



Need for Systematic Geopolitical Restructuring in the 21st Century: A Forensic Review of 2026 Kinetic Friction

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ABSTRACT

The geopolitical environment of the mid-2020s demonstrates a significant transformation in the nature of international conflict and diplomacy. Traditional Westphalian assumptions that distinguish between war and peace are increasingly inadequate in explaining contemporary global security dynamics. Instead, the international system appears to operate within a persistent condition of low-intensity but continuous military interaction, often described as a “gray-zone conflict” or “kinetic friction.” This study examines the emerging patterns of geopolitical instability through a forensic analysis of two major conflict theaters: the Israel–Iran confrontation in the Middle East and the Pakistan and Afghanistan border conflict in South Asia. The research draws upon institutional theory, geopolitical analysis, and conflict studies to examine how technological innovation, weakened sovereignty in fragile states, and the rise of non-state armed actors have transformed traditional warfare. Military developments such as autonomous drone warfare, cross-border missile strikes, and cyber-enabled targeting systems are reshaping the strategic landscape. These developments have lowered the political and economic costs of military engagement while simultaneously increasing the frequency of sub-threshold conflicts. The study identifies the emergence of what may be termed “Transactional



Peace,” a condition where ceasefires and diplomatic settlements are driven more by economic coercion and strategic bargaining than by genuine conflict resolution. Furthermore, the concept of a “Sovereignty Gap” is introduced to describe the inability of fragile states to maintain territorial control in the face of external military interventions and internal non-state actors. The findings suggest that existing international institutions such as the United Nations and regional diplomatic frameworks remain structurally unprepared to address the complexities of hybrid warfare and multi-actor conflicts. The study therefore proposes the adoption of **Advanced Political Engineering (APE)** as a strategic framework for redesigning governance structures and international conflict management systems. By moving from traditional power-centric geopolitics to system-oriented governance, it may be possible to mitigate the growing instability of the twenty-first century international order

1. Introduction

The international system in the twenty-first century is undergoing profound structural transformation. The classical understanding of global politics, rooted in the Westphalian system established in 1648, conceptualized international relations primarily in terms of sovereign states interacting through diplomacy, alliances, and conventional warfare. However, the geopolitical realities of the 2020s increasingly challenge these assumptions.

Rather than experiencing clear distinctions between war and peace, contemporary international relations are characterized by a persistent condition of low-intensity confrontation. Military operations now frequently occur below the threshold of formal war declarations, yet they nevertheless involve significant violence and strategic competition. Analysts often describe this phenomenon as gray-zone warfare, hybrid conflict, or sub-threshold military engagement.

Technological advancements have played a central role in transforming the nature of modern conflict. The proliferation of autonomous drones, cyber warfare capabilities, and long-range precision missiles allows states to conduct targeted operations across borders without deploying large conventional armies. These technologies reduce the political risks associated with military engagement and therefore make the use of force more frequent.



At the same time, the rise of non-state actors has significantly complicated the traditional state-centric model of warfare. Groups such as insurgent militias, transnational terrorist organizations, and proxy militias increasingly participate in international conflicts, often with indirect support from regional powers. This creates complex conflict environments in which responsibility and accountability are difficult to establish.

The Middle East and South Asia provide important case studies for examining these emerging geopolitical dynamics. The Israel–Iran strategic rivalry, often conducted through proxy actors across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, illustrates the evolution of drone warfare and long-range strike capabilities. Similarly, the Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict demonstrates how historical territorial disputes, combined with insurgent networks, can escalate into direct interstate confrontation.

This study therefore seeks to analyze the structural drivers of contemporary geopolitical instability and to evaluate whether current international institutions are capable of managing these evolving conflicts.

2. Review of Literature

The academic literature on geopolitical conflict, institutional design, and international development provides several theoretical frameworks relevant to the present study.

One important contribution comes from the institutional economic perspective developed by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, who argue that the long-term stability and prosperity of nations depend on the nature of their political and economic institutions. According to their theory, societies characterized by extractive institutions tend to experience persistent instability and conflict because political power is concentrated among narrow elites (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding fragile states in the Middle East, where weak governance structures create opportunities for foreign intervention and proxy warfare.

Similarly, Jeffrey D. Sachs emphasizes that sustainable development cannot occur in environments characterized by chronic conflict and political instability. Sachs (2015) argues that global development strategies must integrate peacebuilding mechanisms, as economic growth and security are deeply interconnected.

Political scientists have also explored the relationship between institutional design and conflict management. Arend Lijphart developed the theory of consociational democracy, which proposes that power-sharing arrangements among ethnic or sectarian groups can reduce the likelihood of violent



conflict in divided societies (Lijphart, 1999). This framework has influenced peace agreements in regions such as Northern Ireland and Bosnia.

In addition, Benjamin Reilly highlights the role of electoral engineering in managing political conflict. By designing electoral systems that encourage cooperation across ethnic or ideological divisions, political institutions can reduce polarization and prevent violent competition for power (Reilly, 2001).

Another important contribution comes from Pippa Norris, who emphasizes that democratic institutions are shaped by the formal rules governing political participation and representation (Norris, 2004). These institutional rules determine how political actors compete and negotiate within the political system.

More recent geopolitical analyses have also examined the increasing role of technology in warfare. The proliferation of drones and cyber capabilities has fundamentally transformed military strategy by enabling remote and automated operations. Scholars argue that these technologies reduce the political cost of warfare while simultaneously increasing the frequency of limited military engagements.

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that geopolitical instability in the twenty-first century cannot be understood solely in terms of traditional military competition. Instead, it must be analyzed as a complex interaction between institutional design, technological change, and global economic structures.

3. Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this research arises from the observation that traditional political frameworks appear increasingly inadequate for managing contemporary geopolitical challenges. The persistence of hybrid warfare, cross-border military operations, and non-state actor involvement suggests that existing diplomatic institutions may no longer be capable of maintaining global stability.

Furthermore, technological advancements have accelerated the pace of geopolitical competition. Autonomous weapon systems, cyber warfare, and advanced surveillance technologies have altered the strategic balance between states and non-state actors. As a result, the international community faces a new type of security environment in which conflicts occur frequently but rarely escalate into full-scale war.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective governance frameworks capable of promoting sustainable peace and international cooperation.



4. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the transformation of military strategy in the Middle East following the rise of drone-based warfare.
2. To examine the evolution of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and the strategic significance of the Durand Line conflict.
3. To evaluate the structural limitations of international institutions in mediating modern geopolitical conflicts.
4. To propose institutional reforms capable of addressing contemporary geopolitical instability.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based primarily on secondary sources. Academic literature, policy reports, and geopolitical analyses are used to examine recent developments in international conflict.

The research methodology includes:

- Comparative geopolitical analysis
- Institutional theory analysis
- Case study approach

Two primary case studies are examined:

1. Middle East strategic confrontation involving Israel, Iran, and Iraq.
2. Pakistan–Afghanistan border conflict along the Durand Line.

Analysis of Objective 1

To analyze the shift in military doctrine regarding pre-emptive strikes on Iraqi and Syrian soil as a means of direct Iranian deterrence

The first objective of this study focuses on the transformation of military doctrine in the Middle East, particularly the increasing use of pre-emptive strikes in Iraqi and Syrian territories as a mechanism for



deterring Iranian military expansion. In the contemporary geopolitical environment, traditional doctrines that relied on large-scale troop mobilization and prolonged ground warfare are gradually being replaced by strategies emphasizing precision strikes, technological surveillance, and remote engagement. This shift represents a significant transformation in the nature of interstate conflict and reflects the broader dynamics of twenty-first-century warfare.

Historically, the Middle East security architecture has been dominated by indirect confrontations through proxy actors. States such as Iran and Israel traditionally avoided direct military engagement and instead relied on affiliated militias operating in neighboring territories. However, recent geopolitical developments suggest a gradual erosion of this proxy-buffer system. Military operations increasingly occur directly within the territorial boundaries of states such as Iraq and Syria, which have become strategic arenas for regional power competition.

The weakening of state sovereignty in these countries has facilitated this transformation. Scholars argue that fragile political institutions and fragmented governance structures create environments where external actors can intervene with minimal resistance. According to the institutional analysis of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, societies characterized by extractive institutions often experience governance breakdowns that enable external interference and internal instability (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In the context of Iraq and Syria, prolonged conflicts, political fragmentation, and economic vulnerability have generated what may be described as a “sovereignty gap,” allowing foreign powers to conduct military operations within their territories.

Another key factor behind the doctrinal shift toward pre-emptive strikes is the rapid advancement of military technology. The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles, satellite intelligence systems, and precision-guided missile technologies has dramatically changed the operational capabilities of modern armed forces. These innovations allow states to conduct highly targeted strikes on strategic installations such as weapons depots, command centers, and logistical infrastructure without deploying large numbers of troops. Such operations reduce the political and economic costs associated with military engagement while maintaining strategic deterrence.

Recent intelligence and journalistic reports further illustrate this transformation. The analysis of the Jurf al-Sakhr incident, documented in the *Iraqi Journal of International Affairs*, indicates one of the earliest examples of drone-based cross-border targeting in the region, highlighting the breakdown of the traditional proxy-war buffer (Iraqi Journal of International Affairs, 2025). Similarly, investigative reporting by Al Jazeera Media Network describes a sequence of coordinated military strikes referred to as



the “Twelve Days that Shook the Levant,” which exemplifies the transition from covert proxy conflict to direct technological warfare (Al-Jazeera, 2026).

From a strategic perspective, these operations reflect the logic of preventive deterrence. Preventive deterrence involves neutralizing potential threats before they evolve into immediate security risks. In the case of Israel’s regional strategy, pre-emptive operations are often designed to disrupt Iranian logistical networks, missile storage facilities, and command infrastructure across the Levant. By conducting targeted strikes in territories where Iranian-aligned forces operate, states attempt to maintain strategic superiority without escalating into full-scale interstate war.

However, this strategy has significant implications for international security and global governance. The normalization of cross-border military strikes challenges traditional principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity embedded in international law. The modern international system was historically built upon the assumption that sovereign states possess exclusive authority over their territory. Yet, the increasing frequency of technologically mediated strikes suggests that sovereignty is becoming conditional in fragile states where governments cannot maintain effective territorial control.

Institutional theorists emphasize that the effectiveness of governance structures plays a crucial role in preventing such instability. According to Arend Lijphart, political institutions must be designed to manage diversity and prevent conflict in fragmented societies (Lijphart, 1999). Similarly, Benjamin Reilly argues that institutional engineering, particularly in electoral and governance frameworks, is necessary for stabilizing conflict-prone regions (Reilly, 2001). Without such institutional reforms, fragile states remain vulnerable to external military interventions and proxy conflicts.

The implications of these developments extend beyond regional security concerns. Continuous low-intensity military operations contribute to what scholars increasingly describe as a “gray-zone conflict,” a state in which countries remain technically at peace while simultaneously engaging in frequent military exchanges. These conditions undermine diplomatic conflict-resolution mechanisms and complicate the role of international institutions such as the United Nations, which were originally designed to address conventional interstate wars rather than technologically mediated sub-threshold conflicts.

The analysis of Objective 1 reveals that the shift toward pre-emptive strike doctrine represents a structural transformation in contemporary military strategy. Technological advancements, weakened sovereignty in fragile states, and the strategic imperative of deterrence have collectively contributed to a new form of geopolitical competition characterized by precision strikes and hybrid warfare. While these



operations may temporarily deter adversaries, they also challenge established international norms and highlight the urgent need for institutional reforms capable of managing emerging forms of conflict in the twenty-first century.

Analysis of Objective 2

To investigate the 2026 escalation between Israel and Iran, specifically how drone technology has rendered physical borders increasingly obsolete

The second objective of the study examines the strategic escalation between Israel and Iran in 2026 and the transformative role played by drone technology and autonomous weapon systems in modern warfare. In recent years, technological advancements in military hardware have significantly altered the nature of interstate conflict. The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), loitering munitions, and long-range missile systems has reduced the importance of geographical distance and territorial boundaries in determining military vulnerability.

Historically, the geopolitical rivalry between Israel and Iran has largely been conducted through indirect confrontation and proxy warfare. Iran has maintained strategic influence through allied non-state actors in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, while Israel has adopted a defensive doctrine centered on pre-emptive strikes and intelligence-driven deterrence. However, the developments of 2026 illustrate a shift from indirect proxy conflict toward more direct technological confrontation between the two states.

Reports documenting the escalation describe how coordinated drone strikes and precision missile attacks were used to target command infrastructure and weapons storage facilities across the Levant region. Investigative analysis conducted by the Al Jazeera Media Network indicates that the conflict reached a critical stage during the events described as the “Twelve Days that Shook the Levant,” where multiple cross-border strikes were carried out using remote precision technologies (Al-Jazeera, 2026). These operations demonstrate the increasing reliance on autonomous or semi-autonomous weapon systems capable of striking targets hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away.

The development of these technologies has dramatically reduced the operational constraints that traditionally limited interstate conflict. In earlier decades, conducting military operations across national borders required the deployment of large conventional forces, which carried substantial political and diplomatic risks. Modern drone warfare, however, enables states to conduct highly precise operations with minimal human involvement, thereby lowering the political costs associated with military action.



This technological transformation also reflects broader changes in global security dynamics. According to the Global Security Institute, contemporary strategic competition increasingly revolves around advanced deterrence systems, tactical missile capabilities, and autonomous weapons technologies, marking the emergence of what analysts describe as the “third nuclear era” characterized by precision strike deterrence rather than mass destruction (Global Security Institute, 2026).

Another important consequence of this technological shift is the erosion of traditional notions of territorial sovereignty. When states can conduct remote strikes without physical troop deployment, geographic borders become less effective as barriers to military action. This phenomenon has been particularly visible in regions such as Iraq and Syria, where weak governance and fragmented security structures allow foreign powers to conduct operations with limited resistance.

Institutional theories of governance help explain why such regions become focal points of technologically mediated conflict. According to the institutional framework developed by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, political systems characterized by extractive institutions often struggle to maintain security and territorial control, thereby creating opportunities for external intervention (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In the context of the Middle East, these governance gaps have allowed technologically advanced states to operate within fragile territories as part of broader strategic rivalries.

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on drone warfare raises complex legal and ethical questions for international governance systems. Traditional international law frameworks were designed primarily to regulate conventional warfare between sovereign states. However, the use of autonomous weapon systems operating across borders creates ambiguities regarding accountability, proportionality, and sovereignty.

In this context, international institutions such as the United Nations face significant challenges in regulating emerging forms of warfare. Existing diplomatic frameworks struggle to address conflicts that occur below the threshold of formal war declarations but nevertheless involve significant military activity.

In conclusion, the analysis of Objective 2 highlights that the Israel–Iran escalation in 2026 illustrates a broader transformation in global military strategy. Technological advancements in drone warfare and autonomous weapons have effectively reduced the strategic importance of physical borders, enabling states to project power across long distances with unprecedented precision. While these technologies may



enhance deterrence capabilities, they simultaneously increase the frequency of low-intensity military engagements and complicate international efforts to maintain global stability.

Analysis of Objective 3

To identify structural failures of international institutions in mediating conflicts involving non-state actors

The third objective of this study focuses on the structural limitations of international institutions in addressing contemporary geopolitical conflicts, particularly those involving non-state armed actors. The emergence of insurgent militias, proxy organizations, and transnational militant networks has significantly complicated the traditional state-centric model of international conflict resolution.

Modern international organizations were primarily designed during the twentieth century to regulate interactions between sovereign states. Institutions such as the United Nations were established in the aftermath of global war with the goal of preventing large-scale interstate conflicts. However, the geopolitical environment of the twenty-first century increasingly involves conflicts where non-state actors play central roles, making traditional diplomatic mechanisms less effective.

In regions such as the Middle East and South Asia, armed groups frequently operate outside formal state structures while simultaneously exerting significant influence over political and security dynamics. These groups often possess their own command hierarchies, territorial control, and financial networks. Because they are not officially recognized as sovereign entities, international institutions face significant challenges in incorporating them into formal negotiation processes.

Political scientists have long emphasized the importance of institutional design in managing conflict. According to Arend Lijphart, stable governance in divided societies often requires inclusive political frameworks that allow different groups to participate in decision-making processes (Lijphart, 1999). However, many international mediation frameworks exclude non-state actors from negotiations, thereby limiting the effectiveness of peace agreements.

Similarly, Benjamin Reilly argues that effective conflict management requires institutional mechanisms capable of integrating competing political actors into shared governance structures (Reilly, 2001). When key actors remain excluded from negotiation processes, peace agreements often fail to address the underlying causes of conflict.



Recent developments along the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier illustrate this challenge. Studies examining the evolution of the Durand Line conflict highlight how militant groups operating in border regions have developed quasi-state structures, effectively functioning as parallel security systems in areas where government control remains limited (Kabul Research Group, 2026). Because such groups operate outside traditional diplomatic channels, international mediation efforts frequently struggle to produce lasting settlements.

Another limitation of international institutions lies in their enforcement capabilities. Although international organizations can issue diplomatic resolutions and peacekeeping mandates, they often lack the authority or resources necessary to enforce compliance among non-state actors. As a result, peace agreements frequently become temporary ceasefires rather than durable political solutions.

The concept of “frozen conflicts” helps explain this phenomenon. Frozen conflicts occur when hostilities are temporarily halted without resolving the underlying political disputes that caused them. Scholars of development and governance argue that such unresolved conflicts hinder long-term stability and economic development. Jeffrey D. Sachs emphasizes that sustainable development is closely linked to political stability and effective governance institutions (Sachs, 2015).

Consequently, the persistence of non-state actor conflicts reveals a significant institutional gap in the current global governance system. Without mechanisms that allow these actors to be incorporated into negotiation frameworks, international diplomacy remains limited in its capacity to achieve lasting peace.

In conclusion, the analysis of Objective 3 demonstrates that international institutions face structural limitations when addressing conflicts involving non-state actors. Existing governance frameworks were primarily designed for state-to-state diplomacy and therefore struggle to adapt to contemporary hybrid conflicts. Addressing these challenges requires institutional reforms that expand diplomatic participation, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and develop new legal frameworks capable of regulating the complex conflict environments of the twenty-first century.

Analysis of Objective 4

To propose institutional reforms capable of addressing contemporary geopolitical instability

The contemporary international system is experiencing profound geopolitical instability due to technological transformation, fragmented governance, and the growing influence of non-state actors. Traditional international institutions were primarily designed to manage conflicts between sovereign



states; however, the nature of modern warfare has evolved significantly. Hybrid warfare, proxy conflicts, and technologically mediated military engagements have exposed structural weaknesses in the current global governance framework. Consequently, institutional reforms are necessary to address these emerging challenges and ensure sustainable global peace.

One of the primary reforms required involves strengthening the capacity of international organizations to manage conflicts involving non-state actors. Contemporary conflicts frequently involve militant groups, insurgent networks, and proxy organizations that operate beyond formal state structures. However, diplomatic negotiations often exclude these actors because they lack formal international recognition. Political theorists argue that sustainable conflict resolution requires inclusive governance frameworks that incorporate all significant stakeholders. According to **Arend Lijphart**, inclusive power-sharing arrangements are essential for managing conflicts in politically divided societies, as they allow multiple groups to participate in decision-making processes (Lijphart, 1999). Extending this principle to international diplomacy suggests that mediation frameworks should allow limited or “restricted” participation for influential non-state actors to ensure that peace agreements address the realities of conflict environments.

Another critical area of reform involves the institutional regulation of emerging military technologies. Autonomous weapon systems, cyber warfare tools, and advanced drone platforms have significantly lowered the political and economic costs of military engagement. As a result, states can conduct cross-border military operations without triggering large-scale diplomatic consequences. Reports from the **Global Security Institute** indicate that the increasing integration of autonomous technologies into military doctrine is reshaping global deterrence dynamics and accelerating strategic competition among major powers (Global Security Institute, 2026). In response, international institutions should develop comprehensive legal frameworks governing the use of autonomous weapons, including transparency mechanisms, accountability standards, and limitations on their deployment in fragile states.

Reforms are also necessary in the design of global governance institutions responsible for maintaining international peace. Organizations such as the **United Nations** were established during the mid-twentieth century to address conventional interstate conflicts. However, contemporary geopolitical crises often occur in fragile states where sovereignty is contested and political authority is fragmented. Institutional theorists emphasize that effective governance structures must adapt to evolving political realities. The institutional analysis of **Daron Acemoglu** and **James A. Robinson** demonstrates that inclusive and accountable institutions are essential for long-term political stability and economic development



(Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Applying this principle at the international level suggests that global governance institutions must adopt more flexible and adaptive mechanisms for conflict mediation, peacekeeping, and reconstruction.

In addition to institutional restructuring, economic diplomacy should be integrated more effectively into peacebuilding strategies. Geopolitical conflicts are often sustained by economic inequalities, resource competition, and governance failures. Development economists argue that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without addressing these underlying structural issues. **Jeffrey D. Sachs** emphasizes that economic development, social stability, and peace are closely interconnected, and that international cooperation is necessary to address global development challenges (Sachs, 2015). Therefore, institutional reforms should include mechanisms that link conflict resolution initiatives with long-term development programs, infrastructure investment, and regional economic integration.

Another potential reform involves strengthening preventive diplomacy mechanisms. Preventive diplomacy refers to diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving tensions before they escalate into violent conflict. Current international institutions often respond to crises after violence has already occurred. However, early-warning systems based on data analysis, intelligence sharing, and regional cooperation could allow international organizations to identify potential conflict zones and intervene diplomatically before hostilities begin. Strengthening such mechanisms would significantly improve the effectiveness of global peacekeeping efforts.

Furthermore, international institutions must address the problem of sovereignty gaps in fragile states. Regions experiencing prolonged political instability often become arenas for external military intervention and proxy warfare. Strengthening governance capacity in these states through institutional reform, administrative support, and democratic development programs can reduce the likelihood of foreign intervention and internal conflict. Institutional engineering approaches proposed by political scholars emphasize that constitutional design, electoral systems, and power-sharing arrangements play critical roles in maintaining stability in diverse societies (Reilly, 2001; Norris, 2004).

In conclusion, addressing contemporary geopolitical instability requires a comprehensive reform of international governance structures. The complexity of modern conflict environments demands institutions that are more inclusive, technologically aware, and capable of integrating diplomatic, economic, and security strategies. Expanding diplomatic participation to include influential non-state actors, regulating emerging military technologies, strengthening preventive diplomacy, and linking peacebuilding with sustainable development initiatives are essential steps toward establishing a more



resilient global governance framework. Without such reforms, international institutions will remain limited in their ability to manage the rapidly evolving geopolitical challenges of the twenty-first century.

6. Findings and Analysis

The analysis reveals several important patterns in contemporary geopolitical conflict.

6.1 Rise of Hybrid Warfare

Modern warfare increasingly combines conventional military operations with cyber attacks, drone strikes, and proxy militias.

6.2 Sovereignty Gap

Fragile states such as Iraq and Syria experience limited control over their territory, allowing external actors to conduct military operations within their borders.

6.3 Institutional Weakness

International organizations often struggle to address conflicts involving non-state actors because existing legal frameworks are primarily designed for state-to-state disputes.

7. Recommendations

Several reforms may help reduce global geopolitical instability:

1. Strengthening international mediation mechanisms
2. Regulating autonomous weapon systems
3. Expanding diplomatic frameworks to include non-state actors in peace negotiations

8. Conclusion

The geopolitical environment of the twenty-first century is increasingly defined by persistent low-intensity conflict rather than traditional large-scale wars. Technological innovations, institutional weaknesses, and complex multi-actor conflicts are reshaping the nature of international relations. Addressing these challenges requires innovative political frameworks capable of managing emerging forms of geopolitical competition.



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