
The New Forever Wars

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The world is awash with seemingly endless conflicts. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict exemplifies the most common variety: a local conflict that simmers with sporadic, unpredictable, and devastating surges in violence. Despite this growing trend, the United States has tried to narrowly focus on great power competition, particularly with China. But just as in the Cold War, those local conflicts are where global competition is most likely to play out.

Since the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the left and right in the United States have advocated for an end to “forever wars.”¹ But in the sunset of unsuccessful U.S. forays in the Middle East, another kind of forever war is emerging and threatens to affect U.S. interests for the next two decades. Local and civil wars, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are dramatically increasing in number, intensity, and length around the world. While 2023 saw the highest number of violent conflicts since World War II, 2022 saw more battlefield deaths than any year since 1994.² These crises have nearly tripled in duration since 2005.³

U.S. foreign policy tends to sidestep the drivers of these conflicts and their discontents. In an effort to downsize its approach to peripheral regions like the Middle East, the United States has instead focused on encouraging deals between strongmen and dealing with crises through increasingly anemic humanitarian aid. Even in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the United States has been an integral actor for decades, the U.S. government has sidelined Palestinians in favor of elite bargains with Arab states, otherwise known as the Abraham Accords. The United States and its Western allies have then dealt with the Palestinians through aid. As seen in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli offensive on Gaza, the strategy is not working.

While Gaza is the most dramatic example of this failure in 2023, it is hardly the only one. From Yemen and Syria to East Africa, protracted conflicts and fragile states have become vectors for instability. The United States deals with all these protracted crises in a similar way but with even less interest, seeing

them as more peripheral or even irrelevant to great power competition. Nevertheless, in many ways these conflicts will challenge the narrow U.S. response to great power competition. The instability they create spills across borders and distracts the United States. The vulnerability inherent in protracted crises allows others to take advantage, and the U.S. response or lack of response provides an avenue for enemies to criticize U.S. hypocrisy or ineptitude.

Reignited conflicts have the power to quickly inflame an unstable region. The escalation in Gaza exemplifies the potential ripple effect of localized violence. As the war in Gaza escalated, the regime under Syrian president Bashar al-Assad stepped up attacks in northwestern Syria, and Iranian-backed militants launched attacks on bases and facilities housing U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria—130 attacks in under three months—injuring dozens of service members.⁴ In a globalized world, local events can quickly have global consequences. Houthi attacks on shipping vessels forced several major shipping lines—representing 60 percent of global trade—and oil giants like BP to suspend their services through the Red Sea.⁵ The attacks eventually forced the United States to strike targets in Yemen.⁶ Each of these events has its own destabilizing consequences, and all of them are distracting from the issues the U.S. government wants to focus on.

The United States' great power competitors also gain from these protracted crises in different ways. Both Russia and China gain from U.S. distraction and redirection of U.S. resources. Russia will gain directly from U.S. efforts to provide military support to Israel as it diverts attention and resources from Ukraine. Putin also gains by directly intervening in many of these local conflicts, which the United States considers less strategic. In Sudan, Russia reaps the benefits of the country's gold and continues to push for a naval base in the Red Sea.⁷ In Syria, Putin's support for a struggling Assad won Russia an air base and warm-water port to expand its influence in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

China and Russia are also able to manipulate the United States' chosen path for managing these crises: aid. For aid workers, China's support of North Korea

and Russia's support of Syria have made principled and adequate humanitarian responses nearly impossible. As aid workers struggling with aid diversion in North Korea said in 2018, "If China and Russia were not supporting the Kim regime behind the scenes, then . . . foreign aid groups would have much more bargaining power."⁸ In Syria, the Assad regime egregiously diverts aid with little to no accountability as a result of Russia's protection.⁹ China and Russia have since expanded these protections to other states in Africa, making conflict management through humanitarian aid even less feasible.¹⁰

Indirectly, Russia and China gain from arguing the United States is hypocritical and ineffective on the world stage. For many countries in the Global South, support for Ukraine waned because of U.S. double standards in Iraq and Israel. For these countries, the United States' inconsistent application of norms in the name of national interests excuses them from violating those same rules occasionally. While China and Russia may protect a state's ability to impede aid and commit violence, for 153 countries at the UN General Assembly, the United States is doing the same for Israel at the UN Security Council.¹¹

Unless the United States commits to rigorous diplomacy to resolve conflicts and properly manage crises, especially those like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the United States has unique leverage, these forever wars will spiral. The compounding damage to U.S. interests is likely to be long lasting. To combat it, the U.S. government would do well to view the challenge as Franklin D. Roosevelt saw it in 1941:

We must recognize that the hostilities in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict. . . . Our strategy of self-defense must be a global strategy which takes account of every front and takes advantage of every opportunity to contribute to our total security.¹²

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