

War, Structural Injustice, and Global Political Economy: Rethinking Armed Conflict through a Social Justice Perspective

To Thanh My

Thu Duc College of Technology

ABSTRACT: This article examines war as a phenomenon shaped not only by interstate rivalry or individual moral responsibility, but also by structural inequality embedded within the global political economy. Drawing on political philosophy, global justice theory, critical social theory, and international political economy, the study argues that contemporary armed conflict is closely connected to institutional asymmetries involving economic dependency, technological competition, geopolitical vulnerability, and unequal distributions of power within the international order. The article critically engages realist theories of international relations and contemporary just war theory while emphasizing the limitations of approaches that interpret conflict primarily through military strategy or individual ethics. Instead, the study develops a structural framework linking political violence to broader systems of institutional organization and global governance. Particular attention is given to energy security, technological infrastructures, global supply chains, and structural forms of insecurity associated with globalization. The article argues that sustainable peace requires not only military regulation and diplomatic negotiation but also institutional reforms addressing structural inequality and geopolitical exclusion. The study contributes to contemporary debates on war and global justice by advancing an interdisciplinary framework connecting political violence to structural conditions within the contemporary global order.

KEYWORDS: war; structural injustice; global political economy; global justice; armed conflict; international ethics; social justice

1. INTRODUCTION

War remains one of the most persistent and destructive phenomena in contemporary political life. Despite the expansion of international law, global governance institutions, diplomatic cooperation, and humanitarian norms, armed conflict continues to shape international relations, economic systems, political stability, and human security across the world. Contemporary geopolitical tensions involving territorial disputes, energy competition, technological rivalry, economic dependency, and strategic resource control demonstrate that warfare remains deeply embedded within the institutional structures of the modern global order.

Traditional explanations of war have generally been dominated by two major theoretical approaches. The first consists of realist and strategic perspectives in international relations, which interpret war primarily as the result of interstate competition within an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). From this viewpoint, states operate under conditions of permanent insecurity and must rely upon military capabilities to protect sovereignty and ensure survival. Armed conflict is therefore understood largely through the logic of strategic competition and balance of power politics.

The second major approach emerges from just war theory and contemporary war ethics. Rather than focusing primarily on state behavior or geopolitical strategy, just war theorists examine the moral legitimacy of warfare and the ethical conditions governing the use of violence (Walzer, 2006; McMahan, 2009). Recent developments within analytic political philosophy have increasingly emphasized individual moral responsibility, civilian protection, proportionality, and the liability of combatants participating in armed conflict.

Although these approaches provide important insights into warfare, they often remain limited in several respects. Realist theories frequently underemphasize the institutional and economic structures that shape geopolitical competition, while ethical approaches centered on individual responsibility may overlook the broader social and structural conditions within which political violence emerges. Both perspectives risk treating war either as a strategic necessity of state behavior or as a series of isolated moral decisions, without sufficiently examining how contemporary systems of global governance and political economy contribute to the persistence of armed conflict.

Recent debates in political philosophy, critical social theory, and global justice studies have increasingly challenged purely state-centered and individualistic explanations of war. Scholars such as Beitz (1979), Pogge (2008), Fraser (2009), and Young (2011) argue that global institutional arrangements significantly influence the distribution of political power, economic opportunity, technological capacity, and structural vulnerability across societies. International trade systems, financial institutions, technological

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infrastructures, debt regimes, and resource governance structures do not simply regulate cooperation among states; they also shape patterns of inequality and geopolitical asymmetry within the international order.

From this perspective, contemporary warfare cannot be understood solely as the consequence of isolated military aggression or strategic rivalry among sovereign states. Armed conflict frequently emerges within broader institutional environments characterized by structural inequality, economic dependency, geopolitical exclusion, and competition over strategic resources. Modern wars are increasingly connected to struggles involving energy security, technological sovereignty, financial influence, digital infrastructures, global supply chains, and transnational systems of power.

Critical approaches to security and political economy have further emphasized that violence often operates not only through direct military confrontation but also through institutional structures that systematically reproduce insecurity, marginalization, and unequal vulnerability (Galtung, 1969; Duffield, 2001; Mbembe, 2003). Contemporary forms of warfare therefore reflect broader tensions embedded within the organization of global political and economic systems.

This article develops a structural account of war grounded in political philosophy, global justice theory, critical social analysis, and international political economy. It argues that war should not be understood merely as the result of individual moral failure, state aggression, or geopolitical rivalry. Rather, armed conflict must also be interpreted as a phenomenon shaped by institutional inequality and structural injustice embedded within the contemporary global order.

The article proceeds in several stages. First, it outlines the methodological framework guiding the analysis. Second, it examines the relationship between war, political authority, and institutional power. Third, it analyzes the political economy of war and the role of structural inequality in shaping geopolitical instability. Fourth, it evaluates contemporary debates concerning individual moral responsibility in war. Fifth, it connects these ethical discussions to broader theories of global justice and institutional inequality. Sixth, it addresses several critiques and limitations of the structural account developed throughout the article. Finally, the article considers the implications of this framework for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and global governance in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, the article argues that understanding contemporary warfare requires moving beyond narrow military or state-centered explanations toward a broader interdisciplinary framework capable of integrating ethics, political economy, institutional analysis, and global justice theory. Armed conflict reflects not only failures of diplomacy or morality, but also deeper tensions embedded within contemporary systems of global governance, structural inequality, and geopolitical power.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative theoretical research design grounded in normative political analysis, critical social theory, and institutional interpretation. Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, quantitative modeling, or case-specific statistical analysis, the article adopts an interdisciplinary and interpretive approach to examine the structural conditions underlying contemporary armed conflict. The primary objective of the study is not to identify a single causal explanation for war, but to develop a broader conceptual framework capable of explaining how institutional inequality and global political economy shape the persistence of geopolitical violence within the modern international order. Such a methodological orientation is especially relevant for interdisciplinary social science research addressing complex forms of geopolitical conflict, institutional inequality, and global structural transformation that exceed the explanatory limits of purely quantitative approaches.

Methodologically, the article combines four interconnected analytical approaches. First, it employs conceptual analysis to clarify several key concepts central to the argument, including war, structural injustice, political authority, global justice, institutional inequality, and moral responsibility. These concepts are frequently used across political philosophy, international relations, ethics, and social theory, yet they often carry different meanings within competing theoretical traditions. Conceptual clarification is therefore necessary in order to establish a coherent analytical framework capable of examining the structural dimensions of contemporary warfare.

Second, the study adopts a normative-interpretive approach to evaluate major theoretical explanations of armed conflict. In this respect, the article critically engages contemporary debates in just war theory, international political theory, global justice theory, and critical political economy. The works of Walzer (2006), McMahan (2009), Rodin (2002), Rawls (1999), Pogge (2008), Young (2011), and Beitz (1979) are examined not simply as isolated philosophical positions, but as broader interpretive frameworks that shape contemporary understandings of violence, political legitimacy, institutional responsibility, and international order.

Third, the article utilizes a critical institutional perspective informed by contemporary social theory and political economy. This approach examines how global political and economic structures influence geopolitical instability, institutional vulnerability, and unequal distributions of power within the international system. The analysis is particularly informed by scholarship emphasizing globalization, structural violence, institutional asymmetry, and transnational governance (Sassen, 2014). Rather than treating war solely as the outcome of isolated strategic decisions made by sovereign states, the article interprets armed conflict as a phenomenon shaped by broader institutional environments embedded within the global political economy.

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Fourth, the study adopts an interdisciplinary analytical orientation. Contemporary warfare increasingly involves interconnected forms of military, technological, economic, informational, and institutional power. As a result, no single disciplinary framework is sufficient for explaining the complexity of modern armed conflict. The article therefore integrates insights from political philosophy, ethics, international relations, global justice theory, and critical social analysis in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of war as a structural phenomenon.

Importantly, this article does not claim that structural inequality functions as a deterministic or universal cause of war. Armed conflict remains a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical experiences, ideological tensions, political leadership, cultural dynamics, regional conditions, and strategic calculations. The structural approach developed here instead argues that institutional inequalities and asymmetrical distributions of power create conditions that intensify geopolitical competition, political instability, and social vulnerability within the global order.

This methodological orientation also reflects an important distinction between direct causation and structural conditioning. The article does not argue that institutional inequality automatically produces violence. Rather, structural conditions shape the environments within which political actors operate, influencing the range of available choices, strategic pressures, and geopolitical tensions that may contribute to conflict escalation. Structural injustice therefore functions not as a singular causal mechanism, but as part of a broader institutional context shaping contemporary political violence.

The methodological goal of the article is therefore explanatory, interpretive, and critical rather than predictive. The study seeks to demonstrate that prevailing approaches to war remain incomplete if they fail to account for the institutional structures and global inequalities that shape geopolitical relations in the contemporary world. By integrating conceptual analysis, normative inquiry, critical institutional interpretation, and interdisciplinary social theory, the article develops a framework capable of connecting debates concerning war ethics with broader discussions of global justice, political economy, and structural inequality.

Ultimately, the methodological approach adopted in this article supports the broader argument that war should be understood not merely as an episodic military event or a consequence of isolated moral decisions, but as a phenomenon deeply connected to the institutional organization of the contemporary global order.

3. War, Political Authority, and Institutional Power

Discussions of war in contemporary political and social theory often begin from the assumption that armed conflict represents a breakdown of political order. War is frequently interpreted as a failure of diplomacy, international law, or institutional governance. Although this perspective captures an important aspect of violent conflict, it risks obscuring a more fundamental reality of modern warfare: large-scale war is not simply the collapse of political authority, but often one of its strongest institutional expressions.

Modern warfare depends upon highly organized systems of administration, economic mobilization, technological coordination, and political legitimacy. States engaged in war must mobilize military institutions, regulate economic resources, manage public narratives, and sustain political authority over large populations. In this sense, war is deeply connected to institutional power rather than external to it. Organized violence on a large scale is possible only through political structures capable of coordinating collective action and legitimizing the use of force.

This institutional dimension of war has long been recognized in political theory. Clausewitz (1984) famously described war as “the continuation of politics by other means,” emphasizing the close relationship between military violence and political authority. War does not emerge outside politics; rather, it develops within political structures and reflects broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and control. Similarly, Walzer (2006) argued that warfare cannot be separated from the political communities and institutional systems that authorize collective violence.

From a contemporary social science perspective, however, the relationship between war and political authority has become increasingly complex. Modern conflicts are no longer shaped solely by territorial disputes between sovereign states. Contemporary warfare increasingly operates within interconnected global systems involving economic dependency, technological competition, energy security, transnational governance, and geopolitical influence (Tickner, 2001). These transformations have significantly altered how political authority functions within the contemporary international order.

Recent debates in political philosophy and international relations have offered different explanations for the persistence of war. Realist theories generally argue that conflict emerges because the international system lacks a centralized authority capable of enforcing cooperation among states (Waltz, 1979). According to this perspective, states operate within a condition of strategic competition in which survival and security remain primary concerns. Under such conditions, military power becomes an essential instrument of political survival.

Although realist perspectives provide important insights into interstate competition, they often treat states as relatively autonomous actors operating independently within the international system. Such approaches may underestimate the extent to which contemporary political authority is shaped by broader institutional and economic structures. In the modern global order, political

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power increasingly operates through interconnected networks involving international organizations, financial systems, technological infrastructures, trade regimes, and security alliances (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2023).

These institutional structures significantly influence how political authority is exercised. Access to global markets, technological resources, strategic supply chains, and international financial systems affects the capacity of states to maintain economic stability and geopolitical influence. Consequently, contemporary warfare cannot be adequately understood solely through military strategy or national security concerns. Armed conflict increasingly reflects tensions embedded within broader institutional arrangements of global governance and political economy.

Critical scholars in security studies and political economy have increasingly emphasized the structural dimensions of contemporary warfare. Duffield (2001) argues that globalization has transformed the relationship between development, security, and political violence. According to this perspective, modern conflicts are often connected to broader systems of global governance that regulate populations through overlapping mechanisms of security, humanitarian intervention, and economic control. Similarly, Kaldor (2012) contends that contemporary “new wars” differ from traditional interstate warfare because they emerge within contexts shaped by globalization, fragmented sovereignty, transnational networks, and asymmetrical forms of violence.

The institutional character of modern warfare is also closely connected to broader structures of inequality and geopolitical asymmetry. Harvey (2003) argues that global capitalism generates uneven distributions of economic and political power that contribute to geopolitical instability. Contemporary political authority is therefore deeply intertwined with processes of economic accumulation, resource competition, and institutional domination. States do not simply compete militarily; they also compete for technological superiority, financial influence, energy security, and strategic positioning within global economic systems.

Mbembe’s (2003) concept of necropolitics further expands this discussion by examining how political authority increasingly operates through the management of life, death, and insecurity. From this perspective, contemporary forms of warfare are closely linked to systems of exclusion, vulnerability, and institutionalized violence embedded within global structures of power. Armed conflict becomes not merely a military phenomenon, but also a mechanism through which political authority regulates populations and maintains geopolitical hierarchies.

This broader structural perspective is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary geopolitical tensions. Conflicts involving technological rivalry, energy competition, digital infrastructures, and strategic trade routes demonstrate that warfare is increasingly connected to struggles over institutional influence and economic control. Political authority today extends beyond territorial governance and operates through global systems of finance, information, logistics, and security coordination.

Moreover, globalization has transformed the nature of political vulnerability. States are now more economically interconnected than in previous historical periods, yet this interdependence often produces new forms of insecurity. Dependence on global supply chains, technological imports, financial networks, and strategic resources can create vulnerabilities that shape political decision-making and geopolitical competition. Under such conditions, military conflict may emerge not only from territorial disputes but also from struggles concerning economic access, institutional legitimacy, and geopolitical positioning within the global order.

Understanding war as a structural and institutional phenomenon therefore broadens the scope of traditional approaches to armed conflict. Rather than viewing war merely as the consequence of aggressive political leaders or isolated strategic decisions, this perspective emphasizes the role of institutional arrangements in shaping the conditions under which conflict becomes possible. Political authority is not simply exercised through military force; it is also embedded in the global systems that organize economic power, regulate international relations, and distribute geopolitical influence.

This structural understanding of war has important implications for social science research. It suggests that the persistence of armed conflict cannot be fully explained without examining how global institutions shape relations among states and political communities. International conflicts often reflect deeper tensions associated with inequality, dependency, economic competition, and institutional exclusion within the global order.

From this perspective, war should be understood not merely as an episodic political event, but as a phenomenon connected to broader systems of institutional power and structural inequality. Analyzing armed conflict therefore requires integrating political theory, international relations, political economy, and global justice into a more comprehensive framework of interpretation.

The following section further develops this argument by examining how structural inequalities within the global political economy contribute to geopolitical tensions and shape the conditions under which violent conflict emerges.

4. The Political Economy of War, Global Insecurity, and Structural Inequality

Contemporary armed conflict cannot be adequately understood without examining the political and economic structures that shape global distributions of power, institutional influence, and geopolitical vulnerability. Traditional approaches to war have often focused on military strategy, territorial rivalry, state sovereignty, or security dilemmas. While these perspectives remain important, they frequently underemphasize the broader structural conditions within which geopolitical conflict emerges. In the contemporary

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international order, warfare increasingly reflects tensions embedded within systems of global political economy characterized by inequality, interdependence, technological competition, and institutional asymmetry.

Economic globalization has transformed the nature of political power and international conflict. Contemporary states are deeply interconnected through trade systems, financial institutions, technological infrastructures, energy networks, transportation corridors, and global supply chains. These forms of interdependence have expanded economic integration across national borders, yet they have not produced equal distributions of power or opportunity. Instead, globalization has frequently reinforced structural disparities between economically dominant states and politically vulnerable societies (Fraser, 2009).

One of the most significant dimensions of the political economy of war is the unequal distribution of economic and technological capacity among states. Economically powerful societies generally possess greater access to advanced technologies, financial infrastructures, strategic resources, and global institutional influence. By contrast, economically marginalized states often remain dependent upon external markets, debt structures, foreign investment systems, technological imports, and resource extraction economies. These asymmetries influence not only patterns of economic development but also forms of geopolitical vulnerability and institutional insecurity.

The relationship between political economy, property relations, and conflict has long occupied an important position within critical social theory. Critical approaches increasingly argue that legal and economic institutions are not politically neutral arrangements, but mechanisms shaping distributions of power, exclusion, and geopolitical vulnerability within the global order (Quoc & Y, 2026). Marx (1976) argued that political struggles are deeply connected to systems of economic power and material organization. Contemporary political economy scholars have further emphasized that global capitalism generates uneven forms of accumulation, dependency, and geopolitical competition (Harvey, 2003; Piketty, 2020). From this perspective, warfare cannot be understood solely as a strategic or military phenomenon; it is also shaped by institutional struggles over economic influence, resource control, and geopolitical positioning within the global order.

Competition over strategic resources has become particularly significant in the twenty-first century. Access to energy reserves, rare earth minerals, digital infrastructures, trade routes, semiconductor technologies, and global communication systems increasingly shapes international relations and geopolitical rivalry. Resource-rich regions frequently become sites of prolonged instability because they occupy strategically important positions within global systems of production, logistics, and technological development. In many cases, military tensions are closely connected to struggles over economic access and institutional influence rather than purely territorial disputes.

Contemporary conflicts involving energy security and technological sovereignty illustrate this transformation clearly. Modern economies depend heavily upon stable access to energy networks, technological systems, and global supply chains. Disruptions to these infrastructures may generate severe economic instability, political vulnerability, and strategic insecurity. Consequently, states increasingly interpret economic and technological dependency as matters of national security. Geopolitical competition therefore extends beyond traditional military concerns and increasingly involves struggles over infrastructural control and strategic autonomy. Recent scholarship in global governance and political economy has emphasized how globalization simultaneously increases both interdependence and vulnerability (Jaeger, 2021; Kreuder-Sonnen & Zürn, 2023). Global supply chains connect states through highly integrated systems of trade, finance, logistics, digital communication, and technological production. While such integration may facilitate economic growth and international cooperation, it can also expose societies to forms of strategic disruption and institutional dependency. Dependence upon external energy systems, technological infrastructures, or financial networks may intensify geopolitical insecurity and influence political decision-making.

This transformation has significantly altered the nature of political authority within the international system. Economic sanctions, technological restrictions, cyber operations, financial controls, and infrastructural disruptions increasingly function alongside conventional military strategies as instruments of geopolitical competition. Contemporary warfare therefore extends beyond direct battlefield confrontation and increasingly operates through institutional systems embedded within global political economy.

Critical theorists have argued that these developments reflect broader structural transformations associated with globalization and institutional asymmetry. Fraser (2009) contends that contemporary global capitalism frequently produces unequal distributions of political representation, economic mobility, and institutional recognition across societies. Similarly, Sassen (2014) argues that global economic systems often generate forms of displacement, exclusion, and structural marginalization that weaken institutional stability and intensify social fragmentation. Such conditions may contribute indirectly to political violence by increasing insecurity, vulnerability, and geopolitical instability.

The structural dimensions of conflict are also visible in contemporary forms of technological competition. States increasingly compete over artificial intelligence systems, semiconductor production, digital infrastructures, cybersecurity capabilities, and data governance regimes (Zuboff, 2019). Technological dependence can create forms of strategic vulnerability comparable to military dependence. As a result, geopolitical rivalry increasingly involves struggles concerning informational power, digital sovereignty, and institutional control over technological infrastructures.

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Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics further expands this discussion by emphasizing how contemporary political authority increasingly operates through the management of insecurity, vulnerability, and exposure to harm. In contexts of geopolitical competition, populations may become subject to forms of economic insecurity, infrastructural instability, technological exclusion, and institutional marginalization shaped by broader systems of global power. Contemporary warfare therefore involves not only direct military violence but also institutional arrangements that regulate access to security, mobility, resources, and political recognition.

Similarly, Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence remains highly relevant for understanding the relationship between inequality and conflict. Violence may operate not only through direct physical coercion but also through institutional systems that systematically reproduce deprivation, exclusion, and unequal life conditions. Structural inequalities embedded within global political and economic systems may therefore contribute indirectly to the conditions under which geopolitical tensions intensify and armed conflict becomes more likely.

Importantly, the structural perspective developed in this article does not claim that economic inequality automatically or mechanically causes war. Armed conflict remains a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical experiences, ideological struggles, political leadership, strategic calculations, cultural dynamics, and regional conditions. However, structural inequalities function as critical background conditions that intensify geopolitical competition, institutional fragility, and political insecurity within the contemporary international order.

This distinction is essential for avoiding simplistic forms of economic determinism. Contemporary warfare cannot be reduced solely to struggles over material resources or capitalist competition. Military conflicts are shaped by complex interactions among nationalism, political ideology, technological transformation, institutional legitimacy, and geopolitical strategy. Nevertheless, these dimensions increasingly operate within broader systems of global political economy characterized by unequal distributions of power and institutional influence.

The structural account developed here also has important implications for understanding contemporary peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Traditional approaches frequently emphasize military deterrence, diplomatic negotiation, or humanitarian intervention after violence has already emerged. While such mechanisms remain important, they may prove insufficient if broader structural inequalities and institutional asymmetries remain unchanged. Sustainable peace requires not only the regulation of military violence but also institutional reforms capable of reducing economic vulnerability, geopolitical exclusion, and unequal access to resources and technological infrastructures.

This broader perspective significantly expands the scope of social science inquiry into war. Armed conflict should not be analyzed solely as a military phenomenon or as the consequence of isolated strategic decisions by sovereign states. Rather, warfare must also be interpreted as part of wider institutional environments shaped by globalization, structural inequality, economic interdependence, technological competition, and geopolitical asymmetry.

Ultimately, examining the political economy of war reveals that contemporary conflict is deeply connected to the institutional organization of the global order itself. Modern warfare increasingly reflects structural tensions embedded within systems of global governance, economic inequality, infrastructural dependency, and geopolitical competition. Understanding these structural dimensions is therefore essential for developing more comprehensive approaches to conflict analysis, peacebuilding, and international cooperation in the twenty-first century.

5. Individual Responsibility, War Ethics, and Structural Conditions of Conflict

Contemporary debates concerning the ethics of war have increasingly focused on questions of individual moral responsibility. Over the past several decades, analytic just war theory has shifted attention away from the collective rights of states and toward the moral liability of individual actors participating in armed conflict (Rodin, 2002). This transformation has significantly reshaped philosophical discussions regarding the legitimacy of warfare, the responsibility of combatants, and the ethical limitations governing the use of violence.

Traditional just war theory generally distinguishes between two dimensions of war ethics: the justice of entering war (*jus ad bellum*) and the justice of conduct within war (*jus in bello*). Within this framework, combatants on opposing sides are often regarded as possessing equal moral status as long as they comply with accepted rules regulating warfare, particularly the principles of proportionality and civilian protection (Walzer, 2006). According to this classical perspective, individual soldiers are not fully responsible for the political decisions made by governments that initiate war. Ethical evaluation therefore focuses primarily on conduct during war rather than on the broader political structures that produce armed conflict.

Recent developments in analytic political philosophy have challenged this traditional position. McMahan (2009) argues that the moral permissibility of killing in war cannot be separated from the justice of the cause for which individuals fight. According to this view, soldiers participating in unjust wars may bear moral responsibility for acts of violence even when acting under military

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command structures or state authority. Similarly, Rodin (2002) criticizes traditional analogies between national self-defense and individual self-defense, arguing that states cannot automatically claim moral legitimacy simply by appealing to sovereign interests. These critiques have contributed significantly to contemporary war ethics by emphasizing the importance of personal moral accountability. Questions concerning civilian immunity, military obedience, proportionality, and combatant liability have become central issues in contemporary debates on the morality of war. Ethical analysis increasingly recognizes that participation in violence cannot be morally justified solely through obedience to institutional authority.

However, despite its important contributions, an exclusive focus on individual liability risks narrowing the broader social and structural understanding of armed conflict. Questions concerning whether individual soldiers are morally justified in participating in warfare generally arise only after political conflict has already escalated into organized violence. Ethical analysis centered exclusively on individual actions may therefore overlook the institutional and structural conditions that make war possible in the first place.

Modern warfare does not emerge solely from isolated moral decisions made by individuals. Armed conflict occurs within institutional systems shaped by political authority, economic inequality, geopolitical competition, ideological narratives, and global power relations. Soldiers, political leaders, and civilian populations operate within structures that strongly influence available choices, political perceptions, and strategic behavior. Consequently, moral responsibility in war cannot be fully understood without considering the broader institutional environments within which political violence occurs.

This structural perspective does not reject the importance of individual ethics. Rather, it situates individual responsibility within wider systems of institutional power and social organization. Military institutions, security discourses, geopolitical alliances, economic interests, and nationalist narratives all shape the conditions under which individuals participate in war. Ethical responsibility therefore exists simultaneously at multiple interconnected levels: the individual level, the institutional level, and the structural level of global political and economic systems.

Young's (2011) theory of structural responsibility provides an important framework for understanding this broader conception of moral accountability. According to Young, responsibility for injustice should not be understood exclusively through direct personal causation. Individuals may also bear responsibility through participation in institutional systems that collectively reproduce structural inequalities and harmful social conditions. Applied to the context of war, this perspective suggests that responsibility for political violence extends beyond individual combatants and includes institutional actors, economic systems, and global structures that contribute to geopolitical instability. Similarly, Shue (2016) emphasizes that structural conditions such as deprivation, vulnerability, and unequal access to basic rights can generate forms of indirect violence that shape the conditions under which armed conflict emerges. From this perspective, war ethics cannot be separated from broader issues of economic justice, institutional inequality, and political exclusion. Armed violence frequently develops within environments characterized by long-term insecurity, structural marginalization, and weakened institutional legitimacy.

The relationship between ethics and structure becomes particularly significant in the context of contemporary warfare. Modern conflicts increasingly involve non-state actors, cyber operations, private military corporations, technological surveillance systems, economic sanctions, and transnational security networks. In many cases, the boundaries between military, political, economic, and technological forms of power have become increasingly blurred. Consequently, ethical evaluation can no longer focus exclusively on battlefield conduct or direct acts of violence. It must also examine the institutional systems that organize, legitimize, and sustain conflict.

Critical social theorists have further argued that violence often operates through institutional and symbolic mechanisms rather than through direct military force alone (Fassin, 2021). Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence suggests that social systems may systematically produce inequality, deprivation, and exclusion even in the absence of open warfare. Similarly, Mbembe's (2003) notion of necropolitics emphasizes how political authority increasingly operates through the regulation of vulnerability, insecurity, and exposure to death within global systems of power. These perspectives broaden the ethical analysis of war by highlighting the relationship between institutional structures and the production of human suffering.

Cosmopolitan approaches to war ethics have attempted to address some of these limitations by emphasizing the moral significance of individuals across national boundaries. Fabre (2012) argues that ethical concern should extend beyond state interests to include civilians, displaced populations, and individuals affected by structural inequalities within the global order. Such approaches contribute to a broader understanding of war ethics by connecting armed conflict to issues of human rights, transnational justice, and global inequality.

Nevertheless, even cosmopolitan frameworks may remain incomplete if they focus primarily on moral evaluation without sufficiently addressing the structural origins of conflict. Armed violence frequently emerges within environments shaped by economic exclusion, geopolitical asymmetry, institutional dependency, and unequal distributions of power. Without examining these structural conditions, ethical analysis risks treating war primarily as an isolated moral event rather than as a socially and institutionally produced phenomenon.

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This article therefore argues for a more integrated understanding of war ethics. Questions concerning individual moral responsibility should be connected to broader analyses of political authority, global inequality, institutional power, and structural injustice. Such an approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of why armed conflicts continue to emerge within the contemporary international system.

Understanding war through this broader framework also has important implications for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. If political violence is connected to institutional inequalities and structural asymmetries, then reducing warfare requires more than regulating military behavior or enforcing international humanitarian law. Sustainable peace also depends upon addressing the structural conditions that generate political instability, economic marginalization, geopolitical vulnerability, and institutional exclusion.

In this respect, war ethics and global justice should not be treated as separate areas of inquiry. The moral evaluation of violence is closely connected to the institutional organization of the global political economy and the distribution of power within the international order. A comprehensive social science approach to war therefore requires integrating ethical analysis with critical examination of the structural environments that shape political conflict.

The following section further develops this argument by examining how global justice theory and institutional inequality contribute to understanding the persistence of war within the contemporary global order.

6. Global Justice, Structural Inequality, and the Persistence of War

Debates concerning global justice have become increasingly important for understanding the structural dimensions of contemporary armed conflict. In a highly interconnected international system, political violence cannot be separated from the institutional arrangements that shape global distributions of power, economic opportunity, technological capacity, and geopolitical influence. The persistence of war in the modern world is therefore closely related not only to military competition or strategic rivalry among states, but also to broader systems of structural inequality embedded within the global political economy.

Contemporary theories of global justice differ significantly in how they interpret the moral significance of international inequality. One influential perspective emphasizes the continued importance of state sovereignty and national political autonomy. From this viewpoint, principles of distributive justice apply primarily within domestic political communities rather than across the global system. International institutions are therefore understood mainly as frameworks for cooperation among sovereign states rather than mechanisms for achieving global equality.

Rawls's (1999) account of international justice represents one of the most influential formulations of this position. In *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls argues that the international order should focus on maintaining peaceful relations among societies, protecting basic human rights, and assisting burdened societies in developing stable political institutions. However, Rawls does not extend domestic egalitarian principles to the global economic system. According to this perspective, international inequality is not necessarily unjust unless it threatens political stability or basic human dignity.

Nagel (2005) develops a related argument concerning the institutional foundations of justice. He contends that strong principles of distributive justice presuppose the existence of a shared political authority capable of regulating social cooperation through coercive institutions. Since no centralized global authority equivalent to the modern state currently exists, global inequalities may be morally troubling without constituting injustice in the same sense as domestic inequalities.

Although these perspectives remain highly influential, critics have argued that they insufficiently address the structural realities of globalization and contemporary global governance. Modern international institutions exercise substantial influence over economic opportunities, trade systems, technological access, financial stability, and resource distribution across societies. Consequently, global inequalities cannot be understood solely as the outcome of independent national development trajectories. They are also shaped by institutional arrangements operating within the international order itself.

Critical approaches to global justice emphasize that global political and economic systems frequently reproduce asymmetrical relations of power and institutional domination (Geuss, 2022). Trade regimes, debt structures, financial institutions, technological infrastructures, and resource governance systems often advantage economically dominant states while constraining the political and developmental capacities of weaker societies (Fraser, 2009; Sassen, 2014). Such inequalities are not merely economic disparities; they also influence geopolitical stability, institutional legitimacy, and the distribution of political vulnerability across the global system.

Beitz (1979) was among the first political theorists to argue that international institutions generate forms of interdependence that carry important implications for distributive justice. Similarly, Caney (2005) contends that global inequalities should be evaluated not only in terms of national sovereignty but also through broader considerations of moral equality and human well-being. These approaches challenge purely state-centered understandings of justice by emphasizing the institutional interconnectedness of the contemporary world.

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Pogge's (2008) theory of global institutional injustice is particularly significant for the argument developed in this article. According to Pogge, international economic structures actively contribute to the persistence of poverty, dependency, and unequal development across societies. Trade systems, financial arrangements, and global governance institutions do not merely regulate cooperation among states; they also shape the distribution of opportunities, resources, and political influence within the international order. Structural inequality therefore becomes embedded within the institutional architecture of globalization itself.

From the perspective developed in this article, these structural inequalities are closely connected to the persistence of war. Economic marginalization, unequal access to resources, institutional exclusion, and geopolitical dependency may intensify tensions that increase the likelihood of violent conflict. Societies experiencing long-term structural disadvantage often face weakened institutional legitimacy, social fragmentation, economic instability, and political vulnerability. Under such conditions, armed conflict becomes more likely not simply because of individual political decisions, but because structural environments generate instability and geopolitical competition.

This relationship between structural inequality and conflict is particularly visible in contemporary geopolitical tensions surrounding energy security, technological sovereignty, trade dependency, digital infrastructures, and strategic supply chains. Competition over critical resources and institutional influence increasingly shapes relations among states within the global economy. Military conflict is therefore often connected to broader struggles concerning economic positioning and geopolitical influence within international systems of power.

Critical social theorists have further emphasized that structural violence may persist even in the absence of direct military confrontation. Galtung (1969) argues that institutional systems can systematically reproduce deprivation, exclusion, and unequal life conditions across populations. From this perspective, violence should not be understood solely as direct physical harm but also as the outcome of structural arrangements that limit human flourishing and reinforce social vulnerability. Structural inequalities embedded within global political and economic systems may therefore contribute indirectly to the conditions under which armed conflict emerges.

Similarly, Young's (2011) theory of structural injustice emphasizes that responsibility for harmful social conditions cannot always be reduced to isolated individual actions. Institutional systems themselves may generate patterns of exclusion and vulnerability that contribute to broader forms of political instability and social conflict. Applied to the context of international relations, this perspective suggests that geopolitical tensions often reflect deeper structural asymmetries embedded within global governance systems. The structural perspective developed throughout this article does not claim that inequality automatically or mechanically causes war. Armed conflict remains a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical experiences, ideological struggles, political leadership, strategic calculations, and cultural dynamics. Nevertheless, structural inequalities function as important background conditions that intensify geopolitical competition, institutional fragility, and political insecurity.

This perspective also highlights the limitations of approaches that interpret war exclusively through military or national security frameworks. Security-centered models often focus on strategic threats while overlooking the broader institutional conditions that shape political instability. A global justice perspective suggests that long-term peace cannot be achieved solely through military deterrence, diplomatic negotiation, or humanitarian regulation. Sustainable stability also depends upon addressing the structural inequalities and institutional asymmetries that contribute to geopolitical vulnerability and systemic insecurity.

Consequently, war prevention must be understood not only as a matter of military regulation but also as a question of institutional justice. Reducing armed conflict requires examining how global political and economic systems distribute resources, opportunities, technological capacities, and political influence across societies. International institutions that systematically reproduce exclusion, dependency, and unequal development may contribute to environments in which geopolitical tensions and political violence become more likely.

This broader understanding of war significantly expands the scope of social science research into armed conflict. Warfare should not be analyzed solely as a military phenomenon or as the result of isolated strategic decisions by states. Instead, armed conflict must also be interpreted as part of broader institutional environments shaped by structural inequality, economic asymmetry, and global systems of power.

By connecting debates on global justice with analyses of political violence, this article argues that the persistence of war reflects not only failures of diplomacy or moral judgment, but also deeper tensions embedded within contemporary systems of global governance and political economy. Understanding these structural dimensions is therefore essential for developing more comprehensive approaches to peacebuilding, international cooperation, and long-term global stability.

The following section addresses several objections to the structural account developed in this article and clarifies the broader implications of understanding war as a phenomenon rooted in institutional inequality and global political economy.

7. Structural Injustice and War: Reassessing Conflict in the Contemporary Global Order

The structural account of war developed throughout this article seeks to broaden contemporary understandings of armed conflict by connecting political violence to institutional inequality, global political economy, and asymmetrical systems of power. Rather than

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interpreting war solely as the consequence of interstate rivalry, strategic insecurity, or individual moral failure, the article has argued that contemporary conflict must also be understood in relation to broader structures of geopolitical vulnerability, economic dependency, and institutional exclusion embedded within the global order.

Nevertheless, this structural perspective raises several important theoretical questions. Critics may argue that emphasizing institutional inequality risks overstating the explanatory role of economic and political structures while underestimating the importance of strategic decision-making, ideological conflict, nationalism, and individual agency. Addressing these concerns is essential for clarifying both the analytical scope and the normative implications of the argument developed in this study.

One of the most influential criticisms emerges from realist approaches to international relations. Realist theorists contend that war is fundamentally rooted in the anarchic character of the international system rather than in structural injustice or economic inequality (Waltz, 1979). Since no centralized global authority possesses sufficient coercive power to guarantee security for all states, political communities exist within a condition of strategic uncertainty. Under such conditions, military competition becomes an unavoidable feature of international politics.

From the realist perspective, armed conflict emerges primarily because states must continually protect sovereignty and ensure survival in an environment characterized by geopolitical competition. Even if global economic inequalities were substantially reduced, realists argue that strategic rivalry would persist because insecurity is structurally embedded within the international system itself.

This criticism identifies an important dimension of contemporary geopolitics. Strategic competition undoubtedly remains central to international relations. However, the structural perspective developed in this article does not deny the significance of military insecurity or geopolitical rivalry. Rather, it argues that contemporary forms of strategic competition increasingly operate through broader institutional and economic systems associated with globalization, technological interdependence, and transnational governance.

In the contemporary international order, states do not compete solely through military capabilities. Geopolitical influence increasingly depends upon access to technological infrastructures, financial systems, energy networks, digital platforms, strategic resources, and global supply chains. Political authority therefore operates through institutional systems extending beyond traditional territorial sovereignty. As Abrahamsen and Williams (2023) argue, contemporary security increasingly functions through interconnected global assemblages involving public institutions, private actors, transnational infrastructures, and complex systems of governance.

Consequently, modern warfare cannot be adequately understood solely through classical realist assumptions concerning territorial competition among sovereign states. Contemporary geopolitical conflict increasingly reflects struggles over institutional influence, technological sovereignty, infrastructural control, and economic positioning within the global political economy. Military power remains important, but it is now deeply intertwined with financial, informational, and technological forms of power operating across transnational systems.

A second criticism concerns the relationship between inequality and violence. Critics may argue that structural inequality does not necessarily produce armed conflict. Many societies experience poverty, institutional weakness, or economic dependency without descending into war, while military conflicts may also occur among economically developed states. From this perspective, the relationship between structural inequality and political violence appears too indirect or inconsistent to function as a convincing explanation of war.

This objection correctly highlights the complexity of armed conflict. The structural account presented in this article does not claim that inequality mechanically or automatically causes war. Political violence remains a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by historical experiences, ideological tensions, leadership decisions, strategic calculations, cultural dynamics, and regional conditions. Structural inequalities should instead be understood as background conditions that intensify political vulnerability, institutional fragility, and geopolitical competition within the global order.

This distinction is particularly important for avoiding simplistic forms of economic determinism. Contemporary warfare cannot be reduced entirely to material interests or struggles over economic resources. Nationalism, identity politics, religion, ideology, historical memory, and technological transformation all influence the emergence and escalation of conflict. Nevertheless, these factors increasingly operate within institutional systems shaped by unequal distributions of political influence, technological capacity, and economic power.

Critical political economy scholars have emphasized that globalization frequently produces asymmetrical forms of interdependence that intensify geopolitical insecurity (Jaeger, 2021; Scheuerman, 2021). Dependence upon external financial systems, technological infrastructures, energy networks, or supply chains may generate strategic vulnerabilities influencing political decision-making and interstate rivalry. Structural inequalities therefore shape the conditions within which conflict becomes more likely, even if they do not directly determine political outcomes.

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A third criticism concerns moral responsibility. Some scholars may argue that structural approaches risk weakening individual accountability by attributing violence primarily to abstract institutional systems rather than to concrete political actors. Analytic just war theorists such as McMahan (2009) emphasize that ethical evaluation must ultimately focus on the actions and decisions of individuals participating in warfare. According to this perspective, moral responsibility cannot be displaced onto impersonal structures without undermining ethical judgment itself.

This concern raises an important ethical challenge. However, the structural perspective advanced in this article does not reject the importance of individual moral responsibility. Instead, it argues that ethical analysis must operate simultaneously at multiple levels. Individuals make decisions within institutional environments shaped by geopolitical pressures, economic asymmetries, ideological narratives, and systems of political authority. Understanding these broader structural conditions does not eliminate personal accountability; rather, it provides a more comprehensive explanation of the contexts within which political violence emerges.

Young's (2011) theory of structural responsibility is particularly relevant in this respect. Young argues that responsibility for injustice may arise not only through direct personal actions but also through participation in institutional systems that collectively reproduce harmful social conditions. Applied to the context of war, this perspective suggests that responsibility for political violence extends beyond military actors to include institutional arrangements, global economic systems, and political structures that contribute to instability, exclusion, and geopolitical vulnerability.

Similarly, Fassin (2021) argues that contemporary violence often operates through broader moral economies involving institutional legitimacy, humanitarian discourse, and political normalization. Violence is therefore not only a matter of direct coercion but also of the institutional frameworks through which insecurity, exclusion, and vulnerability are socially organized and politically justified. Another limitation of the structural account concerns empirical variation across conflicts. Contemporary wars differ significantly in their historical origins, ideological dimensions, regional contexts, and geopolitical dynamics. Some conflicts emerge from territorial disputes, others from ethnic fragmentation, state collapse, religious polarization, or struggles over political legitimacy. No single theoretical framework can fully explain every form of political violence across all historical and geographical conditions.

This limitation underscores the importance of interdisciplinary analysis. The structural perspective developed in this article should not be interpreted as a universal or exclusive theory of war. Rather, it functions as a complementary framework that highlights dimensions of conflict frequently underemphasized within conventional approaches to international relations and war ethics. Integrating political philosophy, critical social theory, political economy, global justice theory, and international relations enables a broader understanding of how institutional structures shape geopolitical conflict within the contemporary world.

Importantly, the structural account developed throughout this article also has significant implications for peacebuilding and global governance. Traditional approaches to conflict prevention often prioritize military deterrence, diplomatic negotiation, or humanitarian intervention after violence has already emerged. Although these mechanisms remain important, they may prove insufficient if broader institutional inequalities and geopolitical asymmetries remain unchanged.

De Coning (2022) argues that contemporary peacebuilding requires adaptive and structurally informed approaches capable of addressing the complexity of modern conflict environments. Sustainable peace therefore depends not only on managing violence but also on reducing structural vulnerability, institutional exclusion, technological dependency, and geopolitical marginalization within the global order.

This broader perspective significantly expands the scope of social science inquiry into war and peace. Armed conflict should not be interpreted solely as a military phenomenon or as the consequence of isolated strategic decisions by sovereign states. Rather, warfare must also be understood as part of wider institutional environments shaped by globalization, technological competition, economic interdependence, and asymmetrical systems of power.

Ultimately, the structural perspective developed in this article argues that contemporary warfare reflects not only failures of diplomacy or morality, but also deeper tensions embedded within the institutional organization of the global political economy. Understanding these structural dimensions is therefore essential for developing more comprehensive approaches to conflict analysis, global governance, peacebuilding, and international cooperation in the twenty-first century.

The article does not claim to provide a universally predictive theory of war, but rather a critical framework for understanding how structural conditions shape contemporary geopolitical conflict.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has developed a structural account of war grounded in political philosophy, global justice theory, critical social analysis, and international political economy. Throughout the discussion, the article has argued that contemporary armed conflict cannot be adequately understood solely through traditional frameworks focused on military strategy, interstate rivalry, or individual moral responsibility. Instead, war must also be interpreted in relation to broader institutional structures that shape global distributions of power, economic opportunity, technological capacity, and political influence.

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The article first demonstrated that war is not simply the breakdown of political order but often one of its most organized institutional expressions. Modern warfare depends upon systems of political authority capable of mobilizing economic resources, technological infrastructures, ideological narratives, and institutional legitimacy. Contemporary armed conflict therefore reflects not only strategic competition among states but also broader struggles over geopolitical influence and institutional control within the global order.

The analysis further showed that structural inequalities embedded within the global political economy significantly shape the conditions under which conflict emerges. Unequal access to resources, technological systems, financial networks, and institutional influence contributes to geopolitical asymmetries that intensify insecurity and competition among political actors. In this respect, contemporary warfare increasingly reflects tensions associated with globalization, economic dependency, strategic vulnerability, and institutional exclusion.

The article also critically examined recent debates in just war theory concerning individual moral responsibility. While analytic approaches to war ethics have made important contributions by emphasizing questions of liability, proportionality, and civilian protection, the discussion argued that ethical analysis centered exclusively on individual conduct remains incomplete. Political violence emerges within institutional systems shaped by structural inequality, geopolitical pressures, and global asymmetries of power. Consequently, understanding war requires integrating moral evaluation with broader analyses of political authority and institutional organization.

Building upon this argument, the article connected contemporary debates on war ethics to broader theories of global justice. International institutions do not simply regulate cooperation among sovereign states; they also shape the distribution of opportunities, vulnerabilities, and political capacities across societies. Structural inequalities embedded within systems of global governance may therefore contribute indirectly to the persistence of political instability and armed conflict. War should thus be understood not merely as an episodic military event but also as a phenomenon rooted in broader systems of institutional power and structural injustice.

Importantly, the structural perspective developed throughout this article does not claim that economic inequality or institutional asymmetry mechanically causes war. Armed conflict remains a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by historical experiences, ideological tensions, political leadership, strategic calculations, cultural dynamics, and regional conditions. Nevertheless, structural inequalities function as critical background conditions that intensify geopolitical competition, weaken institutional stability, and increase political vulnerability within the international system.

The broader implication of this argument is that sustainable peace cannot be achieved solely through military deterrence, diplomatic negotiation, or humanitarian regulation after violence has already emerged. Long-term conflict prevention also requires addressing the institutional inequalities and structural asymmetries that shape geopolitical insecurity within the contemporary global order. Questions concerning war, peace, and global stability are therefore inseparable from broader debates about economic justice, institutional legitimacy, and the organization of political power at the international level.

This perspective has important implications for contemporary social science research. Understanding war in the twenty-first century requires interdisciplinary approaches capable of integrating political philosophy, international relations, ethics, political economy, and critical social theory. Contemporary armed conflicts increasingly involve complex interactions among military force, technological systems, economic infrastructures, global governance institutions, and transnational networks of power. No single theoretical framework is sufficient to explain these dynamics in isolation.

The structural approach developed in this article contributes to ongoing debates concerning global governance and international justice by emphasizing the interconnected nature of political violence and institutional inequality. Contemporary warfare reflects not only failures of diplomacy or morality but also deeper tensions embedded within global systems of economic organization, geopolitical competition, and institutional exclusion. Recognizing these structural dimensions broadens both ethical analysis and social science inquiry into war and peace.

Ultimately, this article argues that preventing armed conflict requires more than regulating the conduct of war itself. It also requires critical examination of the institutional conditions that repeatedly generate instability, exclusion, and geopolitical insecurity within the global order. Sustainable peace depends not only upon limiting violence, but also upon creating more equitable and inclusive structures of global political and economic organization.

From a policy perspective, the findings of this article suggest that sustainable peacebuilding requires not only military regulation and diplomatic coordination, but also institutional reforms addressing economic inequality, technological dependency, and geopolitical exclusion within the global order.

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