

# On Classification of Wars and Armed Conflicts: Geopolitical WACs

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*This article attempts to investigate and improve the academic classification of wars and armed conflicts, taking into account the political, geopolitical, international legal and military features of the illegal invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine and the Russian-Ukrainian war and other conflicts like this. At the same time, different approaches to the typology of wars and armed conflicts are considered, different classification systems are presented, and some of their features and shortcomings are studied. The importance of accurate classification of armed conflicts is extremely important for finding mechanisms for their prevention and termination.*

*Keywords: wars, armed conflicts, classification*

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## Introduction

Unfortunately, wars and armed conflicts remain a frequent manifestation of the maximum crisis of relations between states or groups of people. And although the creation of the United Nations and the formation of the international law system significantly reduced the frequency of such phenomena, even today there are at least 41 wars and armed conflicts in the world (Deutsche Welle, 2012), and over 15 thousand wars have occurred in the last 5000 years of human civilization and armed conflicts, the victims of which were at least 3.6 billion people (Lichtenstein, 1976: 117). According to researchers, wars continue virtually continuously, with the exception of the peaceful 292 years of human history (Lichtenstein, 1976: 117), and even this figure is most likely a consequence of insufficient data.

Moreover, the difference between the definitions of “war” and “armed conflict” has always been unclear, and recently it has become increasingly blurred and depends on the context and goals of the study. After all, in a general sense, both terms describe the phenomena of confrontation with the use of group violence and/or weapons and/or armed forces between two or more parties. At the same time, “wars” and “armed conflicts” may have different causes

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and goals, their nature may be differed in a wide range: the set of participating parties, the resources used, the area of existence, consequences, and so on.

### **The main part**

So, it is still possible to distinguish some notable *differences between* these definitions when they are used responsibly and judiciously:

1. *Scale and duration.* War usually has a larger scale and longer duration, including military operations on different fronts (locations), involvement of a large number of people and weapons, significant impact on society and the international situation. While armed conflicts are mostly more local, more limited by the criteria of resources, time and space of the parties involved;

2. *Formal recognition* from the point of view of international or national law. War can be internationally recognized and officially declared by the parties, and its state can be confirmed (proclaimed/recorded from the point of view of international law) by international organizations. At the same time, armed conflict is often (but not necessarily) undeclared, less formalized and does not gain wide international legal recognition.

However, it is necessary to realize that in the modern world legalization of wars – legal or even international legal recognition of war – occurs extremely rarely. Mostly this happens due to a complex of negative political-legal, informational and socio-economic consequences for the “legalizing” side (the side that records the state of war in legal acts or decisions of authorities) or war initiator. Therefore, the concept of “war” in the legal and scientific literature is often replaced by the definition of “armed conflict”, although it is not always equivalent to it, as stated in this article;

3. *Significant political goals.* War is usually associated with higher political goals and strategic interests, including changing borders, regimes of power or international balance. Armed conflicts may have more limited or specific objectives related to territorial disputes, security, socio-economic, ethnic, or religious conflicts.

Based on this, and in order to prevent terminological uncertainty, within this article will be used the *cumulative definition of “wars and armed conflicts” (WAC)*.

In the same approach, international law also applies to the definition of the WAC. In particular, according to the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949 for the Protection of the Civilian Population in Time of War: “... *the present Convention shall apply to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them*” (Convention, 1949).

At the same time, an accurate classification of WACs helps us to better understand and analyze their characteristics, to identify patterns of occurrence, development and consequences, to develop mechanisms for their prevention and peacekeeping technologies.

After all, unfortunately, wars and armed conflicts have become one of the permanent processes of human civilization and a tool of socio-political management. It was in this capacity that the WAC considered by:

- a) *Niccolò Machiavelli*, who in his famous work “The Prince” characterized war as an integral part of political reality and called on rulers to be ready to use war to achieve their goals (Machiavelli, 2014: 14);
- b) *Karl von Clausewitz* – argued that war is a tool that political leaders can use to achieve their goals and considered war as a continuation of politics with the use of other means (“On War”) (Clausewitz, 2007: 12);

- c) *Thomas Hobbes*, who believed that the state is created to ensure security and control chaos, and war is an inevitable state of human nature and a means that can be used by the state to maintain order and stability (“Leviathan”) (Hobbes, 1936: 144);
- d) *Hans Morgenthau*, who developed the theory of “international politics as a struggle” and considered international politics as a constant struggle for power and resources, where war is one of the tools used by states to achieve their interests (Morgenthau, 1956: 38).

And these are just some of the many similar opinions.

Wars can also vary widely in their nature and causes. That is why there is a significant number of author’s classifications and typologies of wars and armed conflicts.

We will recall some of them.

*Yurii Badakh*, in his article “Causes of occurrence and classification of military conflicts” proposed a classification of wars, which includes the following types (Badakh, 2003):

1. By scale: 1) global; 2) regional; 3) local;
2. By duration: 1) fleeting; 2) protracted;
3. By means of impression: 1) with the use of nuclear weapons; 2) using conventional weapons;
4. By intensity: 1) high-intensity military actions; 2) average intensity of hostilities; 3) low intensity of hostilities;
5. According to the nature of the theater of war: 1) continental; 2) oceanic; 3) marine; 4) air; 5) space;
6. According to the number of states involved in the war: 1) coalition states; 2) coalitions against one state; 3) one state against another state.

*Volodymyr Denisov* believes that WACs can be typified as follows (Denisov, 2022):

1. According to the goals of the war: 1) liberating; 2) invasive;
2. According to the deployment vector: 1) defensive; 2) offensive;
3. According to the methods of conducting military operations: 1) maneuverable; 2) positional; 3) remote;
4. According to the level of development of the parties to the confrontation: 1) symmetrical: these are wars when the parties to the confrontation have the same level of development and military potential; 2) asymmetric: these are wars when the opposing sides have different levels of development and military potential.
5. According to the presence of direct military confrontation: 1) “cold”; 2) “hot”;
6. According to the landscape of hostilities: 1) land; 2) marine; 3) air; 4) mixed;
7. According to the degree of involvement of resources and methods of struggle: 1) limited; 2) total.

*Alvin Toffler and Heidi Toffler* in their work “War and Anti-War” proposed a classification of wars, which includes the following types (Toffler & Toffler, 2005: 23):

1. Wars of the First Wave: wars that correspond to agricultural societies and are characterized by the fact that they are conducted at a primitive technological level, irregular units take part in them, their scale and resources involved on both sides are insignificant;

2. Wars of the Second Wave: wars carried out by industrial societies and characterized by a fairly high technological level, participation in combat operations of massive regular armies, significant resources and scales used in military conflict;
3. Wars of the Third Wave: wars waged by post-industrial (information) societies, or at least those in transition to them, characterized by an extremely high technological level.

Proponents of the *Marxist approach* believed that wars can be classified according to (Klymenko, 1992):

1. In connection with the era: 1) slave; 2) feudal; 3) capitalist; 4) transition from capitalism to socialism;
2. By influence on the course of history: 1) progressive; 2) reactionary;
3. By type of contradictions: 1) between states of opposite systems; 2) civil; 3) colonial; 4) between capitalist states (imperialist).

*Hugo Grotius* in his treatise “On the Law of War and Peace” classified the WACs as follows (Grotius, 1994: 119–123):

1. Private wars: such wars are waged between persons who are not endowed with public power;
2. Public wars: such wars are fought between states;
3. Just wars: such wars are morally permissible and do not contradict natural law, but only in some cases, for example, when the purpose of war is to defend one’s territories from invaders;
4. Unjust wars: such wars are carried out by some states against others for selfish reasons of their own benefit, for example, when the purpose of war is to seize other people’s territories and wealth, to subjugate other peoples against their will.

*Anatoly Klymenko* in his study “To the question of the theory of military conflicts” proposed a classification of wars, which includes the following types of military conflicts (Klymenko, 1992):

1. In relation to national interests: 1) wars corresponding to national interests; 2) wars that do not correspond to national interests.
2. By type of contradictions: 1) political; 2) economic; 3) territorial; 4) national and ethnic; 5) religious.
3. According to the socio-political composition of the parties: 1) interstate; 2) national liberation; 3) civil.
4. According to the nature of political goals: 1) wars with aggressive goals; 2) wars aimed at protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity; 3) wars aimed at restoring international peace.
5. On the legal basis: 1) wars that violate international law; 2) war in accordance with international law.

*Hryhoriy Kostenko* believed that such a classification can be made (Kostenko, 1999):

1. According to the nature of the political goal: 1) war for dominance (hegemony); 2) war for territories; 3) mixed.

2. According to the method of achieving the strategic goal and the number of forces:  
1) the strategic goal is achieved by the use of groups of troops (forces) of a strategic scale; 2) the strategic goal is achieved by the use of operational groups of troops; 3) the strategic goal is achieved by using artificial groups of troops.
3. For political purposes: 1) defensive; 2) offensive.
4. According to the solution method: 1) wars can begin with a sudden attack; 2) wars can start because of; 3) wars can start without a reason.

*Volodymyr Slipchenko*, one of the supporters of the theory of generations, in his work “Non-contact Wars” proposed a classification of wars that includes the following types (Slipchenko, 2001: 20-25):

1. Wars of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation: cold weapons are actively used in such wars;
2. Wars of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation: smooth-bore weapons are actively used in such wars;
3. Wars of the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation: automatic weapons are actively used in such wars;
4. Wars of the 4<sup>th</sup> generation: motorized weapons are actively used in such wars;
5. Wars of the 5<sup>th</sup> generation: nuclear weapons are actively used in such wars;
6. Wars of the 6<sup>th</sup> generation: high-tech weapons are actively used in such wars;
7. Wars of the 7<sup>th</sup> generation: biotechnical weapons are actively used in such wars.

*Leonid Chupriy* in his article “Theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of military conflicts in modern globalization issues” proposed a classification of wars, which includes the following types (Chupriy, 2018):

1. Classic territorial wars: the goal of such wars is the conquest or destruction of the territory of one or another state;
2. Wars of secession: the goal of such wars is the conquest of territories and the creation of national wealth;
3. Identity wars: the goal of such wars is the reunification of the representatives of the divided ethnic group, who live compactly on the territories of the Holy Land.

*Mark Khrustalov* in his publication “Sabotage-terrorist war as a military-political phenomenon” proposed a classification of wars that includes the following types (Khrustalov, 2003):

1. According to the character, they are divided into three types: 1) regular: in such wars, combat operations are carried out by regular military formations; 2) partisan: in such wars, combat operations are carried out by partisan units; 3) sabotage-terrorist: in such wars, combat operations are carried out by groups of terrorists.
2. According to the goals: 1) conventional: the goal of such wars is the destruction of the enemy’s military force; 2) unconventional: the goal of such wars is elimination of civilians; in this case, even the weapon of mass destruction is allowed; 3) total: the goal of such wars is the complete destruction of the opponent, including the civilians.

In turn, the famous military historian and professor of Oxford University, *Michael Eliot Howard*, in his work “War in European History” classifies the WACs by the next types (Howard, 2001: 100):

1. Interstate wars: These are conflicts between different states or nations. They are the most common type of war and have been fought throughout history. Examples

- of interstate wars include the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), and World War I (1914-1918).
2. Civil wars: These are conflicts within the same country between different groups or factions. They are often caused by political, social, or economic divisions within a society. Examples of civil wars include the American Civil War (1861-1865), the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and the Syrian Civil War (2011-present).
  3. Colonial wars: These are conflicts between colonial forces and the local population in colonized territories. They were fought during the Age of Imperialism (16th-19th centuries) as European powers sought to expand their empires and control new territories. Examples of colonial wars include the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the Indian Rebellion (1857-1858), and the Algerian War (1954-1962).
  4. Religious wars: These are conflicts in which religious differences are the main reason. They have been fought throughout history, often between different religious groups or denominations. Examples of religious wars include the Crusades (1096-1291), the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639-1651).
  5. Ideological wars: These are conflicts based on different ideologies or political systems. They are often fought between states or groups that have different views on how a society should be organized or governed. Examples of ideological wars include the Cold War (1947-1991), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), and the War on Terror (2001-present).
  6. Economic wars: These are conflicts related to economic interests and resources. They are often fought over control of natural resources, trade routes, or access to markets. Examples of economic wars include the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860), the Chaco War (1932-1935), and the OPEC oil embargo (1973).

Other famous scientists, such as *Joanna Herman, Olga Martyn-Ortega, and Chandra Lekha Sriram*, in their work "War, conflict and human rights: theory and practice", highlighted additional types of wars (Sriram et al., 2014: 73-74):

1. Symmetrical wars: conflicts between forces of comparable power and capabilities;
2. Asymmetric wars: conflicts in which the parties differ significantly in strength and capabilities;
3. Hybrid wars: conflicts involving a combination of different combat methods, such as military, political, information and cyber-attacks;
4. New wars: conflicts arising from new challenges and threats, such as terrorism, cybercrime or state instability;
5. Civil wars: conflicts within the same country between different groups or factions.

Some international organizations of the system of public international law also offer their own definitions. Thus, the International Criminal Court considers the following types (The Classification, 2020):

1. International armed conflicts (IACs): These are conflicts between two or more states or between a state and a non-state armed group that is under the effective control of a foreign state.
2. Non-international armed conflicts (NIACs): These are conflicts between government forces and non-state armed groups within a state, or between two or more non-state armed groups within a state.

Some historians propose to slightly expand the typological framework of armed conflict and include wars to protect violated civil rights. It is also proposed to supplement the level of classification of armed conflicts by qualitative content with the following characteristics (Classification, 2024):

- a) by nature of participation in the war – direct and indirect;
- b) according to the quality of combat troops (forces) – regular, irregular or mixed troops, gang formations, anti-state terrorist groups.

So, after analyzing all the above classifications of wars and armed conflicts, it can be noted that each of them is an important attempt to systematize and analyze the armed conflicts, as well as to identify general patterns of their occurrence, course, formation of consequences and prevention of these phenomena of human civilization. On the other hand, most of these classifications do not take into account modern changes in the geopolitical nature, international legal field, and the nature of modern wars and armed conflicts.

In connection with the creation of the UN and the development of a broad international legal framework that condemns wars and does not consider them to be a sufficiently legal, fair and effective way of resolving conflicts (not unlike diplomacy and negotiations), in the modern globalized world widespread WACs of indirect or covert participation (which are still often called “hybrid”), as well as geopolitical but narrowly localized wars and armed conflicts. In the scientific and popular literature, this kind of confrontation (and everything that does not fit into the traditional forms of the WAC) has often become fashionable to call “hybrid”. But if the “hybrid” nature of wars is due to the efforts of the parties (mainly the aggressor) to avoid legal and political responsibility (mainly by manipulating information) and is a significant (albeit classical) problem for international law, then the problem of localized and, at the same time, internationalized geopolitical wars and armed conflicts needs an updated methodological description and classification improvement.

After all, wars and armed conflicts in Ukraine (from 2014 to the present), Syria (2011 to the present), Yemen (2015 to the present), and, to a lesser extent, wars in Afghanistan (1979-1989, 2001-2021), on the Korean Peninsula (1950-1953), in Vietnam (1955-1975), and others are characterized by special features that cannot be comprehensively taken into account and clarified within the framework of other classifications.

The understanding of this problem has recently provoked scientists to search for new definitions for the classification of war crimes, one of the most popular of which has become the definition of “internationalized” wars and armed conflicts (“internationalized armed conflicts”), which is used even by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The ICRC considers the following features of such conflicts:

1. One or more third States or an international/regional organization (the States or the organization acting through a multinational force) intervene in support of a state involved in an armed conflict against an organized armed group.
2. One or more third States or an international/regional organization (the States or the organization acting through a multinational force) intervene in support of an organized armed group involved in an armed conflict against a State.
3. Other possible combinations between situations 1), 2) and 3).

From a legal point of view, these situations can be translated into three specific cases:

- Some remain a non-international armed conflict
- Others become an international armed conflict
- Others become “mixed” conflicts. In such conflicts, depending on the nature of parties to the conflict, IHL of non-international armed conflicts applies to the relations between some parties (Internationalized, 2024).

Other authors also raise this issue. For example, Kubo Macak in his book “Internationalized Armed Conflicts in International Law”, or criticize – James G. Stewart, “Towards a single definition of armed conflict in international humanitarian law: A critique of internationalized armed conflict” (Stewart, 2003).

But even the introduction of the concept of “internationalized” wars and armed conflicts (“internationalized armed conflicts”) does not solve all the problems of describing today’s specific confrontations.

*Among such special features and characteristics*, and through the prism of the analysis of the criteria of the involved resources and participants, the consequences of such WACs, the following can be distinguished:

1. The real participants of the IPC (or at least some of them) have geopolitical or geoeconomics goals and/or such consequences arise for them in the form of reformatting of global or regional zones of influence in the spheres of security, politics, economy;
2. A large number of indirectly involved states, and especially global leader countries, the use of a huge number of resources – the formation of formal or informal geopolitical blocs (coalitions) of adversary states, with or without the formation of such zones of direct control. For example, in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Belarus, Syria, North Korea, and Iran are on the side of the Russian Federation, other states are contributing, and on the side of Ukraine, the united countries of the “Ramstein+” format (about 50 countries led by the NATO bloc); Iran, the Russian Federation, Turkey, the USA, Iraq, SA, Qatar, Israel, etc. took part in the Syrian war in clear forms. But at the same time, only 2 armies and numerous internationalized and transnationalized formal and informal military organizations (private military companies, foreign volunteers, special services of a large number of states) are present on the battlefield;
3. The hostilities are taking place on the territory of only one state or the region localized around this state, which does not allow us to talk about the escalation of these hostilities with the participation of many participants into a new World War. This kind of war also does not correspond to the characteristics of regional wars, since the consequences of the war have an unambiguous result (it goes beyond the boundaries of the region), despite the fact that often far from all the countries of the region participate in such a war (combat operations do not take place in the vast majority of the region);
4. Unrecognized, low (better regulated only at the level of combatants) or clearly undefined international legal status of the participants of such military operations;
5. Use of state-of-the-art and newest types of weapons, technologies that are available only to the world’s leading states (technological global leaders).



Therefore, wars and armed conflicts that have the above characteristics may be called “*geopolitical*” wars and armed conflicts. After all, the size of the coalitions of their participants (direct and indirect) and the consequences for the world are often comparable to the World Wars, although the level of involvement of the participants and the geographical distribution of such wars mostly do not correspond to such a definition; and significantly exceeds the characteristics of regional or “internationalized” wars and local conflicts.

## Conclusions

Therefore, if we take as a criterion the global importance and complexity of the consequences of certain types of wars and armed conflicts, then their types can be displayed graphically in the following way:

#	Type	Peculiarities
	World wars	Most countries or the world’s population participate; or countries whose total GDP and armed forces account for more than 50% of the world’s; lead to the reformatting of global zones of political, military and economic influence and creating new one.
	Geopolitical wars and armed conflicts	Several of the most developed and powerful countries in the world are participating; advanced military technologies and a significant amount of resources are adopted; leads to significant geopolitical changes, although localized on the territory of one or several countries, regions.
	Internationalized wars and armed conflicts	Internal or regional conflicts involving and involving third countries and organizations; international intervention or support for domestic rebel or separatist groups; limited impact on international relations and balance sheets
	Regional wars and armed conflicts	Conflicts involving one or more states or organizations with regional implications
	Local wars and armed conflicts	Conflicts between a state or several states, a state and informal military organization, on the territory of one country or in one relatively small location, have local consequences.

Moreover, ignoring the features of this type of WACs leads to a sharp decrease in the effectiveness of peacemaking efforts to end conflicts and overcome their consequences, because it does not correctly define the purpose and goals of settlement, political levels and mechanisms of settlement, does not take into account the interests of all real participants (actors).

Recognition of the existence of a new type of wars and military conflicts will also require a serious reform of international law, taking into account the formal and informal characteristics of the behavior and positioning of the participants in such wars and military conflicts.

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