DISCUSSION PAPER

War Without Borders: The Ontological Shift in Modern Warfare

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Introduction

The concept of war has evolved not only on the battlefield but also within the realms of technology, politics, and thought throughout history. From ancient times and medieval siege techniques to the World Wars, from the nuclear deterrence doctrines of the Cold War to the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape, both the actors and objectives of war have undergone significant transformation.

Today, however, this evolution reveals that it is not merely the instruments of war that are changing — the very nature of war itself is undergoing a profound transformation. Contemporary warfare is no longer a struggle confined to traditional frontlines, tanks, artillery, and rifles. It has become a multidimensional cognitive operation, shaped in data centres, on screens, through algorithms, and within the collective subconscious of societies. This transformation demands a fundamental redefinition not only in military terms, but also in core concepts such as sovereignty, legitimacy, truth, and resistance.

Concepts like network-centric warfare, hybrid warfare, fifth-generation warfare, and cognitive warfare indicate that modern conflict is now waged not through physical supremacy alone, but through dominance in information, data, narrative, and initiative. These new forms of warfare unfold in a landscape where non-state actors, tech companies, artificial intelligence algorithms, and digital infrastructure providers have become influential players. Crucially, the primary target of warfare has increasingly become the human mind, public perception, and collective memory (Krishnan, 2022).

In this context, the Russia–Ukraine war and Israel's military operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran provide striking examples for understanding the evolving nature of modern warfare. These cases, shaped by technological evolution, tactical shifts, alliance structures, and propaganda battles, vividly reflect the on-the-ground implications of new security paradigms.

Understanding the role of ontological security in shaping decision-making processes among both state and non-state actors remains a vital yet underexplored avenue in conflict studies. Ontological security—the need to maintain a consistent sense of self and stable narrative identity—has often been sidelined in favour of more materialist or strategic accounts of war. However, as this paper argues, the erosion of normative boundaries and the rise of identity-driven conflict call for a deeper engagement with this concept (Mitzen, 2006).

Future research should focus on how actors' pursuit of ontological security influences their engagement with violence, especially in asymmetrical and hybrid warfare environments. For example, non-state armed groups frequently invoke historical grievances and collective trauma to justify their actions and mobilise support. These narratives serve not only strategic objectives but also existential needs, offering members a coherent identity in the face of marginalisation or perceived erasure. Similarly, states may embark on risky or escalatory behaviour not solely for territorial gains but to reaffirm national narratives under threat (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Kinnvall, 2004).

To this end, interdisciplinary methodologies that draw from political psychology, narrative analysis, and international relations theory are required. Empirical case studies—particularly those involving groups in prolonged identity-based conflicts (e.g., Hezbollah, the PKK, or Houthi rebels)—could shed light on how ontological insecurity motivates behaviours that might otherwise appear irrational through a purely strategic lens.

By clarifying the psychological and narrative underpinnings of conflict behaviour, such research could contribute to the design of more effective diplomacy and conflict resolution frameworks. Understanding the "why" behind seemingly entrenched violence could, ultimately, enable more empathetic and context-sensitive policy interventions, particularly in post-conflict or transitional settings.

This discussion paper aims to examine the transformation of warfare not merely through technical developments or operational tactics, but also at conceptual, political, and epistemological levels. In this new era of warfare—where data, perception, and strategic autonomy have become decisive—the ways in which global actors adapt, and the directions in which security doctrines, defence industries, and cognitive capacities are evolving, will be analysed as integral components of this transformation.

Situating Ontological Warfare Among Competing Paradigms

To fully appreciate the significance of ontological targeting in modern conflict, it is necessary to engage briefly with alternative traditions of strategic thought—most notably Clausewitzian, Realist, and technological-positivist perspectives. These schools often operate from a fundamentally different epistemological basis than ontological approaches and thus offer a critical foil through which the stakes of ontological warfare become clearer (Clausewitz, 2017; Waltz, 1979; Freedman, 2017).

Clausewitzian and Realist Reservations

From a Clausewitzian standpoint, war is the continuation of politics by other means—a tool of the state guided by rational political objectives (Clausewitz, 2017) Similarly, Realist thinkers emphasise the material distribution of power, focusing on state behaviour within an anarchic international system. From these lenses, the notion of "ontological insecurity" or "identity-centred warfare" may appear secondary, or even epiphenomenal. For example, a Realist might argue that identity-based narratives are deployed tactically, but do not constitute the core logic of conflict; they are surface phenomena layered atop material and strategic interests (Mearsheimer, 2001).

However, this position underestimates the extent to which identity has become not just a narrative accessory but a *strategic objective* in and of itself. In hybrid and information-centric warfare, disrupting the adversary's collective sense of self—its historical narratives, moral legitimacy, or national purpose—is now pursued with as much vigour as seizing territory or degrading military capabilities. The weaponisation of memory, culture, and belonging—seen, for example, in Russia's psychological campaigns in Ukraine or Islamophobic narratives in Western counter-terrorism—suggests a deeper strategic shift. Ontological harm undermines the cohesion necessary for political and military mobilisation, fulfilling Clausewitz's emphasis on the "moral forces" of war, albeit in a reinterpreted fashion (Mitzen, 2006).

Technological-Positivist Counterpoints

Technological-positivist views, particularly those grounded in network-centric warfare or algorithmic command and control, may also cast doubt on the centrality of identity. These perspectives tend to focus on cyber capabilities, sensor grids, or data-driven efficiencies as the cutting edge of contemporary conflict. From this vantage point, the emphasis on identity may appear outdated—subjective, imprecise, and ill-suited to the technical demands of modern battlefield (Rid, 2013).

Yet this view overlooks how technology itself is increasingly mobilised to influence identities. Algorithmically amplified disinformation campaigns, deepfakes, and AI-generated propaganda are not merely auxiliary tools; they are direct assaults on what adversaries believe about themselves and others. Identity is not displaced by technology; it is re-engineered by it. Thus, ontological targeting is not in opposition to the technological turn in warfare—*it is embedded within it* (Zuboff, 2019).

Responding to Sceptics

While critics may view the emphasis on identity and ontology as intellectually fashionable but strategically marginal, empirical developments suggest the contrary. The erosion of trust in democratic institutions, the fragmentation of shared narratives in pluralistic societies, and the rise of affective polarisation are all outcomes of targeted ontological disruption. These are not byproducts of war; they are the new terrain upon which war is increasingly waged (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012).

In short, ontological targeting should not be seen as a soft supplement to "hard" power logics but as a central axis of contemporary conflict. To miss this shift is to misunderstand the evolving grammar of war in the information age.

Identity at War: The Rise of Ontological Conflict in Modern Times

The First and Second World Wars marked turning points by revealing the devastating capacity war had reached through industrialisation, and how the global system underwent a comprehensive transformation. World War I manifested the potential for mass destruction on increasingly technical fronts and redefined the notion of conventional battlefields. World War II, on the other hand, introduced new parameters such as ideological radicalisation, total mobilisation, and the atomic bomb (Jordan et al., 2016). These two wars clearly demonstrated that warfare was no longer conducted solely through military force on the battlefield, but also through national economies, diplomatic coalitions, and propaganda apparatuses.

The Cold War order established after 1945 reshaped the nature of warfare once again. During this era, conflict became defined by nuclear deterrence, emphasising indirect intervention and proxy wars over direct confrontation. The ideological polarisation between the United States and the Soviet Union transformed warfare into a series of high-cost proxy conflicts rather than direct military engagements. Diplomacy, alliance structures, and intelligence wars came to dominate the field of conflict, shifting the terrain away from traditional combat. Military alliances like NATO and the Warsaw Pact fostered a multidimensional environment in which war was waged not only on the battlefield but also at negotiating tables, in technological races, and within diplomatic spheres (Bhaskar, 2000).

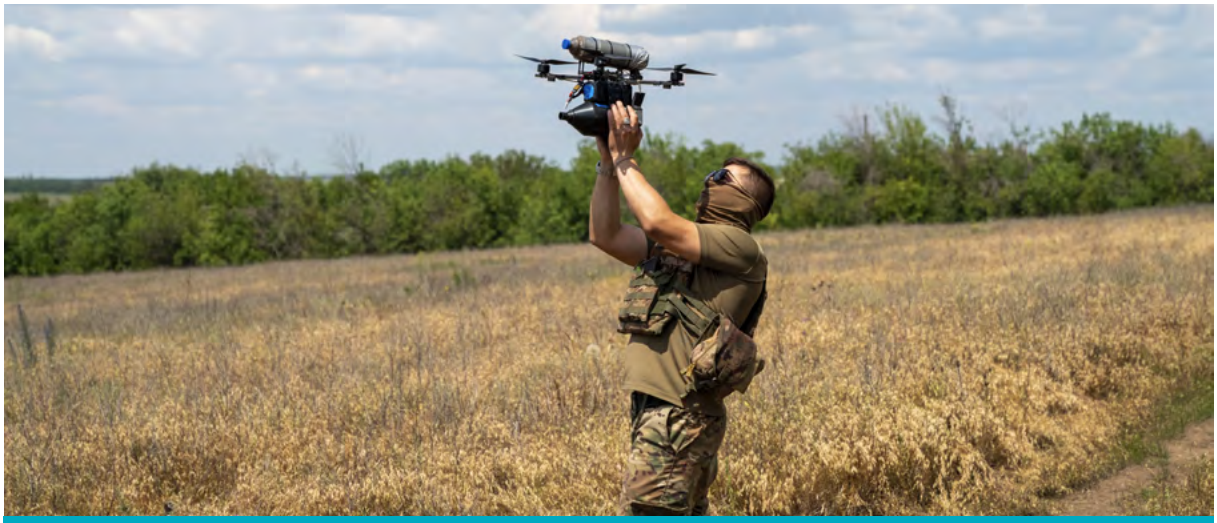
In the post-Cold War era, although this structure dissolved, warfare became even more complex. In this new phase, the rise of non-state actors, terrorist organisations, and irregular forces meant that war was no longer confined to interstate conflict—it evolved into a multi-layered struggle fought across identities, ethnic allegiances, and belief systems (Ostaszewski, 2019). Examples such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Rwandan Genocide, the Chechen Wars, and the Gulf Wars highlight how modern warfare has been redefined around civil conflicts, humanitarian crises, and the dominance of information.

The theoretical articulation of this transformation emerged with the concept of "Fourth-Generation Warfare" (4GW), developed in 1989 by William S. Lind. Lind, along with later thinkers like Thomas Hammes (2006), defined a new mode of warfare in which conflict was no longer limited to regular armies, but involved non-state actors, religious-ideological organisations, and irregular militias. In this paradigm, the boundaries between war and peace become increasingly blurred, and civilians and public opinion become direct targets. This model asserts that war is now waged not only through military force but also through narrative production, media control, and the strategic management of perception (Lind et al., 1989).

Complementing 4GW is the important theoretical development known as "Network-Centric Warfare" (Cebrowski & Garstka, 1998). The 1991 Gulf War was the first field demonstration of this model. GPS-guided munitions, JSTARS (Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System), and AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) technologies clearly demonstrated that warfare was no longer executed merely through mechanical firepower but through network-based command, control, and targeting systems (Hoehn, 2022). Thus, war transformed from mechanical confrontation into an information theatre where data architecture, decision-cycle speed, and sensor-missile integration became key determinants (Tagg, 2015).

However, technological evolution alone is insufficient to explain the new forms of warfare. The legitimacy, objectives, and epistemology of war are also undergoing transformation. Mary Kaldor's "New Wars" theory argues that modern conflicts are no longer driven solely by territorial conquest but are shaped by identity politics, the production of international legitimacy, and the control of economic networks (Kaldor, 2022). Although this model was initially criticised for neglecting the technological dimension, it gains broader explanatory power when complemented by hybrid warfare and Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW) theories.

In this new form of warfare, private military companies, proxy elements, cyber units, and media warriors function collectively—revealing that war must be conceptualised not only as a military activity but also as political communication, technical infrastructure management, and societal psychological engineering. Within this context, 5GW seeks not only physical destruction but also cognitive victory—by shaping individuals' perceptions, beliefs, systems of opinion, and even their understanding of "reality" (Hammes, 2006).



(Jose Colon - Anadolu Agency)

Elements of Modern Warfare

Modern warfare can no longer be understood solely through military power, territorial gains, or traditional battlefield encounters. Today's wars unfold across cognitive, digital, and symbolic planes. This transformation signals a departure from Clausewitzian models that define war as an extension of political intent and from Realist paradigms that reduce conflict solely to rational, material interests.

At the heart of this shift lies a profound reconfiguration of both who fights and how it is fought. Warfare now mobilizes not only regular armies but also proxy actors, private military companies, AI-assisted targeting systems, psychological warfare operatives, and disinformation engineers. The battlefield has expanded to include the human mind, social algorithms, and the symbolic order (Hammes, 2006).

The most visible aspect of modern warfare is technological transformation. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), AI-assisted targeting systems, satellite communication, and cyber warfare components have transformed the battlefield into a digital map shaped not only by physical but also by data. Ukraine's operations with low-cost yet high-impact systems like Bayraktar TB2 and Switchblade exemplify the role of technology in creating asymmetric superiority (Millynia et al., 2025). Similarly, Israel's ability to make bombing decisions within minutes using the AI-powered Habsora system demonstrates the integration of automation into the battlefield (Davies et al., 2023).

The development of satellite-based systems like Starlink and Maxar has enabled electronic jamming and signal intelligence (SIGINT), providing both battlefield awareness and decision-making supremacy to the warring sides. With this technological infrastructure, the focus has shifted from "human-machine coordination" to the decisive role of machines in the decision-making process (Millynia et al., 2025).

With the advancement of technology, decision-making processes focused on artificial intelligence now determine who lives and who dies in warfare, relying on machine logic rather than human judgment. This shift reflects a process Gayatri Spivak describes as "epistemic violence"—a form of domination that occurs when knowledge production is controlled in ways that silence marginalized voices and replace human ethical subjectivity with algorithmic abstractions (Spivak, 2023). In this context, the act of knowing turns into a mechanism of power, where decisions that once relied on human understanding and moral consideration are now made by algorithms, stripping away the human element from critical life-and-death decisions in warfare.

Another significant component of modern warfare is the prominence of perception engineering and psychological warfare. Today's wars are waged not only on physical targets but also on shaping perceptions and the subconscious. In this context, the video broadcasts made by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Israel's social media psyops during the Gaza conflict, and the propaganda videos of non-state militias are not just communication tools but also perception ammunition. Deepfake videos, bot networks, micro-targeting algorithms, and viral content campaigns not only involve the public in the war but also shape the war through public opinion.

In this framework, these methods aim not to destroy infrastructure but to create or distort perception, fragment reality, and erode public trust. This aligns with media theorist George Gerbner's concept of the "Mean World Syndrome."

The intense presentation of violent and deceptive imagery generates a worldview characterized by fear, confusion, and doubt (Gerbner, 1998). Here, the target is not just the warring parties but all global populations exposed to such content. This situation shows that states must now strategize not only through military objectives but also through legitimacy construction, narrative control, and perception engineering. The impact of public opinion on war goes beyond securing traditional public support: now every individual becomes a "perception target" or a "manipulative tool." In this sense, 5GW represents the unseen but guiding nature of war.

In this context, Ukraine-Russia war drone attacks carried out at night, Israel's jamming operations in Lebanon, drone strikes on Iran, or Iran's missile strikes on Israel not only aim to catch the enemy off guard at night but also target the subconscious. Uncertainty and the constant state of alertness turn into a form of psychological warfare, particularly for civilians living in city centres. Disrupted sleep patterns, siren sounds, emergency alerts on phones, and attack images circulating on social media show that war is not only a physical but also a cognitive, ongoing action, with the goal not just to destroy but to create exhaustion.

Modern warfare is also driven by an existential search for identity-based security. Here, historical grievances, collective traumas, and mythological narratives carry not just instrumental but existential value. For example, Israel strategically uses the historical trauma of the Holocaust to justify its existential security doctrines, associating critics of its Gaza genocide with anti-Semitism.

This search for ontological security is also evident among non-state actors engaged in long-term identity or ideology-based conflicts. Groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, or the PKK do not just act as insurgents with strategic objectives. They are also nourished by historical complaints, cultural narratives, and deeply embedded mythologies.

As a result, the elements of modern warfare have evolved into a holistic system of struggle conducted not only with physical force but also through data, code, screens, and minds. In this system, the front line is erased, wartime is endless, and the target audience is global. War is simultaneously fought on the front, on screens, on networks, and in consciousness. The winning side is no longer determined by weapons alone but by the actor who can control truth.

Two Case Studies in Modern Warfare

Understanding the ontological shift in modern warfare requires not only a theoretical inquiry but also a deep examination of real-world examples. In this context, the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel's wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran offer valuable examples to observe the elements of modern warfare.

In Ukraine, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war that began in 2022 started with a campaign organised around ontological erasure. President Vladimir Putin's statements consistently denied Ukraine's historical legitimacy and defined Russia's borders as extending wherever they were. (Dickinson, 2025). This rhetorical move is not just an ideological claim but an ontological assault aimed at dissolving the collective self-narrative of Ukraine as a nation.

According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory, symbolic violence works by imposing seemingly "natural" meanings that serve the interests of domination (Bourdieu, 1991). Russia's linguistic and historical reframing has served to reject Ukraine as a sovereign subject.

Ukraine's response has mobilised both military and symbolic resistance. President Volodymyr Zelensky's nighttime broadcasts from Kyiv were not just political communication but ontological acts affirming existence and continuity. His visual presence in military camouflage created a strategy reflecting Jennifer Mitzen's (2006) theory of ontological security, addressing the need for a coherent and resilient identity in the face of uncertainty, sending a message to the Ukrainian people. Zelensky's refusal to leave the capital, his physical presence on the ground, and his continuous rhetorical resistance have collectively reinforced the narrative of resistance (Wakefield, 2022).

Beyond political messages, Ukraine has also used the digital domain as a space for cognitive resistance. Civilian TikTok videos, viral memes mocking Russian military errors, and soldiers dancing in the trenches have all become symbolic acts of cognitive dominance.

On the other hand, Russia aimed to erode ontological continuity by using deepfake videos showing Zelensky calling for surrender, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. These reciprocal epistemic sabotage actions exemplify one of the fundamental dimensions of modern warfare.

On the physical battlefield, Ukraine has combined traditional tactics with the latest technological adaptations. Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones and U.S.-made

Switchblade kamikaze drones have enabled asymmetric but precision-focused engagements. Palantir Technologies' AI-assisted targeting systems have enhanced artillery effectiveness with battlefield surveillance, image recognition, and predictive analysis. Starlink satellite infrastructure has provided resilient communication networks, even under cyberattacks and infrastructure collapse conditions (Millynia et al., 2025).

Israel's Gaza War, meanwhile, presents an example where algorithmic and symbolic domination are concentrated. The AI-powered Habsora targeting system processes communication metadata, movement patterns, and sensor data to autonomously prioritise bombing targets. Human commanders remain the final approvers of machine-generated decisions (Davies et al., 2023). Antoine Bousquet (2009) describes this shift as moving from "recognising the enemy" to "calculating the enemy." This shift represents a radical form of epistemic violence, where algorithms make life and death decisions without transparency, accountability, or ethical deliberation.

The symbolic framing of this violence is also highly strategic. Israeli military briefings often feature animated graphics, statistical panels, and sanitised visualisations of attacks—abstracted from human outcomes. Civilian deaths are reframed as technical errors or collateral damage (Kahn, 2025).

Sensory strategies of warfare have further reinforced ontological instability in Gaza. The constant drone hum, the uncertainty of nighttime airstrikes, and the opacity of targeting criteria create an existential confusion for all of humanity, especially when basic humanitarian aid is unreachable and civilian casualties mount. Civilians are not only physically destroyed but also experience an invisible, unreadable, and unrecognised condition, unprotected by any normative system.

Israel's operations outside Gaza, such as the jamming attacks in Lebanon and drone strikes in Iran, also carry traces of cyber-psychological operations aimed at creating distrust within society. As part of its tactics in Iran, Israel organised operations targeting "critical state officials" through fake assassination or attack scenarios, demonstrating systematic psychological warfare methods aimed at creating societal distrust. Additionally, during the 12-day war, Iran used hypersonic missiles to balance Israel's strikes, underscoring the importance of multi-layered air defence systems.

Moreover, both conflict zones offer examples of "alliances." Ukraine, although not a NATO member, has effectively waged war in close integration with NATO. It has received broad support, from HIMARS artillery systems and Leopard tanks to Patriot air defence systems and Starlink satellite infrastructure. Furthermore, it has established multifaceted connections with countries like the U.S., the UK, and Germany through intelligence-sharing, training support, and logistical corridors (Bjöörn, 2024).

Israel, on the other hand, has traditionally maintained a deep strategic partnership with the U.S. This partnership extends beyond weapons and ammunition, involving joint production, R&D activities, and AI algorithms. The integration between Israeli companies like Rafael and Elbit and U.S. giants like Lockheed Martin is an indicator that non-state technological actors and companies have become primary players in warfare (Shephard, 2024).

Both wars serve as current examples showing that modern warfare has evolved into a perceptual struggle, not just a physical one. Ukraine has been actively and positively portrayed in traditional and social media, mobilising public opinion in favour of Ukraine. In contrast, the nature of media warfare in Israel is radically different. Israel not only conducts operations but also controls how these operations are perceived. The portrayal of Israel's position as "self-defence" on Western media platforms and the overlooking of civilian casualties in Gaza reveal the extent to which information warfare is directed.

Examples from modern warfare also highlight the normalisation of the "New Lawlessness Regime." The U.S. war in Iraq, initiated on the claim of Weapons of Mass Destruction, resulted in serious international sanctions after it was revealed that no such weapons existed. This situation demonstrated that great powers see themselves as entitled to shape the law without consequence.

Today, Israel's systematic bombing of civilian settlements, targeting of UN facilities, and destruction of energy and water infrastructure illustrate the entrenchment of this "new impunity regime." This is not merely the suspension of law but the selective application of law, becoming a norm. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its decisive influence on U.S. politics, Western media's pro-Israel framing, and the inefficacy of international institutions indicate that war is being won not only on the battlefield but also in the internal workings of the international system (Yüksel, 2023).

Both conflict zones provide examples of the new paradigms of modern warfare and how global powers have adapted to—or must adapt to—these paradigms, forcing both central state powers and regional forces into comprehensive adaptation at both strategic and institutional levels within the global system.

Strategic Orientations of Global Actors

Global actors are responding to this new era in line with their historical backgrounds, geopolitical interests, and technological infrastructures.

The United States

The United States is one of the key actors that both comprehends and shapes the transformation of the modern warfare paradigm. The 2025 defence budget has reached $849.8 billion, making it the largest military budget in the world. The Pentagon allocates a significant portion of this budget to AI-assisted decision-making systems, space-based sensor networks, cyber warfare capabilities, and cognitive warfare strategies (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2024). These strategies are aimed not only at the military domain but also at influencing perception management and collective memory.

At the core of U.S. and NATO military strategy is the "Multi-Domain Operations" (MDO) concept, which extends beyond land, air, and naval forces to define cyberspace, electromagnetic spectrum, AI-assisted command systems, and societal perception management as the essential components of warfare (Congressional Research Service, 2024). This approach is not only a tactical innovation but also a strategy that directly targets the ontological dimension of war. In modern conflicts, "reality" is no longer determined solely by physical outcomes on the battlefield, but also by which narrative dominates. In this context, MDO, with its capacity to shape the symbolic order of war, deconstruct enemy identities, and guide public opinion, brings Clausewitz's concept of war's "moral force" to a new level.

(Daniel Ceng - Anadolu Agency)

The Ukraine War has clearly demonstrated the on-the-ground manifestation of this strategic orientation. Not only the physical superiority provided by the high-precision attack capabilities of HIMARS rocket systems, but also the operational decision-making transformations facilitated by AI-based tactical analysis software developed by Palantir Technologies, illustrate this shift. Furthermore, Elon Musk's Starlink satellite system has enabled an uninterrupted communication infrastructure, allowing Ukraine to maintain information superiority and rendering Russia's "information suppression" strategy ineffective. As a result, the flow of data and control of narrative have become as crucial as the physical frontlines.

In the context of ontological warfare, the advanced weapon systems developed by the U.S. are noteworthy not only for their destructive power but also for the algorithmic reduction of decision-making processes. The 2,800 km-range hypersonic LRHW missile system, AI-assisted RAZOR unmanned weapon systems, Aegis Combat System with AI Fusion-integrated radar-missile algorithms, and Sentinel Program's real-time decision support systems now incorporate ontological reflexes into engineering processes by narrowing the classical decision cycle of human actors (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024). At this point, technology plays a foundational role not only as a tool but in constructing subjectivity and identity.

In the diplomatic sphere, the U.S. secures its global ontological security not only through armed capacity but also through norm production, value transfer, and information architecture. Multilateral security frameworks such as NATO, AUKUS, and QUAD, although questioned under Donald Trump's isolationist approach, remain Washington's most important normative leadership tools.

The U.S. soft power strategy toward ontological security is particularly constructed through media, cultural industries, and think tanks. Hollywood productions, Netflix series, think tank publications, and narratives disseminated through traditional and social media platforms target not only public opinion but also the enemy's memories, self-narratives, and moral positions. In this sense, the U.S. narrative production is not just propaganda; it is a form of "ontological engineering."

As a result, the U.S. war strategy has shifted from simply deterrence or dominance to breaking the enemy's historical continuity, undermining its identity integrity, and fragmenting its symbolic domain.

(China's People's Liberation Army - Anadolu Agency)

China

China's modern warfare strategy is inward-focused, long-term, integrated, and interdisciplinary. The Beijing administration is surpassing traditional warfare paradigms with its "Intelligent zed Warfare" concept, integrating multi-layered technological capabilities such as data sovereignty, AI integration, electromagnetic spectrum control, and quantum communication into its strategy (Baughman, 2024). From an ontological security perspective, this shows China's effort not only to assert its national sovereignty but also to rebuild its historical self-narrative, civilisation-based existence, and identity on a global scale.

China's sovereignty claims over Taiwan or its historical territorial rights narrative in the South China Sea should not be understood merely in terms of geopolitical interests but also in terms of the continuity of collective identity and the sustainability of the "Chinese Dream" vision (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2022) Therefore, the "Intelligent zed Warfare" approach should be seen not as a political tool in the Clausewitzian sense but as an attempt by China to reaffirm its historical continuity and rightful place in the world system.

In pursuit of this goal, Beijing is developing an integrated military-economic-cognitive capacity. A large portion of China's 2025 defence budget of 1.78 trillion yuan (approximately $249 billion) is allocated to autonomous systems, swarm drones, AI-controlled targeting technologies, and electromagnetic spectrum superiority. The Beidou satellite system aims to create an alternative to U.S. GPS dominance for both military targeting and global information infrastructure, thereby turning ontological security into a spatial expression (Beaver, 2024).

China's "civil-military fusion" policy, as emphasised by post-positivist theories, uses technological advancements not only as tools but as a strategic domain for identity construction (Fritz, 2019). Private technology companies like Huawei, DJI, Alibaba, and ZTE are working in close cooperation with the state, not only enhancing surveillance and intelligence capabilities but also being instrumental in presenting China as a "digital civilisation" to the world. In this context, the Western perception of Huawei's 5G projects as an "ontological threat" is not merely about data security but also about China's systemic norm-setting claims (Yüksel, 2023).

China's "Digital Silk Road" initiative transforms infrastructure investments into an epistemic power project, not just an economic one. Data centres, fibre-optic networks, and digital surveillance systems in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia help China build both economic and cultural authority in these regions. Supported by global media services like CCTV and Xinhua English, this structure reproduces Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" in the context of the digital age (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022).

Militarily, platforms like the CH-7 stealth drone, DF-17 hypersonic missile system, and ZTD-05 amphibious armoured vehicles are designed not only for physical superiority but also to produce psychological deterrence. In April 2025, a hyper-simulative exercise in the Taiwan Strait exemplified China's "multi-dimensional warfare" concept, utilising advanced techniques like electromagnetic signal compression, satellite blackout, and fake target deception, showing that the opposing side's cognitive capacity was also targeted (Dang & Dang, 2025).

China's cognitive warfare capacity is shaped not only by technology but also by narrative. China's global media policy, Confucius Institutes abroad, and digital platforms are central to constructing ontological security's cultural dimension (Confucius Institute, 2025). The promotion of the "China model" against Western values, the emphasis on the crises of liberal democracies, and the focus on "stability-oriented development" support China's claim of offering an alternative civilisation project.

Realist or technological-positivist approaches may interpret these strategies solely as tools for maximising interests or increasing efficiency. However, ontological security theory emphasises the significance of "intention" and "identity" in China's war strategies. China's goal is not just to control a region but also to redraw the epistemic and symbolic map of that region.

As a result, China engages in warfare not only through power projection but also through meaning production and identity construction.

Russia

Russia has developed its unique warfare doctrine by shifting from traditional conventional warfare strategies to hybrid and cognitive warfare paradigms. At the centre of this transformation is the "Gerasimov Doctrine," named after Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. In the strategic framework published in 2013, Gerasimov argues that war is not only an armed conflict but also a holistic struggle across psychological, economic, diplomatic, and cognitive fronts. According to this approach, military operations in modern conflicts make up only 20% of total war capacity, while the remaining 80% occurs in the "information space," including media, social psychology, propaganda, and digital operations (Rumer, 2019).

As of 2025, Russia's defence budget has reached 13.1 trillion Rubles (approximately $145.9 billion), with a large portion allocated to covert operations, private military companies, and enhancing cyber capabilities (Mackenzie, 2025). This choice is rooted in the strategic value of "asymmetric capabilities" that can generate high impact at low cost compared to expensive and traditional frontline battles. The Wagner Group exemplifies this trend. Operating in diverse geographies like Libya, Syria, Mali, and Ukraine, Wagner allows Russia to expand its influence at little cost to Moscow while maintaining plausible deniability. The symbols, narratives, and digital media presence used by Wagner have transformed military operations into an ontological narrative construction process.

In cyberspace, Russia carried out over 6,500 cyberattacks during the first six months of the Ukraine War, disrupting Ukraine's energy lines. GRU and FSB hacker groups have significant capabilities in disinformation and social media manipulation. Groups like "Fancy Bear" and "Sandworm" are internationally recognised threats in this field (Cetin, 2022). Russia seeks to fragment individuals' collective identities, making them more vulnerable and open to manipulation.

Although AI investments are limited compared to the U.S. and China, Russia has developed advanced capabilities in electronic warfare, GPS jamming, and intelligence fusion. Systems like Krasukha-4 produce sophisticated threats targeting NATO infrastructure (Eugene Rumer, 2019).

Another key element of Moscow's warfare strategy is cognitive warfare and information injection through media. State-supported media outlets like "Russia Today" and "Sputnik" produce alternative epistemologies that challenge Western-centred narratives. These broadcasts do not just provide information but also transform how individuals perceive the world, offering an ontological alternative reality. In this context, the media is not just a propaganda tool but an ontological instrument that shapes individual self-perception.

The weaponisation of energy resources is also part of Russia's ontological warfare strategy. Strategic pressure through Europe's dependence on natural gas targets not only economic vulnerabilities but also political identities. The "energy cutoff" threat creates a crisis of trust in both the state and EU institutions, triggering public instability and a deeper polarisation of collective identities.

Diplomatically, the Kremlin reinforces its narrative by building alternative global alliances against the West. Multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation offer not only economic and military cooperation but also alternative epistemological and political frameworks to Western norms.

European Union

The European Union, though fragmented in military capacity, has made significant investments in modern warfare domains such as cognitive warfare, cybersecurity, and AI regulations with a common strategic vision. The Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), which came into force in 2024, stands out as a pioneering regulation with the potential for high-impact results not only in Europe but globally.

The AI Act imposes serious transparency, traceability, and ethical accountability obligations on AI applications classified as high-risk. Although military applications are not directly included, the ethical limits of "dual-use" systems are building a strong norm that indirectly affects companies in this sector. Thus, the EU aims to create a framework that prioritises ontological security rather than technological superiority (EU Artificial Intelligence Act, 2024).

This approach opens an epistemic front that cannot be explained by Clausewitzian or Realist paradigms: Which technologies are "legitimate," which algorithms are "ethical," and which surveillance systems are "democratic"? These questions show that the war is now fought not just on territorial or interest axes but on the axes of information, norms, and narratives.

The EU's normative power is not limited to legislation. The cybersecurity strategies carried out under the coordination of ENISA (European Cybersecurity Agency) show that the EU is responding institutionally to the cognitive warfare domain. According to the 2023 ENISA Threat Landscape report, over 30,000 cyberattacks have been prevented across the EU, with a significant decrease in threats to critical infrastructure. ENISA's cyber threat definitions include not only technical damage but also ontological risks such

as public trust, the legitimacy of election processes, and social stability (ENISA Threat Landscape, 2023).

The EU's energy policies are also directly related to the strategic and ontological dimensions of warfare. The natural gas dependency following the Russia-Ukraine war has created vulnerabilities not only economically but also in political identity. The traumatic effect of the "dependency" narrative in public discourse has made EU energy policies both a foreign policy guide and a tool for identity construction within domestic public opinion. The REPowerEU program defines energy security as a means of collective self-reliance (ontological self-reliance) rather than just a technical supply issue. Projects such as the shift toward energy supply from Norway, Azerbaijan, and the Eastern Mediterranean function as a strategy to rebuild Europe's identity (REPowerEU, 2022).

EU foreign policy tools also support this multi-layered ontological approach. The Strategic Communications Division (StratCom) develops counter-narratives against disinformation campaigns and aims to establish normative dominance over the "realm of reality" (EEAS, 2011). Thus, the EU recognises that war is no longer just military but also a symbolic and emotional domain, intervening with ethical, legal, and cultural tools.

Türkiye

Türkiye operates with a multi-layered understanding, not only from a conventional military power perspective but also through diplomatic balance, defence industry indigenisation, strategic communication, and regional power projection. In particular, the increase in indigenous production capacity in defence technologies, expanded foreign policy manoeuvrability, and strategies developed against hybrid threats have positioned Ankara as a regional war and security strategist.

As of 2025, Türkiye's defence budget has reached 624 billion TL (16 billion USD), but what stands out is the 200% increase in defence industry exports, which reached 7.1 billion USD in the last three years (SavunmaSanayiST, 2025). The UAV/UCAV systems developed by Baykar Teknoloji, such as Bayraktar TB2, Akıncı, and Kızılelma, enhance Türkiye's soft power capacity not only through their field activities but also through the prestige they bring to diplomatic relations. Exports to over 180 countries reinforce Türkiye's recognition as a global technological defence actor (Duyar, 2025).

From the perspective of post-structuralist war paradigms, this shows that Ankara has become an actor that exports not just weapons but identity and narrative. For example, Bayraktar TB2 is not just an aircraft; it is a carrier of the discourse of non-Western, indigenous, and national defence technology, making it an instrumental form of ontological security. Through these tools, Türkiye exports a security narrative, an identity model, and a set of values.

This technological transformation is supported by institutions like ASELSAN, ROKETSAN, HAVELSAN, and STM, which develop electronic warfare systems, AI-supported autonomous platforms, and integrated digital communication infrastructures. Multi-purpose amphibious assault ships like TCG Anadolu are redefining the conceptual boundaries of warfare by not only enhancing naval power but also integrating unmanned air and sea vehicles.

In this era, where modern warfare extends beyond technical capacity to the cognitive domain, Türkiye is also increasing its influence through strategic communication and public diplomacy tools. Institutions like the Directorate of Strategic Communication, the Centre for Combating Disinformation, and other public media organisations play critical roles in information production and public opinion impact, supporting Türkiye's narrative-building capacity in the soft power dimension of modern warfare.

Diplomatically, Türkiye is one of the few countries capable of bridging the parties in conflicts with its multi-dimensional foreign policy. Mediation efforts during the Russia-Ukraine War, the Grain Corridor Agreement, and prisoner exchanges are concrete examples of this balancing position. As a NATO member, Türkiye maintains geopolitical flexibility with close diplomatic relations with both the Western bloc and the Eurasian axis.

This position carries flexibility and multidimensionality that cannot be explained by Realist or Clausewitzian approaches. As a NATO member and a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Türkiye understands that war is no longer sustained by fixed blocks and clear identities but by multiple identities, temporary alliances, and epistemic flexibility. This demonstrates that Türkiye has developed its own "ontological diplomacy."

Türkiye is also making significant investments in cybersecurity and AI-based defence. Systems developed through cooperation between USOM, TÜBİTAK, and the Presidency of Defence Industry offer proactive solutions to digital threats. The widespread adoption of the national operating system PARDUS and indigenous cryptography solutions is seen as a strategic step in terms of data sovereignty (Capanoglu, 2024).

(Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion

In the contemporary era, where the traditional concept of warfare is increasingly evolving into a more invisible, multi-layered, and cognitive form of struggle, war is no longer solely defined by armed conflict. However, it has become a phenomenon in which data flows, algorithms, and narratives compete. This indicates that war is transforming not only in terms of its tools, but also in terms of its meaning, legal boundaries, and epistemological foundations. Today, the objective of war is no longer just physical superiority; it is to establish absolute dominance in the domains of information, perception, and initiative.

This transformation reveals that the global system is structurally moving away from the idea of "conventional war" and building a new order in which a perpetual state of conflict is legitimised. States now conduct warfare not only through armies and diplomatic instruments, but also through social media platforms, algorithmic content-filtering systems, data centres, and AI-assisted decision-making processes. As a result, the distinction between "war" and "peace"—a foundational pillar of international law—is becoming obsolete; wars are no longer declared, but continuously waged through software updates, targeted content, and strategies of consciousness management.

However, examples like Gaza show that the physical domain still retains its strategic significance. The trench warfare seen in Ukraine also suggests that the pursuit of classical geographic dominance has not come to an end. Therefore, the new elements of warfare should not be seen as a complete rupture from traditional objectives, but rather as a manifestation of the desire to reach those objectives using more sophisticated, technological means. The core truth here is this: while the instruments of war may modernise, the aims do not always evolve simultaneously or uniformly.

Examples such as Gaza demonstrate that physical space remains a viable strategic target. The ongoing trench warfare in Ukraine further confirms the persistence of classical territorial ambitions. In particular, drones used actively

in the Ukraine War are redefining the nature of warfare as low-cost but high-impact tools. As seen in the Israel-Iran conflict, ballistic missiles continue to play a central role in targeting strategic facilities. These developments clearly reveal the necessity of prioritising low-altitude air defence systems within modern military doctrines. At the same time, the critical role of ballistic and hypersonic missile technologies in strategic deterrence mandates further investment in this area. Thus, the new elements of warfare do not indicate an abandonment of traditional goals but rather reflect a shift toward attaining them with more advanced means.

Another dimension of this new war environment is the deepening of the legitimacy crisis in international law. As observed in Israel's attacks on Gaza, the selective application of norms and the entrenchment of a culture of impunity are eroding the ethical foundations of modern warfare. Faced with autonomous weapon systems, AI-assisted targeting algorithms, and cognitive warfare techniques, international law proves inadequate both in implementation and interpretation. Questions such as who qualifies as a combatant, how civilians should be protected, and who bears responsibility for algorithmic decisions remain unanswered. In this context, regulating modern warfare requires more than just controlling weapons systems; it demands a new normative framework encompassing data ownership, digital rights, accountable AI use, and algorithmic justice.

In the coming era, the decisive axis of warfare will undoubtedly be strategic software capability. War is now won not in ammunition depots, but in software laboratories, lines of code, and AI-supported command systems. The global prominence of countries like India, Israel, and the United States in this domain reflects not only economic competitiveness but also strategic superiority in intelligence architecture, defence optimisation, and narrative control. It is no coincidence that national security doctrines now prioritise indigenous software development strategies over hardware capabilities. National operating systems, independent data networks, domestic cryptography infrastructures, and open-source intelligence platforms have become the new parameters of sovereignty capacity.

This process of digitalisation also reshapes the cost structure of warfare. Compared to conventional military operations, AI-based targeting systems, drone swarms, simulation-supported exercises, and cyber operations generate high strategic value at significantly lower costs. This indicates the dawn of a new era in which war is not only driven by technology but also by the principles of efficiency and scalability. However, this transformation also creates an ethical and political rupture. As decision-making processes increasingly move beyond human oversight, the question of who has the right to wage war becomes more urgent. In a world where AI algorithms gain initiative, redefining responsibility, accountability, and ethical boundaries becomes imperative.

In this regard, legal regulations such as the AI Act implemented by the European Union should be viewed not merely as technological governance, but as an effort to create new norms that frame the cognitive and ethical dimensions of warfare. In the future, AI and software infrastructures will inevitably impact not only military systems but also legal and cultural frameworks.

In an era where the meaning of war is undergoing such a profound transformation, data sovereignty has taken centre stage in modern geopolitics. Actors who can not only produce data but also process, steer, narrativise it, and generate strategic influence over target groups will be decisive—not only on the battlefield, but also within global normative systems. This represents not just a technical shift, but a profound ontological transformation wherein sovereignty, truth, and even individual freedom are being redefined.

In conclusion, the wars of our time are not fought solely on battlefields, but also across networks, screens, codebases, and within the depths of consciousness. The victor is no longer the one with mere technological superiority, but the one who constructs truth, builds norms, and shapes perceptions. Therefore, survival in the modern age of warfare depends not only on military capacity, but on conceptual clarity, ethical sensitivity, digital competence, and the ability to generate strategic narratives. The true struggle of the coming era is not merely about possessing superior technology, but about constructing a normative vision capable of safeguarding human dignity, truth, and intellectual independence.

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