, encouraged by Russia. Russia uses the political disempowerment of "Russians" as pretext to "protect" co-ethnics—fellow Russian-speaking Russian orthodox populations—across the border from second-class citizenship, in line with the general pattern. The Russian invasion of Ukraine follows, motivated by geopolitical interests against a further expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization but channeled into particular war aims and logics by the post-imperial dynamics of nationalist competition. In this interpretation, the war thus follows an old pattern of irredentist war after the end of empire and the transition to the nation-state, rather than representing a resurgence of the logics of the empire.

How does this post-imperial logic of the Ukraine war intersect with the dynamics of the new international system? The neo-nationalist, raw-realist system of multipolarity encourages Russia to pursue maximalist war aims without much regard for the death toll among its soldiers, knowing that the long-term military balance of power will be on its side. International law (such as the principle of state sovereignty) does not seem to matter in its calculations at all, as it may have under the previous, liberal international regime, nor does it have to directly confront the overwhelming military power of the United States, as it might very well have had to during the liberal internationalist period, when Serbia's assault on Kosovo or Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were militarily pushed back under American leadership. If this analysis is correct, then the neo-nationalist logic guiding and shaping the post-imperial politics of Russia will never aim at re-establishing empire: It is exceedingly unlikely that Russia will develop a genuine imperial design to conquer and permanently incorporate Poland, for example, since the nationalist logic prevents the extension of state power to include non-national others, such as Catholic and Polish-speaking Poles.

The Middle East war theater also provides ample illustration of how post-imperial nationalism and the new international regime interact to produce a specific pattern of conflict. Israel's conflict with the Palestinians dates back almost a century and escalated sharply with the ethnic cleansings that accompanied the foundation of Israel as an ethnonational state in 1948. The violence that may result from competing nationalist claims on the same territory is well known from other cases as well (Kosovo comes to mind, but

also the earlier Balkan wars). And so is the spiral of terrorist violence, indiscriminate state repression, and more terrorist violence in response (Lindemann and Wimmer, 2018).

What is unique in this case is that Israel was able to conquer new territories—the West Bank and Gaza—and hold on to them in an era when "foreign rule" over ethnically different populations was no longer considered legitimate in the international system that now unequivocally supported decolonization. This is of course why the occupation had to be legally framed as temporary. The political situation of Palestinians in the occupied territories is thus analogous, though obviously not in legal terms, to a colonial situation where the subject population does not enjoy basic citizenship rights. The likelihood of civil war, motivated by nationalist desires of self-rule, in such extreme cases of political discrimination is indeed very high (Cederman et al., 2010), and so is the likelihood of terrorism (Polo, 2020). The latest rounds of the Israel–Palestine conflict thus fit the general pattern of post-imperial ethnic conflict quite well. Also in line with general patterns, neighboring states (Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon) are drawn into the conflict as they intervene on behalf of discriminated co-ethnics (fellow Arabs or Muslims) and, of course, to further their own regional agendas to counter the power of the United States, Israel, and the Gulf states.

On the other hand, the international system influences the war aims and their ideological framing in this conflict as well. During the liberal international regime, Israel was forced (by its American ally) to enter a peace process to negotiate the contours of a future Palestinian state, in line with the then hegemonic ideas of conflict resolution through accommodation and the recognition of self-determination rights of all peoples. In the neo-nationalist, raw-realist era, this pressure has weakened considerably, and the nationalist vision of eventually incorporating the West Bank into the state of Israel is pursued in open ways by the Netanyahu regime and its settler allies. The raw-realist aspect of the international regime, if this is indeed the appropriate description of the still nascent order, is also illustrated by the Israeli campaign in Gaza, following the unprecedented Hamas massacre of October 7. The Israeli campaign led to the mass killing of tens of thousands of civilians and the complete destruction of the physical infrastructure of the strip. No longer constrained by ideals of human rights or the protection of civilians and dismissing international legal opinion that its conduct of war might be considered a crime, Israel pursued a hyper-realist policy of destroying as much of its enemy as militarily possible.

The 2026 attacks of Israel and the United States on Iran follow a similar neo-realist pattern: Israel managed to convince its US ally that regime change in Iran—the main regional threat to Israeli security—would be possible and a destruction of its military capabilities, precluding the possibility of ever crossing the nuclear threshold, within reach. Unlike in the previous period of liberal internationalism, the project was not to install a democratic regime to replace the Mullahs. Rather, Israel and the United States would have been content, as the *New York Times* reported, with a hardline Revolutionary Guard government or the former hardline president Ahmadinejad, conditional on either of them giving up on the nuclear ambitions of the Islamic republic.

As a final example, let me quickly look at the Tigray war, fought between 2020 and 2022, which cost the lives of at least 100,000 individuals from direct battle and possibly

around half a million if we include civilian deaths from famine and disease. Ethiopia emerged from empire when the monarchy was overthrown by a revolutionary, Soviet allied military junta in 1974. Various ethnic militias subsequantly fought a long civil war against the Amhara-dominated junta, motivated by nationalist demands for self-rule, culminating in its overthrow in 1991 and the independence of Eritrea, which had previously been annexed in the 1960s by the Ethiopian empire (a late example of imperial expansion). The dominant force in the multi-party government after 1991 was a Tigray militia from the North. The centers of power within the multi-ethnic coalition gradually drifted away from the Tigray elites, however, towards demographically larger groups such as the Amhara and Oromo. The Tigray reacted with increasingly assertive demands for regional self-rule in their home territory, leading to the civil war of the early 2020s.

This short summary obviously doesn't do justice to the complexities of political developments in this multi-ethnic state. It may suffice here to note that the general pattern—first the struggle to overthrow the dynastic empire; then a civil war against a newly emerged form of Amhara dominance to establish a coalition with a multi-ethnic composition, the first in the country's history; and then the destabilizing jostling for dominance within this coalition, all driven by nationalist desire for self-rule—represents one particular pathway of how the transition from empire to nation-state can lead to rounds of domestic civil conflict.

It is interesting to note, again, how the international system influenced war aims, alliances, and ideological frames during the various phases of the conflict. The overthrow of the empire occurred during the period of bipolar competition between different ideological–institutional principles, the Cold War. Correspondingly, the anti-monarchical junta adopted a Communist ideology and political program (violently eliminating the dominant class of landowners and enacting a land reform) that was supported by the Soviet Union, including during the Ogaden war when Soviet and Cuban forces beat back the irredentist Somali invaders.

During the period of international liberal hegemony that followed, revolutionary programs or one-party dictatorships were no longer the order of the day. The new, multi-party regime instead opted for (at least formally) liberal solutions to the problem of ethno-political competition, undertaking one of the most radical reforms of a nation-state in recent history, decentralizing government power into an elaborate ethno-federal system. In the contemporary era of neo-nationalism and raw realism, participants in the recent Tigray war resorted to nationalist ideologies—demanding minority self-rule in the case of the Tigray army and party and pursuing a centralist, majoritarian nationalism in the case of the Ethiopian government—without much reference to liberal principles on either side. The "international community" paid very little attention to the conflict despite its high human toll and despite many well-documented and widespread incidents of violent ethnic cleansing and systematic rape. Clearly, Ethiopia was outside of the spheres of influence and interest of any of the major powers in the new, multipolar international system, and raw-realist politics and the diktat of national interests precluded any of them to intervene—as could perhaps have happened had the war broken out during the previous period of liberal internationalism.

Conclusion

These short vignettes on three of the deadliest violent conflicts in recent years (the wars in Syria, Yemen, and Sudan would be the other ones to consider) are of course mere illustrations of the argument this article intends to make, rather than fully developed case studies using "process tracing" methods, as would be appropriate for a more focused analysis. At least they exemplify how current conflict dynamics are both new and old at the same time: The dynamics of ethno-political competition after the end of (the Soviet, British, and Ethiopian) empire follow an "old" pattern that we have seen in wave after wave of the transition from empire to the nation-state. This recurring, if variegated, logic combines with global system-level dynamics, shaping the ideological content of ethno-political struggles, patterns of alliances that weave these local conflicts into higher-level inter-state dynamics, and the precise institutional goals that war participants seek to attain. This interpretation thus suggests that the "new" part of these dynamics is situated at the international rather than the domestic levels (in contrast to an earlier literature on "new wars," see, e.g., Mary Kaldor (1999), which predicted the disappearance of conventional wars such as those fought in Ukraine or Ethiopia; for a critique, see Malešević, 2008).

This essay was squarely focused on how the goals of warfare and its ideological justification have changed over the very long run and is again changing under our very eyes. I have not considered more technical, military aspects that are obviously also important, such as the proliferation of nuclear bombs, the rapid development of drone warfare during the Ukraine war, the future changes that robotics and artificial intelligence will bring about, and so forth. Also left out of the picture is the important question of how frequent different types of war will be and whether wars between states will continue to be relatively rare, as they have been since the Second World War (but see Clauset, 2018). Rather than offering a complete picture of all the different aspects of continuity and change relevant for the immediate future, this essay sought to renew our attention to long-term dynamics and recurring trends at a moment in world history when everything seems to be in flux and terrifyingly new.

ORCID iD

Andreas Wimmer https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1593-866X

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Note

1. Only recently have comparative political scientists begun to take ideological motivations seriously, see for example Balcells and Kalyvas 2025.

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Andreas Wimmer is the Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy at Columbia University. He studies ethnic politics, nation-building, state formation, and the wars and armed conflicts they entail. He is the author of *Ethnic Boundary Making* (2013), *Waves of War* (Cambridge 2013), and *Nation Building* (Princeton 2018).