

# REFRAMING CONTEMPORARY SECURITY: THE CONFLICT SEVERITY MAPPING FRAMEWORK (CSMF) AND THE DYNAMICS OF GLOBAL CONFLICT

Hiba Malik\*

## Abstract

*Contemporary conflicts are hybrid and transnational, shaped by overlapping drivers of insecurity, unlike the conflict landscape of previous centuries, which was characterised by singular causes and isolated theatres. The existing approaches tend to categorise conflicts either as purely qualitative themes or through a quantitative lens, leaving a gap in the comprehensive understanding of the severity and nuances of contemporary conflict. This paper introduces the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF), which combines a thematic lens (identity, fragile governance, resource competition, geopolitical rivalry, and hybrid risks) with a spatial lens (conflict clusters, strategic corridors, transnational flows, and emerging frontiers), derived from contemporary conflict arenas. By integrating these dimensions, the CSMF categorises conflicts into low, medium, and high severity levels, each corresponding to tailored responses ranging from preventive diplomacy to robust post-conflict recovery. Through illustrative cases and an inductive, case-based comparative method across six regions, the paper demonstrates how the framework moves beyond descriptive mapping to offer a prescriptive model that links theory to practice. In doing so, it provides policymakers with a systematic tool for navigating the complexity of contemporary security.*

**Keywords:** Contemporary Conflict, Global Security Landscape, Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF), Conflict Mapping, Global Conflict Pattern, Adaptive Responses.

## Introduction

Conflict has long been a part of human society, but the violence of this century differs profoundly from the past. Today's conflicts are hybrid and transnational, involving a myriad of non-state groups, fragile governments, and great-power rivalries. The distinction between war and peace, local and global, political and criminal, has blurred, with wide-ranging consequences. The debate over "old wars vs. new wars" and global conflict datasets highlights violence but often fails to provide practical solutions.

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\*Hiba Malik is Assistant Manager Research at the NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS), National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), Islamabad. The author can be reached at [hibaaqmalik@gmail.com](mailto:hibaaqmalik@gmail.com).

While datasets such as UCDP/PRIO<sup>1</sup> and ACLED<sup>2</sup> have transformed the study of conflict by providing systematic data, their focus remains primarily quantitative, which can obscure the layered thematic and spatial dynamics that this paper seeks to capture. Three existing approaches stand out:

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Core Argument</b>	<b>Strengths</b>
<b>Old Wars vs. New Wars</b>	New wars differ from interstate wars because of the involvement of state and non-state actors, funding from crime and other transnational sources, and conflicts usually driven by identity politics rather than by the territorial conquests of the past. <sup>3</sup>	Highlights the changing character of war and shows a shift from interstate to identity-driven violence.
<b>Fragile States &amp; Quantitative Indices (FSI, UCDP, PRIO)</b>	Focus on fragile/failed states and use indices and datasets to map hotspots, fatalities, and trends. <sup>4</sup>	Provides large-scale data that helps track conflict prevalence and intensity.
<b>Hybrid War (Security Studies)</b>	The blending of conventional and irregular tactics (cyber, disinformation, proxies) is central to modern great-power rivalry. <sup>5</sup>	Captures new military methods and external interventions.

While datasets and indices such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Global Peace Index (GPI), and the Fragile States Index (FSI) have significantly advanced conflict analysis, their focus remains primarily descriptive and state-centric. They fail to capture the adaptive and networked nature of modern warfare by remaining confined within national boundaries or by classifying them by type, thus limiting their capacity to anticipate escalation or diffusion. The model proposed in this study aims to fill this gap by integrating thematic drivers with spatial diffusion patterns, thereby providing a more adaptive and predictive tool for analysing contemporary security dynamics. While it draws on empirical insights, it diverges by adopting a dual-lens approach that links thematic and spatial dimensions, seeking to understand the diffusion of conflict across interconnected regions.

Unlike the existing approaches, this study exposes the complexity of modern warfare and highlights the fragmented state of analysis, via a tactical innovation which:

- Integrates the thematic and spatial aspects of conflict.
- Classifies conflicts based on severity instead of just typology, and
- Links classification directly to policy prescriptions.

Building on these observations, the study identifies a critical analytical gap in how contemporary conflicts are conceptualised and mapped. The main problem identified is that, despite the availability of conflict datasets and theoretical approaches, existing tools remain limited in their ability to capture the multi-layered dynamics of contemporary conflicts. Most frameworks focus either on quantitative parameters or descriptive typologies, overlooking the influence of identity, governance, power rivalries, and geography. This gap renders it cumbersome to devise actionable, context-sensitive strategies. This study, therefore, addresses the need for an integrated framework that bridges the thematic and spatial dimensions to assess and respond to conflicts by severity. Broadly, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How can thematic and spatial dimensions be integrated to better understand and assess the severity of contemporary conflicts?
- What are the recurring drivers and diffusion patterns across different conflict regions?
- How can the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF) classify conflicts into actionable categories that support timely policy response?

Hence, this study investigates how integrating thematic and spatial dimensions can improve conflict analysis and adaptation models. It argues that the severity of present-day conflicts cannot be fully understood through a single lens. Instead, holistic analysis requires a dual-lens framework that combines the thematic and spatial dimensions by capturing both the underlying drivers and the geographic diffusion of violence to build a more predictive understanding of the global conflict landscape.

By the end, the paper proposes the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF) to fill this gap, by advancing a dual lens approach: based on a thematic lens that captures the drivers of conflict such as identity grievances, fragile governance structures, resource competition, great power rivalry, and hybrid risks along with a spatial lens that traces how conflicts diffuse through geographic clusters, strategic corridors, transnational flows, and emerging frontiers. This logic of regional diffusion builds on insights from Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory, which highlights how security dynamics are clustered geographically and how instability radiates across regions.<sup>6</sup> Unlike existing tools, the CSMF tends to map conflicts and classify them into low, medium, and high severity categories, linking each category to tailored, actionable responses.

Methodologically, the study adopts an inductive, case-driven approach, beginning with a snapshot of conflicts across Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Arctic. The basis of case selection was to capture the complexity and nuances of the current conflict landscape. The study is secondary in nature and employs academic literature, articles, essays, and news reports to identify recurring thematic and spatial drivers, which then culminate in the CSMF.

In this way, the paper transitions from empirical observation to conceptual development and ultimately to prescriptive application, ensuring that the framework is practical, adaptable, and relevant to contemporary security challenges.

The paper is structured into four parts. The first section presents a comparative snapshot of the contemporary conflict landscape. The second synthesises these insights into the thematic and spatial dimensions of the global conflict arc. The third introduces the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF), and lastly, the final section offers policy recommendations.

## **Global Conflict Snapshot: Case Studies of 2025**

This section examines selected regions, including Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Africa, Asia Pacific, and Emerging Frontiers, through focused case studies that highlight the evolving patterns of conflict in 2025. This analysis aims to dissect modern conflict, extracting the thematic and spatial dimensions that later inform the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF).

### **Europe**

#### **Russia–Ukraine War**

The Russia–Ukraine conflict traces its origins to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the unresolved tensions of the post-Cold War era. Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan revolution, followed by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Donbas and other regions, set the stage for a protracted confrontation.<sup>7</sup> These events unfolded due to deep-rooted issues of territorial sovereignty, identity, and geopolitical orientation. The full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 has now transformed the conflict into Europe's largest war since 1945.<sup>8</sup> After initial setbacks, Russia entrenched itself in eastern and southern Ukraine, while Ukraine, heavily reliant on Western arms and financial aid, mounted strong defences.<sup>9</sup> By 2025, the war reached a grinding stalemate: frontlines are contested, Russia continues missile and drone strikes, and Ukraine sustains its defence through NATO-backed support. Diplomatic negotiations remain stalled, with peace talks overshadowed by mutual mistrust and competing war aims.<sup>10</sup>

Analytically, the war is an interstate conflict with hybrid dimensions, combining conventional military campaigns with extensive disinformation, cyberattacks, and energy coercion.<sup>11</sup> The humanitarian crisis is acute: tens of thousands of civilians have been killed, millions displaced across Europe, and basic energy and health services severely disrupted.<sup>12</sup> In Ukraine, great-power competition defines the conflict, as Russia frames the war as resistance to NATO expansion. At the same time, the U.S. and Europe view Ukraine's defence as essential to preserving their liberal order in Europe.

Furthermore, China, Iran, and North Korea's alignment with Moscow underscores the widening divide between Western and revisionist powers.<sup>13</sup> Regionally, the war has reshaped Europe's security landscape through NATO enlargement, energy diversification away from Russia, and significant efforts for rearmament. Globally, it has disrupted grain and energy markets,<sup>14</sup> heightening food vulnerabilities in Africa and Asia, and highlighting widespread implications for global stability.

## Armenia-Azerbaijan Dispute

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is rooted in competing territorial claims over Nagorno-Karabakh, a region recognised as part of Azerbaijan but historically populated by ethnic Armenians. The dispute intensified during the Soviet Union's collapse, leading to a brutal war (1988–1994) that left Armenia in control of Nagorno-Karabakh, including surrounding Azerbaijani territories. A fragile ceasefire held for decades but was punctuated by skirmishes and failed negotiations. The 2020 Second Karabakh War marked a decisive shift: Azerbaijan, backed by Türkiye, regained significant territories. Russia brokered a ceasefire that deployed Russian peacekeepers, but tensions persisted.<sup>15</sup> In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a swift military offensive, dismantling the Armenian-backed administration in Nagorno-Karabakh and triggering the mass exodus of ethnic Armenians. Since then, Azerbaijan has consolidated its control, while Armenia grapples with political instability, weakened ties with Russia, and a cautious approach to the West.<sup>16</sup>

The dispute exemplifies a territorial and ethnic conflict with interstate dimensions, shaped by deep-rooted identity struggles and competing nationalisms. The humanitarian crisis has been severe: the displacement of nearly the entire Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh has created a refugee burden for Armenia, compounded by loss of homes, cultural heritage, and livelihoods.<sup>17</sup> The conflict has drawn in great-power competition and reshaped regional alignments: Russia's traditional role as Armenia's guarantor has weakened, Türkiye continues to militarily and politically back Azerbaijan, and the EU is engaging Baku over energy. The dispute illustrates how unresolved ethnic conflicts and resource politics remain a long-term threat, and can be reignited and exploited within broader regional and global rivalries.

## Regional Synthesis

The European cases highlight how territorial disputes intersect with great power rivalry to produce protracted instability. The Russia-Ukraine war embodies a hybrid conflict combining conventional warfare with cyber and energy coercion. Meanwhile, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict illustrates the impact of unresolved ethnic disputes when external politics shift. Together, these cases reveal:

- **Thematically:** the salience of sovereignty and identity grievances coupled with great power competition.

- **Spatially:** Europe demonstrates how conflict clusters in post-Soviet spaces created spillovers affecting food security, energy markets, and migration.

## Middle East

### Gaza

The Gaza conflict is rooted in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian struggle over land, sovereignty, and identity. Following Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the territory came under Hamas' control after its 2007 victory over Fatah, leading to repeated escalations with Israel. Since then, Gaza has endured recurrent wars, in 2008–09, 2012, 2014, and 2021, punctuated by fragile ceasefires.<sup>18</sup> The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, which killed around 1,000 people, triggered Israel's most extensive military campaign to date. Israeli airstrikes, ground incursions, and a total siege have devastated Gaza's infrastructure.<sup>19</sup> In 2025, Gaza faces unprecedented humanitarian collapse and mass starvation,<sup>20</sup> highlighting the failure of the international mediation structures to produce a durable ceasefire and adhere to the basic principles of humanitarianism and ethics.

The conflict is best understood as a protracted asymmetric conflict, combining elements of occupation, insurgency, and state–nonstate confrontation. Israel, a formidable state actor supported by the US with advanced military capabilities, confronts Hamas operating amidst dense urban environments, embedding combat within civilian populations. The humanitarian crisis is catastrophic: tens of thousands killed, hospitals destroyed, and more than two million residents facing famine-like conditions under blockade. Education, health, and water systems are entirely incapacitated, amounting to what some scholars term "scholasticide"<sup>21</sup> and systemic civilian suffering.

In Gaza, great-power competition overlays a protracted nationalist struggle. The U.S. remains Israel's primary supporter, while Iran, Qatar, and Türkiye support the stance of Hamas. Russia and China have used the conflict to challenge U.S. dominance.<sup>22</sup> Regionally, the war destabilises the Middle East and risks wider escalation with Hezbollah and other groups. Globally, it raises valid questions about humanitarian law and the credibility of the UN, making Gaza a focal point of both regional and global instability.

### Yemen

The Yemeni conflict traces its origins to long-standing political, tribal, and sectarian divisions, which intensified after the Arab Spring in 2011 forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down. His successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, struggled to govern a fragmented state plagued by corruption, weak institutions, and insurgent activity.

In 2014, the Houthi movement, backed by Saleh loyalists, seized Sana'a, forcing Hadi into exile. The crisis escalated in 2015 when a Saudi-led coalition intervened militarily to restore Hadi's government, triggering a protracted regional proxy war. Over the next decade, Yemen fractured between Houthi-controlled northwestern areas, a Saudi- and UAE-backed coalition in the south, and strong local militias. By 2025, the Houthis will retain control of Sana'a and key northern territories, while southern separatists push for autonomy. Despite occasional ceasefires and UN-mediated talks, a durable political settlement remains elusive.<sup>23</sup>

The war is classified as a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) with heavy internationalisation, involving multiple regional and global actors. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is one of the world's worst: more than 370,000 deaths since 2015, with widespread famine, collapsed health infrastructure, and cholera outbreaks.<sup>24</sup> Yemen has become a key arena of great-power and regional rivalry. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have intervened to counter Iranian influence, while Tehran uses support for the Houthis to pressure Riyadh and expand its reach. The U.S. backs Saudi operations while targeting terrorist groups like ISIS, whereas Russia and China frame the conflict as a Western failure. Regionally, the war has destabilised the Gulf security, with deep sectarian divides and spillover into the Horn of Africa. Globally, attacks on shipping and oil infrastructure are threatening vital trade routes through the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb.<sup>25</sup>

## Regional Synthesis

The Middle Eastern conflicts underscore how state fragility, sectarian divides, and external interventions produce protracted, internationalised wars. Gaza shows how asymmetric conflict blurs lines between occupation and insurgency, while Yemen highlights multi-actor fragmentation and regional proxy warfare.

- **Thematically:** the role of sectarian/identity politics, weak governance, and humanitarian catastrophe.
- **Spatially:** the region exemplifies conflict corridors (e.g., Israel–Lebanon, Syria–Turkiye, Yemen–Red Sea) that destabilise entire subregions and global trade chokepoints.

## South Asia

### India–Pakistan Tensions

The conflict between India and Pakistan originated with the 1947 Partition of British India, when the maharaja of Kashmir acceded to India despite the majority Muslim population, sparking the first Indo-Pakistani war. The 1949 Karachi Agreement created a cease-fire line, but subsequent wars in 1965 and 1971, followed by the 1972 Simla Agreement, failed to resolve the issue. India's 1974 nuclear test intensified the rivalry, fueling a decades-long arms race.

By the late 1980s, insurgency and communal violence in Kashmir further destabilised the region, leading to the 1999 Kargil War and a fragile cease-fire in 2003, though cross-border skirmishes never ceased.

Tensions periodically escalated, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2016 Uri attack, and thousands of border clashes in 2017–18. The 2019 Pulwama bombing, which killed forty Indian soldiers, brought India and Pakistan close to full-scale conflict after retaliatory air strikes. Later that year, India revoked Article 370, stripping Kashmir of its special status and intensifying unrest through media restrictions, lockdowns, and arrests. Violence persisted into 2024, as New Delhi moved to consolidate control over the region.

In April 2025, militants attacked Indian tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir, killing twenty-six people in the deadliest assault since the Mumbai 2008. India blamed Pakistan, while Pakistan denied involvement and claimed it was a false-flag attack. Relations deteriorated rapidly, with India suspending the Indus Waters Treaty, visa regimes, and border crossings, followed by an armed attack. At the same time, Pakistan closed its airspace, halted trade, and threatened retaliation if its river flows were altered, with an outstanding military response to Indian aggression, prompting the US to intervene for a ceasefire.<sup>26</sup> Since the attack, daily exchanges of fire have resumed along the Line of Control, accompanied by arrests and demolitions in Indian occupied Kashmir.

The conflict is best categorised as an interstate rivalry with insurgency dimensions, where Kashmir remains the central flashpoint. The humanitarian crisis persists in Indian-controlled Kashmir, where reports of civilian casualties, arbitrary detentions, communication blackouts, and restrictions on movement highlight ongoing human rights concerns.<sup>27</sup> The great-power competition further exacerbates the India-Pakistan rivalry. The U.S. increasingly views India as a strategic partner against China. At the same time, Pakistan aligns closely with Beijing through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and defence cooperation, highlighting South Asia's entanglement in global rivalries. Regionally, this conflict blocks South Asian integration through SAARC and remains prone to issues in Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean. Globally, the dispute remains one of the world's most dangerous flashpoints, with the Kashmir conflict linked to the nuclear arsenals of both states, giving it systemic significance for global security.

## **Afghanistan**

Afghanistan's modern conflict is deeply rooted in decades of instability, from the Soviet invasion in 1979 to the civil wars of the 1990s and the U.S.-led intervention in 2001 following the 9/11 attacks. The two-decade international presence, aimed at state-building and counterinsurgency, failed to establish lasting stability. In August 2021, the Taliban regained power after the collapse of the U.S.-backed government, marking a dramatic shift in the country's trajectory.<sup>28</sup>

In 2025, Afghanistan is under the Taliban rule, with sanctions and a governance crisis. The political vacuum, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises remain unresolved, leaving Afghanistan fragile and isolated.

The conflict is categorised as a non-international armed conflict with transnational terrorist dimensions, as the Taliban confront internal resistance and extremist groups while struggling to govern. The humanitarian crisis is dire: more than half the population faces acute food insecurity, unemployment is widespread, and extreme poverty<sup>29</sup>, and access to healthcare and education, especially for women and girls, remains severely restricted under Taliban edicts.<sup>30</sup> Afghanistan remains geopolitically significant as the U.S. withdrawal opened space for China's limited economic engagement, Russia's cautious diplomacy, and Iran's sectarian and economic ties. Regionally, instability undermines connectivity projects such as energy pipelines and trade corridors, raising fears of the spread of extremism in Central and South Asia.<sup>31</sup> Globally, Afghanistan stands as a cautionary tale of failed state-building and the challenge of transnational extremism.

## **Sri Lanka**

Sri Lanka's conflict is historically defined by its decades-long civil war (1983–2009) between the Sinhalese-majority state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who sought an independent Tamil homeland in the north and east. The war ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the LTTE, but it left deep scars of ethnic mistrust, displacement, and alleged war crimes. Post-war reconciliation has been slow, with Tamil grievances over political marginalisation, militarisation, and accountability largely unresolved. In recent years, Sri Lanka has faced new challenges: the 2019 Easter bombings by Islamist extremists revealed evolving security threats,<sup>32</sup> while the 2022–23 economic crisis sparked mass protests that toppled President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.<sup>33</sup> In 2025, Sri Lanka is in a fragile recovery phase, balancing political reforms and debt restructuring, while efforts to stabilise its democracy continue, and underlying ethnic tensions remain unaddressed.<sup>34</sup>

The conflict is best understood as a post-Civil War society facing risks of renewed internal unrest. While the armed conflict has formally ended, grievances rooted in ethnicity and economic exclusion persist, with a humanitarian crisis of financial hardships. The collapse of foreign reserves and food and fuel shortages in 2022 pushed millions into poverty, worsening the social vulnerabilities, especially among minorities and rural communities.<sup>35</sup> The issues of wartime accountability and resettlement remain unresolved, with human rights organisations continuing to press for justice for Tamil victims.

Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean places it at the centre of the India-China rivalry. China's Belt and Road investments, especially Hambantota Port, have raised fears of debt dependency<sup>36</sup> and strategic encirclement, prompting India to counter with economic aid and infrastructure projects.

Regionally, Sri Lankan instability affects South Asian security and maritime trade, and domestically, it demonstrates how internal crises intersect with great-power competition.

## Regional Synthesis

South Asian conflicts reveal how **legacy disputes and unresolved governance failures** persistently fuel instability. Kashmir embodies interstate rivalry with nuclear risks, Afghanistan shows state collapse amid transnational extremism, and Sri Lanka demonstrates the unfinished business of post-civil war reconciliation.

- **Thematically:** persistence of historic grievances, religious/ethnic divides, and insurgency-terror overlaps.
- **Spatially:** South Asia functions as a nuclearised security complex, where crises reverberate across borders, obstructing regional cooperation and connectivity.

## Africa

### Mali

Mali's conflict has its roots in long-standing tensions between the central government and marginalised northern communities, particularly the Tuareg population. Since independence in 1960, periodic Tuareg rebellions sought autonomy, but the 2012 uprising marked a turning point. Armed groups, including al-Qaeda affiliates, hijacked the Tuareg revolt, seizing control of northern Mali. France intervened in 2013 to support Malian forces, but was later expelled, leaving space for Russia and the Wagner Group.<sup>37</sup> Despite international assistance, insecurity spread to central Mali and across the Sahel. Later, coups in 2020 and 2021 further destabilised governance, bringing a military junta to power.<sup>38</sup> As of today, Mali remains mired in violence, with jihadist groups controlling large swathes of territory and civilian populations facing severe insecurity.

The conflict is best categorised as a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) with transnational dimensions, involving insurgents, jihadists, and foreign interventions. The humanitarian crisis is severe: thousands killed, millions displaced, and widespread food insecurity threatens vulnerable communities, making Mali the worst case of humanitarian crisis in 2024.<sup>39</sup> Mali has become a focal point of shifting global alignments: France's withdrawal marked the decline of Western influence, while Russia expanded its role through Wagner mercenaries. The U.S. and EU have scaled back, though concerns over terrorism and regional instability persist. Regionally, Mali's crisis has spilt into Burkina Faso, Niger, and the broader Sahel. Globally, Mali illustrates the limits of international peacekeeping, with MINUSMA's withdrawal in 2023 leaving core insecurities unresolved and demonstrating that a one-size-fits-all approach to conflict resolution is no longer appropriate.

## Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo has endured decades of instability, with roots in colonial exploitation, weak governance, and regional interference. The First (1996–1997) and Second Congo Wars (1998–2003), often termed "Africa's World War," drew in multiple neighbouring states. Despite peace agreements, violence persisted, particularly in the mineral-rich eastern provinces. Armed groups, including the March 23 Movement (M23), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), and various local militias, continue to operate, exploiting weak state authority. The UN has maintained one of its largest peacekeeping missions, MONUSCO, since 1999, though with limited success.<sup>40</sup> Political instability, disputed elections, and governance failures further complicate the situation.

The conflict is considered a non-international armed conflict with international dimensions due to the involvement of foreign-supported groups and cross-border activities. The humanitarian crisis ranks among the worst globally, with thousands dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. Civilians are suffering from shortages of food and water, overwhelmed healthcare facilities, and an increasing use of rape and sexual violence as tools of war.<sup>41</sup> Control over mining areas by armed groups has led to resource exploitation and funding for violence.

The Democratic Republic of Congo's vast mineral wealth, especially cobalt and coltan, fuels global competition.<sup>42</sup> China leads mining investments, integrating Congolese resources into its supply chains, while Western nations worry about supply security and human rights. Rwanda and Uganda are accused of supporting rebels for economic gains, and Russia seeks influence through security cooperation. The conflict destabilises the Great Lakes, strains regional ties, and complicates East African initiatives. Globally, the DRC highlights how humanitarian crises, resource geopolitics, and insecurity intersect, raising questions about ethical supply chains and international limits.

## Sudan

Sudan has long been plagued by internal conflict, fragile governance, and deep ethnic, political, and economic divides. The secession of South Sudan in 2011 ended decades of civil war but did not bring stability to the north. Darfur has witnessed protracted violence since 2003, with mass atrocities committed by the Janjaweed militias and government forces. More recently, in April 2023, Sudan descended into a devastating conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a powerful paramilitary commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). What began as a power struggle between two former allies, who jointly overthrew Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and staged a coup in 2021, escalated into a nationwide war.<sup>43</sup>

The conflict is classified as a non-international armed conflict with internationalised dimensions, as foreign actors are providing political, financial, or military support to both sides. The humanitarian toll is staggering: the UN estimates over 8 million people displaced, widespread food insecurity, and a looming famine.<sup>44</sup> Sudan's strategic location on the Red Sea and its resource wealth make it a key site of great-power and regional competition. Russia, through the Wagner Group, has pursued gold-mining concessions and a naval base in Port Sudan, while Western powers struggle to gain leverage. Gulf States are deeply involved, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE acting as mediators, yet they are accused of backing rival factions. Regionally, the war drives refugees into Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt, destabilising the Horn of Africa and threatening Red Sea security.<sup>45</sup> Globally, Sudan highlights the limits of mediation: despite African Union and other arrangements, ceasefires collapse repeatedly, showing how external interests and entrenched rivalries obstruct peace.

## **Regional Synthesis**

African conflicts highlight the entanglement of weak state capacity, resource struggles, and external interventions. Mali shows jihadist insurgency spreading across the Sahel, the DRC illustrates resource-driven violence sustained by regional rivalries, and Sudan demonstrates rapid state collapse into warlord competition.

- **Thematically:** state fragility, resource exploitation, and militia proliferation dominate.
- **Spatially:** Africa reveals conflict arcs stretching across porous borders (Sahel, Great Lakes, Horn of Africa), showing how localised violence metastasises into continental crises.

## **Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)**

### **Haiti**

Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has been plagued by chronic political instability, weak governance, and cycles of violence. The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021 plunged the country into a more profound crisis, leaving a power vacuum that competing factions have struggled to fill.<sup>46</sup> With no elected president or functioning parliament, Haiti is governed by interim leaders lacking legitimacy. This institutional collapse has allowed intense expansion of armed gangs, controlling large portions of Port-au-Prince and key transport routes, effectively fragmenting state authority.<sup>47</sup>

The situation has evolved into a complex non-international armed conflict with elements of state collapse and transnational crime. Armed groups, numbering in the hundreds, fight each other, and civilians face kidnappings, massacres, sexual violence, and forced displacement, with the UN estimating more than 500,000 displaced children<sup>48</sup> and millions in need of humanitarian aid.

The United States and Canada remain key external actors, supporting security efforts and imposing sanctions on gang leaders and corrupt elites. The UN Security Council has approved a Kenya-led Multinational Security Support Mission to assist Haitian police in stabilising the country, but it has faced logistical and political challenges.<sup>49</sup> Haiti exemplifies the challenges of fragile statehood, where governance breakdowns, poverty, disaster vulnerability, and organised crime intersect. Despite international promises, lasting peace depends on rebuilding institutions, limiting gangs, and fighting corruption. Haiti remains a humanitarian crisis and a test of international commitment beyond traditional war zones.

## Mexico

Mexico faces one of the world's deadliest non-international armed conflicts, driven primarily by the state's decades-long "war on drugs."<sup>50</sup> Since 2006, successive governments have deployed the military to combat powerful drug cartels, producing a cycle of violence that has claimed more than 35000 lives in just a period of four years.<sup>51</sup> Unlike conventional wars, Mexico's violence is characterised by criminal organisations competing for control of lucrative drug trafficking routes, extortion rackets, and local political influence.

The Mexican state retains formal sovereignty, but its monopoly on violence is heavily contested. Drug Cartels operate as quasi-political actors in certain regions, exercising coercive control and even providing limited governance. This blurred line between criminality and insurgency complicates the legal classification of the conflict but has increasingly drawn recognition as a low-intensity armed conflict. Mexico's conflict involves cartel violence, human rights abuses, and displacement, with over thirty thousand people dead each year since 2018, and journalists are often targeted.<sup>52</sup> Globally, organised crime, weak rule of law, and international markets blur war and crime, highlighting the need for hybrid strategies combining law enforcement and development.

## Regional Synthesis

Latin American and Caribbean countries demonstrate how criminal violence and governance collapse increasingly resemble armed conflict. Haiti epitomises near-total state failure, while Mexico reveals how cartels contest state sovereignty and weaponise transnational flows of drugs and arms.

- **Thematically:** the erosion of state monopoly of force and entanglement of crime and war.
- **Spatially:** illustrates urbanised, transnational violence corridors (Haiti–Caribbean, Mexico–U.S.), showing how insecurity radiates along migration and trafficking routes.

## **Asia-Pacific & Emerging Frontiers**

### **Myanmar**

Myanmar is facing one of the world's most complex and protracted armed conflicts, marked by overlapping struggles between the military junta, ethnic armed organisations, and newly formed resistance groups. The crisis deepened dramatically after the February 2021 military coup, which overthrew the elected civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi.<sup>53</sup> The coup reignited long-standing ethnic grievances while sparking new nationwide resistance movements, plunging the country into a full-scale civil war. At the core of the conflict is the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military), which seeks to maintain centralised control through brutal counterinsurgency campaigns. Opposing them are dozens of ethnic armed organisations, some of which have fought for autonomy since independence in 1948. Since 2021, the formation of People's Defence Forces (PDFs) under the shadow government, the National Unity Government (NUG), has expanded the conflict from ethnic borderlands into the country's heartland. This convergence has fractured Myanmar into zones of contested authority, with the junta losing significant territorial control to resistance forces in recent years.<sup>54</sup>

The humanitarian toll has been catastrophic. More than 2.5 million people are displaced,<sup>55</sup> and over 20,000 civilians have been killed since the coup. Human rights abuses such as massacres, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, and the recruitment of child soldiers are widespread. Myanmar has become a focal point of regional and international rivalry. China and Russia support the junta with military aid and diplomatic backing, while Western countries impose sanctions and provide limited assistance to the opposition. ASEAN has proved to be of limited influence, as refugees pour into neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Thailand, and India, putting pressure on them. Globally, Myanmar represents a modern conflict scenario, where authoritarian regimes act with impunity amid weak international responses. The paralysis of the UN Security Council underscores the need to empower local civil society, expand humanitarian access, and challenge military rule.

### **South China Sea**

The South China Sea (SCS) is one of the most significant contemporary flashpoints of conflict, involving overlapping territorial and maritime claims among China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. At stake are not only sovereignty and national pride but also strategic sea lanes, rich fisheries, and vast hydrocarbon reserves. Approximately one-third of global shipping passes through the SCS, making regional stability central to global economic security.<sup>56</sup>

China's claim to most of the sea, demarcated by the "nine-dash line," has been the central driver of tensions.<sup>57</sup> Despite the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines, which invalidated China's claims, Beijing has rejected the verdict.<sup>58</sup> China has consolidated its presence by building artificial islands and deploying coast guard fleets to assert control, leading to frequent confrontations with Vietnam and the Philippines.

The South China Sea dispute has escalated, drawing in the United States, Japan, Australia, and European states, who have conducted naval operations to challenge China's claims, intensifying the risks of confrontation. Beyond geopolitics, militarisation has disrupted fishing livelihoods and devastated fragile ecosystems. ASEAN's stalled negotiations expose the bloc's internal divisions and China's leverage, while the UN Security Council remains paralysed by great-power alignments. The South China Sea dispute exemplifies a hybrid conflict, combining elements of territorial rivalry, resource competition, environmental degradation, and great power politics. It demonstrates how maritime disputes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are reshaping the dynamics of international security.

## Arctic

The Arctic is emerging as a new arena of geopolitical contestation, shaped by the effects of climate change, resource competition, and great power rivalry. Melting sea ice is opening previously inaccessible shipping routes, such as the Northern Sea Route (NSR), and exposing vast reserves of hydrocarbons, rare earth elements, and fisheries,<sup>59</sup> transforming the region into a strategic space central to global security and economic interests. The Arctic Council, established in 1996, serves as the primary forum for cooperation among the eight Arctic states (Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States) and Indigenous peoples' organisations. While it promotes environmental protection and sustainable development, it excludes military security issues, limiting its effectiveness in managing rising tensions.<sup>60</sup>

The Arctic has become a new battleground for great-power competition. Russia, with the most extensive Arctic coastline, has upgraded its military bases, expanded its icebreaker fleet, and strengthened the Northern Fleet to control the Northern Sea Route and access Arctic resources. NATO countries and the U.S. view this militarisation as a concern, while China, which calls itself a "near-Arctic state," seeks to exert influence through research, investments, and its Polar Silk Road initiative.<sup>61</sup> Climate change accelerates these developments by opening new sea routes and exposing resources, but it also disrupts indigenous livelihoods, threatens food security, and damages delicate ecosystems.

Although the Arctic has not yet escalated into open conflict, it reflects a classic "emerging regional security complex",<sup>62</sup> where climate change, resource geopolitics, and military buildup intersect.

The region's future stability depends on whether cooperative frameworks, such as the Arctic Council and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), can withstand the pressures of great power competition.

## Regional Synthesis

These cases highlight fragmented insurgency (Myanmar), maritime militarisation (SCS), and climate-driven competition (Arctic). They capture the way conflicts now extend into new geographies shaped by global warming and global trade.

- **Thematically:** ethnic insurgencies, maritime rivalries, and environmental stress.
- **Spatially:** these regions illustrate emerging frontiers of conflict, where climate change and resource geopolitics create new security complexes.

## Regional Analytical Themes

An examination of conflict case studies reveals unique historical and political trajectories and recurring patterns of instability.

**Table 1:** Regional Analytical Themes: Key drivers of Conflict across Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, Latin America & Caribbean, Asia-Pacific, and the Arctic

Region	Cases	Main Drivers
Africa	Mali, DRC, Sudan	Weak governance, porous borders, resource exploitation, and external meddling
South Asia	India–Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka	State rivalries, territorial disputes, extremism, and post-war fragility
Middle East	Gaza, Yemen	Occupation, proxy wars, regime survival, humanitarian crises
Latin America & Caribbean	Haiti, Mexico	Governance collapse, gangs, cartels, organised crime
Asia-Pacific	Myanmar, South China Sea	Authoritarianism, ethnic insurgency, sovereignty/resource disputes, great-power rivalry
Arctic	Arctic region	Climate change, resources, US–Russia–China rivalry, contested governance

## Cross-Cutting Global Themes

Across these regions, recurring patterns connect otherwise distinct conflicts. Governance fragility is near-universal, whether in Mali, Sudan, Haiti, or Myanmar. Identity and ideology harden divides in South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of the Asia Pacific, turning disputes into existential struggles.

Resource competition, minerals in Africa, oil and water in the Middle East, maritime resources in the South China Sea, and hydrocarbons in the Arctic, emerge as a central structural driver. This factor reflects the often-discussed “greed and grievance” idea in conflict studies, in which Collier and Hoeffler argue that natural resources can prolong violence. At the same time, Keen underscores how war economies and resource exploitation entrench protracted conflict.<sup>63</sup> Great-power rivalries overlay many conflicts, amplifying local crises into global flashpoints, from Ukraine to the South China Sea and the Arctic. Criminal economies, including gangs and cartels, sustain violence in Africa, Latin America, and fragile states elsewhere. Finally, humanitarian crises have become defining markers, with civilians in Gaza, Yemen, the DRC, and Haiti disproportionately bearing the costs of violence.

Taken together, these cross-cutting themes show that contemporary conflicts cannot be understood in isolation. They are sustained by the intersection of fragile governance, identity cleavages, resource competition, and geopolitical rivalry, forces that increasingly converge across regions to produce complex, multi-layered crises.

**Table 2:** Key Recurring Themes across Global Conflicts

Theme	Examples
<b>Fragile Governance</b>	Mali, Sudan, Haiti, Myanmar
<b>Identity &amp; Ideology</b>	South Asia, the Middle East, Southeast Asia
<b>Resource Competition</b>	Minerals (Africa), Oil/Water (Middle East), Maritime (South China Sea), Hydrocarbons (Arctic)
<b>Great-Power Rivalries</b>	Ukraine, South China Sea, Arctic
<b>Criminal Economies</b>	Gangs/Militias (Africa, Haiti), Cartels (Latin America)
<b>Humanitarian Crises</b>	Gaza, Yemen, DRC, Haiti

## Deriving a Dual Lens: Thematic and Spatial Dimensions & the Global Conflict Arc

The previous case studies and cross-regional analysis indicate that modern conflict cannot be understood through either isolated causes or local settings alone: two connected elements, thematic escalation and spatial spread, together influence the course of global conflict.

### Thematic Conflict Arc

The thematic conflict arc illustrates how local issues evolve into widespread risks. Four stages can be identified:

- **Identity-Based Sparks:** Ethnic, sectarian, or ideological divisions frequently cause social unrest and weak government legitimacy.

- **Fragility and Resource Contexts:** In fragile or delegitimised states, identity grievances often interact with institutional weakness, worsened by competition over natural resources, leading to increased violence.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** External actors intervene to pursue strategic interests, turning local struggles into proxy conflicts and increasing their intensity.
- **Hybridisation with Global Threats:** Conflict dynamics are now overlapping more with transnational issues such as terrorism, forced migration, climate change, and cyber warfare, blurring the boundary between traditional and non-traditional security risks.

This thematic arc highlights the *logic of escalation*: Conflicts shift from micro-level identity struggles to macro-level hybrid crises threatening the regional and global stability.

### Spatial Conflict Arc

The spatial conflict arc explains how instability spreads across borders and global systems. Three patterns are visible:

- **Conflict Clusters:** Violence rarely remains confined to a single state but spreads into regional clusters via refugee flows, militant networks, and arms trafficking.
- **Strategic Corridors:** Certain geographies act as choke points, such as maritime routes and energy hubs, where rivalries converge and augment local disputes.
- **Emerging Frontiers:** New domains of contestation are opening, from the Arctic's melting frontiers to cyber and outer space, where competition over resources, information, and technology is redefining the geographical landscape of contemporary conflicts.

This spatial arc emphasises the *logic of diffusion*: Insecurity radiates outward through corridors and frontiers, reshaping regional and global order.

### Combined Thematic–Spatial Synthesis

Together, the thematic and spatial arcs show that modern conflict is both escalating and spreading. Thematically, conflicts shift from identity-based issues to fragile governance crises, resource struggles, and hybrid threats. Spatially, conflicts extend across clusters, corridors, and borders, connecting local disputes to global systems. In short:

- Thematic arc = *why* conflicts escalate.
- Spatial arc = *where* instability spreads.

This dual lens serves as the conceptual bridge to the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF), which turns these insights into a structured model for classifying conflict severity and customising responses.

## From Mapping to Measurement: The Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF)

Building on the thematic and spatial arcs outlined above, this study introduces the Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF). The CSMF converts insights from global case studies into a structured tool for systematically assessing conflict trajectories. By linking thematic drivers to spatial patterns, the framework offers both a diagnostic and a predictive perspective on the severity and progression of contemporary conflicts.

### Two Analytical Layers of CSMF

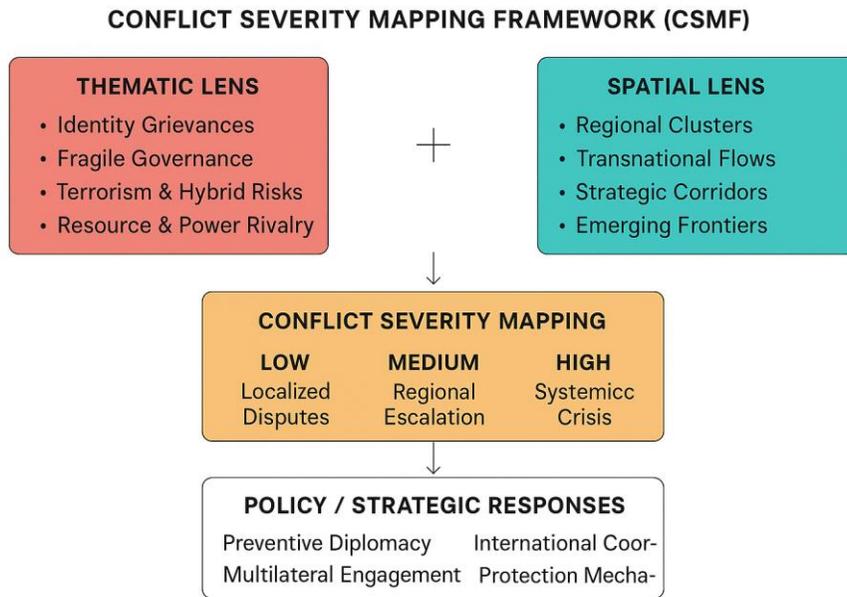
- **Thematic Drivers:** Terrorism and violent extremism, non-state armed groups, great-power competition, identity-based divisions, and resource scarcity are the key forces shaping modern conflicts.
- **Spatial Dynamics:** How thematic drivers manifest differently across regions depending on governance capacity and geopolitical context. For instance, terrorism may remain localised in some contexts, but when combined with great-power competition or fragile governance, it produces broader systemic instability.

By integrating these two dimensions, CSMF classifies conflicts into **three severity categories: low, medium, and high**, based on the interaction between thematic and spatial drivers:

- **Low Severity:** Drivers are present but contained, mainly due to resilient institutions and strong governance.
- **Example:** The Balkans, where EU mechanisms act as stabilisers despite ethnic and political divides. Similar dynamics exist in parts of the Asia Pacific, where extremist groups are contained by state capacity.
- **Medium Severity:** Conflicts where multiple drivers converge, producing persistent instability and a high risk of escalation if left unresolved.
- **Example:** The Sahel, where terrorism, climate stress, and weak governance intersect.
- **High Severity:** Conflicts marked by the convergence of several drivers, resulting in a massive humanitarian catastrophe and regional spillover. Such conflicts are often highly resistant to resolution and attract international intervention.
- **Examples:** Yemen, where great-power rivalry intersects with sectarian and resource cleavages, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where identity, resources, and governance fragility perpetuate violence.

This categorisation builds on insights from earlier conflict mapping frameworks. It challenges the static, state-focused view of previous models by offering a more flexible approach suited to the complex, transnational nature of modern conflicts.

Figure 1: Conceptual Map



### Policy Recommendations

Building on the CSMF, targeted policy recommendations can be developed for conflicts of varying severities, ranging from low to high.

#### Low-Severity Conflicts: Preventive Stabilisation

Conflicts here involve localised tensions, sporadic violence, or structural grievances that have not escalated to prolonged violence. Early prevention is key in such disputes.

- **Strengthen Governance and Inclusion:** Policies should emphasise inclusive political processes, fair resource allocation, and strong legal institutions to address grievances before they escalate.
- **Preventive Diplomacy:** Regional organisations (e.g., the African Union, ASEAN) should take on a larger role in promoting dialogue between communities and states before disputes escalate.
- **Information Monitoring:** Create local conflict observatories and early warning systems to track indicators of radicalisation or ethnic polarisation.

## Medium-Severity Conflicts: Containment and Resolution

These conflicts are often protracted, involving armed non-state actors, terrorism, and significant involvement from great powers. While violence is entrenched in such cases, the situation is not yet existential for the state.

- **Hybrid Approaches and Targeted Negotiations:** Governments and international mediators should pursue hybrid peace frameworks that combine military containment with political dialogue, recognising that many armed groups cannot be defeated militarily alone, especially those that enjoy the support of the people.
- **Counter-Terrorism with Human Security Lens:** States must avoid heavy-handed approaches that exacerbate grievances; instead, counter-terrorism efforts should integrate human rights protections and local and community-based tactics.
- **Multilateral Engagement:** The UN, regional bodies, and middle powers should coordinate strategies to prevent unilateral great-power interventions that may exacerbate proxy dimensions of the conflict.

## High-Severity Conflicts: Protection and Transformation

These conflicts, such as in Gaza or Ukraine, exhibit great power rivalry, mass atrocities, and systemic humanitarian collapse, demanding urgent international mobilisation.

- **Civilian Protection Mechanisms:** Strengthen the United Nations, International Humanitarian Law, and Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine's operationalisation, with robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms that increase transparency. Also, penalising inaction or excessive use of veto in the UN.
- **International Consensus-Building:** While great power rivalry makes consensus difficult, middle powers (e.g., Türkiye, Brazil, South Africa) can act as bridging actors to negotiate temporary ceasefires or humanitarian pauses.
- **Post-Conflict Recovery Planning:** International institutions should prepare long-term reconstruction frameworks that integrate governance reforms, transitional justice, and civil society empowerment, ensuring that peace agreements are not merely elite bargains.

Through this classification and policy mapping, the CSMF bridges case study findings and theoretical insights, providing a practical tool for scholars and policymakers to support early-warning systems, prioritise humanitarian response, and guide peacebuilding strategies. It can not only anticipate conflict trajectories but also adapt peace operations to the evolving nature of conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional paradigms of interstate war can no longer explain the complexity of contemporary conflict. As this study has demonstrated, the current landscape of violence emerges from the intersection of multiple thematic drivers ranging from identity grievances, fragile governance, terrorism, great-power rivalry, and resource stress and spatial dynamics that link local disputes to regional clusters, transnational flows, and emerging frontiers. Together, these forces form a global conflict arc in which instability reverberates throughout the international system.

The Conflict Severity Mapping Framework (CSMF) developed in this study translates these insights into an actionable model by classifying conflicts into low, medium, and high severity levels. It provides a structured means of anticipating escalation trajectories and aligning them with context-sensitive policy responses. The framework underscores that effective conflict management depends on severity-specific strategies: preventive diplomacy and inclusive governance for low-level disputes, coordinated multilateral engagement for medium-severity conflicts, and robust international protection and stabilisation mechanisms for high-severity crises.

The key contribution of this study lies in bridging descriptive mapping, analytical categorisation, and prescriptive strategy within a unified framework. Looking ahead, future research can refine and expand the framework by integrating it with AI-based conflict prediction tools and peacebuilding metrics. Applying the CSMF across different regions and conflict types would also help assess its predictive accuracy and policy relevance. Through such interdisciplinary extensions, the framework can continue to evolve as both a scholarly and operational instrument for understanding and addressing the volatility of 21st-century security.

To sum up, this study contributes to contemporary security analysis by demonstrating that modern conflict must be understood thematically, mapped spatially, and addressed strategically. The CSMF offers one step in that direction, linking knowledge to action in pursuit of a more resilient global peace architecture.

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