Language(s) of War: A Discursive Framework for the Linguistic Construction of Interstate Conflict*

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Summary. 'War' is a perennial issue of world politics. Building upon the insight that war is a socially constructed phenomenon (Bartelson, Butler, Wilhelmsen), one to be "explored… not explained or counted by IR theory" (Barkawi), this paper suggests an original theoretical framework for deciphering the role that language plays in making modern international conflict. The article reflects on the persistence of war in world politics, despite the extensive normative, legal, moral, and even aesthetic rejections of this form of interstate interaction that have developed over many centuries. Taking these injunctions seriously, the project explores how the 'language of war' (the elective framing of international issues, relationships, and even forms of actors, within militarised metaphors and symbolic invocations) enacts particular processes which participate in the making of armed (international) conflict. Specifically, the framework suggests that the language of war not only reflects but actively shapes the predispositions and decisions leading to conflict. By framing international disputes in this way, language establishes a symbolic landscape that makes recourse to violence appear permissible, advantageous, and then necessary. It argues that the metaphor of war operates through, and indeed pervades, the 'ordinary security language' (Leader Maynard 2022) which attends the modern international state system. By explicitly deploying such framings, which are easily brought to the surface, the language of war – inadvertently, at first – enacts a cycle of radicalisation between domestic constituencies, international diplomacy, and (political) elites. In this way, the paper begins to ask how we can talk ourselves into war.
Keywords: international relations theory, war, constructivism.

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Karo kalba (-os): diskursyvinis tarpvalstybinių konfliktų lingvistinės konstrukcijos pagrindas

Santrauka. „Karas" yra nuolatinė pasaulio politikos problema. Naudojantis įžvalga, kad karas yra socialiai konstruojamas reiškinys (Bartelson, Butler, Wilhelmsen), kurį, anot Barkawi, reikia „tirti…, o ne aiškinti ar suskaičiuoti remiantis tarptautinių santykių teorijomis", šiame straipsnyje siūloma originali teorinė prieiga, skirta išryškinti kalbos vaidmenį formuojant šiuolaikinius tarptautinius konfliktus. Straipsnis reflektuoja karo tęstinumo pasaulio politikoje faktą, nors per daugelį amžių yra susiformavusių išsamių normatyvinių, teisinių, moralinių ir net estetinių šios tarpvalstybinės sąveikos formos atmetimų. Rimtai vertindamas šias nuostatas, tyrimas nagrinėja, kaip „karo kalba" (pasirinktinis tarptautinių problemų, santykių ir net veikėjų formų įrėminimas militarizuotomis metaforomis ir simbolinėmis invokacijomis) įgyvendina tam tikrus procesus, dalyvaujančius kuriant ginkluotą (tarptautinį) konfliktą. Konkrečiai – siūloma teorinė sistema teigia, kad karo kalba ne tik atspindi, bet ir aktyviai formuoja nuostatas bei sprendimus, vedančius į konfliktą. Šitaip įrėmindama tarptautinius ginčus, kalba sukuria simbolinę erdvę, kurioje smurto naudojimas ima atrodyti leistinas, naudingas ir, galiausiai, būtinas. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad karo metafora veikia per vadinamąją „įprasto saugumo kalbą" (Leader Maynard 2022) ir iš tiesų ją persmelkia, tapdama neatskiriamu šiuolaikinės tarptautinės valstybių sistemos elementu. Sąmoningai pasitelkdama tokias lengvai aktualizuojamas įrėminimo formas karo kalba skatina vidaus auditoriją, tarptautinės diplomatijos ir (politinių) elitų radikalizacijos ciklą. Taip straipsnis pradeda kelti klausimą, kaip mes patys įsikalbame karą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: tarptautinių santykių teorija, karas, konstruktyvizmas.

Introduction

> "To be free in this world you need to be feared.
> To be feared, you must be powerful."
> – Emmanuel Macron, President of France[1]

Large-scale inter-state war has long been viewed as a fundamental feature of international relations. It is no coincidence, therefore, that understanding its causes has been the subject of intense scholarly debates. Dominant in these debates are explanations that locate the causes of war in material factors. Proponents of the 'security dilemma', for instance, argue that the anarchic environment and the inability of states to fully understand each other's intentions compel

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[1]   Victoria Bourne, 'Macron Says Europe's Freedom Faces Greatest Threat since WW2', *BBC News* (London), 14 July 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdez5e212dzo.

them to seek 'security' through aggression.[2] Likewise, particular constellations of material 'power' between states within the anarchic international system are said to drive conflict: either by compelling the most powerful states in the system to extend their dominance,[3] or, conversely, because the more even distribution of power leads states to fight one another in order to attain dominance.[4] Power transitions, when a 'challenger' state seeks to overtake a declining hegemon, have also been argued to precipitate war.[5] Scholars have also examined how the decisions of a relatively small group of political elites, operating within modern bureaucratic and professional structures, can permit or even encourage aggressive 'wars of choice'.[6]

This article offers a conceptual departure from these material approaches to understanding the causes of inter-state war. While acknowledging the importance of material factors, it directs attention to the crucial role which language plays in inadvertently generating the conditions for large-scale conflict. More specifically, it proposes an initial exploratory framework for understanding how the 'language of war' in world politics, that is, the militarised content of our 'ordinary security language' and the specific discursive invocation of war-like

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[2]   Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (Collins, 1951); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2017); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979).

[3]   Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed., ed. Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton (McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006).

[4]   Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (Hurst & Company, 2018).

[5]   Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War, Volume I: Books 1-2*, ed. C.F. Smith, The Loeb Classical Library 108 (Harvard University Press, 1919); Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydide's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1958).

[6]   Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, The Henry l. Stimson Lectures Series (Yale University Press, 2018).

metaphors and the framing of certain interactions and relationships of war-like framings which imaginatively invoke notions of war and conflict, serves to generate the conditions for inter-state conflict.

We argue that war is a powerful vocabulary. Yet, far from merely 'describing' an object beyond the boundaries of its discursive invocation, we interpret this vocabulary itself as an active agent in the (re-) making and generation of war in world politics. In short, war is first spoken into being. This process is highly contextual. It occurs in time and space, and, in particular, through a world political condition fundamentally mediated by Western modernity. Building upon foundational constructivist and interpretivist insights, this article suggests a historically-grounded framework for interpreting how war's linguistic construction accompanies and generates its material development. The proposed framework investigates this linguistic process at two embedded levels. First, it explores the broader conceptual and cultural contexts within – and, to some extent, by – which ideas that are regarded as the foundational building blocks of our understanding of international politics, such as human nature, sovereignty, or just order, are given their specific meanings that come to be accepted as fixed, shared knowledge. We propose that these ideas are in constant interaction with the material and discursive aspects of war, and therefore give rise to its particular conceptualisations and framings. Consequently, at the second level, the framework focuses on this interaction by uncovering how specific issues and relationships, oftentimes conceived in terms of threat/fear/defence, are created, interpreted, and described using the language of war. This article is guided by the following question: *How does the language of war discursively constitute the conditions under which large-scale inter-state violence becomes thinkable, legitimate, and ultimately desirable?*

Before moving on, it is important to clarify some central concepts. The 'ordinary security language' that we are discussing, terminology borrowed from Leader-Maynard,[7] describes the background,

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7   Jonathan Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing: The Radicalized Security Politics of Genocides and Deadly Atrocities* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

taken-for-granted vocabulary through which insecurity, danger, protection, and political order are rendered intelligible in Western modernity. This language is 'ordinary' in the sense that it appears commonsensical, neutral, and self-evident. Ordinary security language permeates public discourse, structures the social and political imagination, governing and delineating the range of the plausible, possible, and 'realistic' in world politics. Its conceptual repertoire appeals to usually unquestioned categories of threat, survival, territorial integrity, vigilance, deterrence, and so on. Through this repertoire, we can identify the articulation of moral value – i.e., the state, nation, and the casting of groupings as 'inside/outside', or 'us/them' – which defines an often-unspoken moral terrain upon which politics happens (and which constrains how it *can* happen). Within this, the 'language of war' refers to the explicit and implicit discursive practices that frame political issues, relationships, or actors in war-like terms. It includes metaphorical invocations ('war on drugs', 'economic warfare'), designations of existential threat, securitizing moves, and symbolic repertoires that draw upon the cultural authority of war as an exceptional and morally charged category of action. While ordinary security language provides the wider semantic field within which meanings of danger and protection circulate, the language of war represents a specific, intensified subset of this field that mobilises the grammar, imagery, and emotional resonance of war to re-categorise political reality. The language of war is therefore identified by markers such as the invocation of enemies, battles, fronts, victory, necessity, inevitability, or survival, whether or not actual armed conflict is present. Within this article, ordinary security language is treated as the broader discursive terrain that both legitimises, explains, and renders war-like framings intelligible. This is, for sure, a difficult conceptual webbing which escapes entirely neat analytical disentanglement. However, the broad contours of these concepts can be made visible in empirical analysis.

This article proceeds as follows. First, it explores the 'ordinary security language' that permeates contemporary public and elite dis-

courses in the Euro-Atlantic region, eliciting the core aspects of its basic logic as captured by foundational texts commonly associated with the Realist School of International Relations. In particular, it examines how this highly militarised vocabulary is informed by fundamental ideological commitments and ontological assumptions around human nature, the state, and the nature of the international system, assumptions which come to be accepted as common sense, with fixed meanings across different spatial and temporal contexts. Second, building on the core features of this 'language of war' thus identified, the article elaborates on the theoretical framework for uncovering how war is discursively constituted in world politics, challenging conventional views in International Relations, where war is often treated as a given, stable, and bounded event, and primarily the result of material forces. Most importantly, it questions mainstream understandings that regard war as an inherent or functionally immutable feature of human existence.

Methodologically, this article adopts an interpretivist and genealogical approach to the study of war. Rather than treating war as a fixed or observable outcome, it examines the historically sedimented concepts, metaphors, and linguistic repertoires through which inter-state violence becomes intelligible. The analysis proceeds through close reading of influential political and theoretical texts, not because these works 'cause' war, but because they crystallise the broader discursive assumptions embedded within Western modernity's ordinary security language. This approach does not offer empirical explanation in a positivist sense; instead, it reconstructs the conceptual terrain that makes particular forms of political action possible. As such, the framework developed here is intended to guide subsequent empirical inquiry into how war language circulates within specific historical contexts and across different political constituencies.

1. From Human Nature, to the State, to the International: Wide-Circles of Security Discourse in World Politics

A core claim of this article is that the 'ordinary security language' of modern (Euro-Atlantic) world politics[8] is informed by fundamental ideological commitments and ontological assumptions around 'human nature', 'the state', and the nature of the 'international'. Ordinary security language provides a highly militarised vocabulary which operates functionally as a universalising 'common sense'. This linguistic apparatus continues to shape how 'international' politics, and significant issues such as war, are conceptualised among society and policy 'elites'. Whilst on one level this is an ideological commitment which reflects the deeply vested power interests of a world political system still vainly seeking emancipation from colonial structures, on another it is both product and productive of a vocabulary for interpreting 'plain reality' which simply exists 'out there'. To fully elaborate the weaving of this world view would be a monumental task, well beyond the scope of this article, if even possible. Instead, we propose a partial – guiding – outline for coming to grips with the discursive conditions for contemporary inter-state war.

Although the following discussion draws heavily on canonical works commonly associated with the Realist school, our purpose is not to present Realism as the originator of the core assumptions we analyse. The conceptual building blocks that underpin what we call the ordinary security language, particular views of human nature, the state, and the international, long pre-date modern Realism; they circulated widely in Western political and cultural thought before being distilled with unusual clarity by twentieth-century Realist authors. For this reason, we turn to selected works by Raymond Aron, Hans J. Morgenthau, and John J. Mearsheimer, whose intellectual lineage reaches back to situated readings of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, not to critique Realism as a unified or coherent school, but

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8   Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*.

because these texts articulate with exceptional precision the underlying logic that continues to inform contemporary security discourse. What follows, therefore, should not be read as an assessment of Realism as such,[9] nor as an exhaustive treatment of internal debates within the tradition,[10] but rather as an analytical reconstruction of those recurrent assumptions that these works most powerfully capture and which, we argue, form the conceptual substrate of the ordinary security language.

As mentioned above, this vocabulary can be approached through assumptions about 'human nature', 'the state', and the supposed nature of an 'international' world.[11] Turning first to 'human nature', several core precepts inform theorising here. First, reflecting a deep continuity with (but, paradoxically, also a radical break from) prominent strands of 'Western' political theology at least since the Enlight-

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[9]   For excellent works exploring Realism thoroughly and comprehensively, see: Benjamin Frankel, ed., *Roots of Realism* (Frank Cass, 1996); Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael C. Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Annette Freyberg-Inan et al., eds., *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Ken Booth, ed., *Realism and World Politics* (Routledge, 2011).

[10] Of which there are numerous iterations. While it would go beyond the scope of the article to list all of these disagreements, it is worth highlighting some of the more important ones. On whether conflict is rooted in human nature, a product of systemic forces, or driven by a combination of systemic and state-level factors, see: Morgenthau, H.J. 1967. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. A. A. Knopf; Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. 1st ed. McGraw-Hill; and Ripsman, Norrin M., Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell. 2016. *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. Oxford University Press. On whether state behaviour is influenced by material factors only or by perception as well, see: Gilpin, Robert. 1981. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press and Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. International Relations. Princeton Univ. Press. On whether states are security-maximising or power-maximising, see: Walt, Stephen M. 2007. *The Origins of Alliances*. 1. publ. paperb. 1990, [Nachdr.]. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Cornell Univ. Press and Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Updated edition. The Norton Series in World Politics. W.W. Norton & Company.

[11] Which echoes the structure of Waltz's highly influential analysis of the role of war in world politics. Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, Anniversary Edition (Columbia University Press, 2018).

enment, and (re-)readings of Greco-Roman antiquity, the 'human' it-self is pre-supposed to enjoy a distinct, fundamental, existence which is both prior-to and ontologically privileged above its social consti-tution. In a word, the individual exists, and is the building block and ultimate referent of political life. Indeed, without the individual it makes no sense to speak of politics at all. Without collapsing subtle distinctions, the theorising underpinning the ordinary security lan-guage that we are foregrounding here obviously shares this common lineage with Western political thought in the broad, and the various distinct 'schools' of traditional IR which have emerged from it.[12] Second, reflections on human nature again proceed as if this can (and must) be an analytic category above, and in some important ways outside of, its relations *with other humans and human cultural mi-lieus*. (Not even to mention a 'nature' which is either conceived as property, or at least in the custodianship of, this independent human subject.) A rarely interrogated starting point of a highly anthropo-centric Western IR, then, is that 'one and many' are categorically distinct.[13] At base, the fundamental aspects of human nature are as-sumed to be static across different temporal, geographic, and cultural contexts. The underlying logic of the ordinary security language pre-supposes a temporally invariant human subject who can be subject-ed to rational and almost disinterested 'external' analysis. And, after establishing a categorical and firm tri-partite distinction between *hu-man, animal*, and *nature*, it then introduces a paradox. First of all, it depicts the timeless human being as analogous to the way in which it conceptualises (an equally timeless and universal) animal nature as 'aggressive', 'physically and morally combative', and that 'responds

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[12]   Barry Buzan, 'How and How Not to Develop IR Theory: Lessons from Core and Periphery', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 4 (2018): 391–92.

[13]   Giorgio Shani and Navnita Chadha Behera, 'Provincialising International Relations through a Reading of Dharma', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 837–56; Shampa Biswas, 'Postcolonialism', in *International Relations Theories: Disci-pline and Diversity*, 4th edition, ed. Tim Dunne et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017); Deepshikha Shahi, *Global IR Research Programme: The Futuristic Foundation of 'One and Many'* (Springer, 2023).

with violence to pain and frustration'.[14] At the same time, human beings are rational in the sense that they are able to identify their goals and the most efficient means available to achieve them. This reflects a deep pre-disposition in the Western imagination towards reflecting on the 'dual nature' of the human: rational and animal (or even divine).[15] Their primary goal is physical survival, described as an 'elemental bio-psychological drive to live'.[16] Despite this shared goal, humans must depend solely on themselves, as they are locked 'in permanent competition with [their] kind'.[17] They pursue this goal independently and with self-interest, seldom seeking the cooperation of others. The 'plain common sense' of a modern world politics, then, imagines the individual as a distinct relation-preceding moral and political agent, distinguished by a (so far) unique capacity for rationality (or, more precisely, access to the moral law).

Fear is foundational to this anthropology. Playing a crucial role in human interactions, it acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As noted, it is pre-supposed and generally unquestioned in mainstream IR thinking that the individual human subject *fundamentally* exists, and that it likes it that way. Persistence, or 'survival', is the ultimate motivating aspiration, within a world which constantly threatens this aspiration. To ensure their survival, human beings must remain vigilant, constantly on the lookout for potential dangers that might inflict serious physical harm. However, due to their inherent vulnerability to other humans, their safety can never be fully guaranteed. Assuming that others are

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[14]   Raymond Aron, *Peace & War: A Theory of International Relations*, transl. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966).

[15]   Hubert Cancik, '"Dignity of Man" and "Persona" in Stoic Anthropology: Some Remarks on Cicero, De Officiis I 105–107', in *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, ed. David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein (Kluwer Law International, 2002); Giannozzo Manetti, *On Human Worth and Excellence*, transl. Brian P. Copenhaver, I Tatti Renaissance Library 85 (Harvard University Press, 2018); Brian P. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico Della Mirandola and His Oration in Modern Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2019), https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674238268.

[16]   Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 17.

[17]   Aron, *Peace & War*, 355.

as egoistic and malevolent in their pursuit of survival as they themselves might potentially be, human beings can never fully trust one another. The 'self'/'other' divide can never be fully bridged. Despite a dominant strain of thought which identifies the human as 'social' in a very important sense,[18] the island of individual existence will always hover above this, the spectre at the feast. This 'plain reality' sows the seeds of distrust among humans, permeating all their interactions. Distrust and fear in their human relations drive them to seek security through gaining more (physical) power. The ultimate objective is to dominate other human beings, a strategy deemed necessary to deter physical attacks and thus increase one's chances of survival. This 'desire to dominate is a constitutive element of all human associations', ranging from familial or fraternal groups to the state.[19] The inherent desire for power and the ensuing struggle for power, essential aspects of human existence, transform competitive, distrustful human relations into conflictual ones. If one increases its power, others will inevitably feel existentially threatened and are likely to respond violently, driven by 'primal instincts': biological, fundamental, ultimately unassailable.

Moreover, this 'will to power' has no limits, as the desire for more power "would be satisfied only if the last man became an object of his domination, there being nobody above or beside him, that is, if he became like God".[20] Power is typically amassed through the accumulation of two fundamental resources: social status, or honour, and material wealth. However, as both resources are finite, human interactions become a zero-sum game, rendering it impossible for all individuals to simultaneously achieve their shared goals, including that of survival.

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[18] Aristotle, *Politics*, transl. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 264 (Harvard University Press, 1932), bk 1; Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. Allen W. Wood (Yale University Press, 2002), sect. 2; Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, with Friedrich Engels, Great Books in Philosophy (Prometheus Books, 1998), 570.

[19] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 17.

[20] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Latimer House, 1947), 165.

Consequently, humans are primarily focused on their relative power and remain cautious of any changes to it. This pessimistic view of human nature is further exacerbated by the assumption that humans are incapable of changing their fundamental characteristics. There is no 'gradual development towards the good', and the 'sinfulness of man' is perceived as "an inescapable necessity which gives meaning to the existence of man".[21] This negates the possibility of human 'progress', progress conceived as the elimination of the conflictual aspects of their interactions, through some kind of (hypothetical) bridging of self/other.

Whilst this partial sketch of the universal human nature is largely taken-for-granted by the ordinary security language and much akin 'policy-focussed' IR scholarship, constituting a 'taken-for granted' starting point for thinking about the international, it plays a highly significant role in shaping (thinkable/'practicable') state behaviours and interactions between units of world politics. First of all, the fundamental cosmology of the international is made in this Enlightened image. We will expand on the specific role that various of these cosmological images play in the militarised 'ordinary security language' of world politics below, but suffice to say this vision of the universal human nature explicitly generates ideas of 'anarchy' / 'hierarchy', 'state', and 'system' / '(dis-)order'.

In particular, the state reflects a metaphorical individual persona in this language (and also in international legal regimes). And, accordingly, this constructed agent becomes the focus and (by extrapolation) the central referent of all possible world politics. And thus, in keeping with the analogy, "starting from animal aggression, human vanity and tribal coherence, societies develop both production tools and combat weapons", state-to-state relations are not merely the bread and butter of IR, but also they are inherently conflictual.[22] Power politics is the inescapable and universal lingua franca among nations, precisely because it is "rooted in the lust for power *which is common to all men*… [and which is] inseparable from social life

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[21] Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 174.
[22] Aron, *Peace & War*, 355.

itself".[23] In other words, "politics… is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature".[24] It is clear that, within the common sense of the ordinary security language that constitutes and bounds our performances of world politics, the state is a 'rational', individual actor whose behaviour naturally mimics the ideological commitments towards the certain perception of human nature that we have sketched in the broad. And what it means for states to act rationally, is to devise optimally efficient strategies for persistence and replication, 'survival'. Likewise, rooted in the universal human nature as this objective is, this strategy must contend with a distinct outside world that is ultimately hostile and threatening. So, whilst the primary goal of states is physical survival, achieved through the preservation of national independence and territorial integrity, as historically consistent 'core values',[25] states will also (or, within the logic of this vocabulary, *therefore*) attempt to "maximize [their] share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states".[26]

Here, we see the common-sense view of an 'international system' made of these units, as an arena populated (if not generated *per se*) by units which continuously seek power and strive to dominate it, just as 'all men' do in common society.[27] Although military power is the predominant source of power, material wealth and status, or prestige, also play a crucial role. The former provides 'the foundation of military power', enhancing the state's ability to survive through deterring potential attacks and ensuring the qualitative and quantitative improvement of military capabilities.[28] The latter hinges on how states perceive or recognise another state's relative strength, which can also serve as a deterrent.[29] Consequently, status and mate-

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[23]   Emphasis added. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 16.

[24]   Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4.

[25]   Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics.* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 489.

[26]   Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 3.

[27]   Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*, 16.

[28]   Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 46.

[29]   Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, ed. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad, with Jack Spence (Continuum, 1978), 98.

rial wealth, along with fear, emerge in the ordinary security language as the primary drivers of interstate conflicts.[30] Once we have established, concretised, and individualised the state, an 'irreducible level of fear' in the international system arises from the states' inability to fully discern each other's present and future intentions, implying "that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions".[31] This predicament gives rise to a famous security dilemma where "each side's efforts to make itself more secure had the unintended effect of making the other less secure", potentially triggering a conflict spiral and contributing to the escalation of war.[32] Whether or not a supranational, global authority can or should be instituted to moderate these fundamental realities of an inter-national world politics, although a hot topic of debate in mainstream IR, is secondary. What matters for the common-sense logic which prescribes modern political thought and action is that, first of all, it *does not* straight-forwardly exist,[33] and, if it did, except in some 'utopian' or hypothetical sense, its role would still be to exercise governance functions over an international system constituted (primarily) by states, or some other theoretical grouping (i.e., regions), inescapably delineated 'selves', those metaphorical avatars of our inescapable and timeless nature.

A significant task of much IR scholarship has been to provincialise and dismantle this ideological infrastructure.[34] The highly subjective, gendered, and colonial lens through which mainstream IR views the human condition is a well-recognised problem for critical scholars. The purpose of this section has rather been to illustrate some central features of the (largely unspoken) conceptual universe from

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30   Wight, *Power Politics*; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*.
31   Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31, 43.
32   Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, xiii–xiv.
33   The modulating effect of norms and communities of practice which is sometimes considered, especially in liberal or constructivist IR, notwithstanding.
34   For some important recent contributions towards this effort see, Laura Doyle et al., eds., *Dissolving Master Narratives: Decolonial Reconstellations, Volume Two* (Routledge, 2025).

which the 'ordinary security language' draws its concepts, notions, and vocabulary. In the following section, we outline a speculative, historical, theoretical framework for guiding a situated enquiry into how this 'language of war' shapes the conditions for and generates inter-state war in world politics.

2. Uncovering the Discursive Making of Inter-State War

This section proposes a theoretical framework for uncovering how war is discursively constituted in world politics. Drawing from constructivist and post-structuralist insights, it argues that war is not merely a response to material conditions, but an emergent effect of language, largely through metaphor, and symbolic invocation. The section proceeds in four steps: (1) challenging essentialist views of war; (2) locating the paradoxical aversion to war in modernity; (3) examining the securitizing function of war discourse; and (4) proposing a two-tiered historical-analytical model to study how war discourse circulates and materialises.

War is not an essential or timeless feature of human existence, but a historically and socially constructed practice. This claim challenges conventional views in International Relations, where war is often treated as a given, "a fact to be explained or counted by IR theory".[35] In contrast, this article argues that war is constituted through language. More specifically, it is made through discursive acts, metaphors, and symbolic framings that assign meaning to conflict and justify the mobilisation of violence.[36] Approaching war as a discursive phenomenon

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[35]   Tarak Barkawi, 'War and History in World Politics', in *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*, ed. Mlada Bukovansky et al. (Oxford University Press, 2023), 292.

[36]   This is to say that the widespread deployment of warlike, securitised, metaphors and symbolic framings not just to describe specific 'inter-national' relationships or policy conundrums, but also to conceptualise and make sense of the international more generally, are subjective, contingent, and extrapolated from the broad ontological commitments described above, rather than objective and value-neutral descriptors of a world politics which exists beyond its linguistic constitution.

allows us to move beyond explanations rooted in material capabilities or innate aggression. And this distinction is critical, as it challenges conventional understandings that regard war, or debate it, as an inherent or immutable feature of human existence. Whilst the 'character' of war changes,[37] scholars concede, its nature is static; hence, "war has a nature which is eternal but which at the same time takes a finite form".[38] Approaching war as discursively constituted, on the other hand, invites attention to how war is defined, legitimated, and naturalised in different historical and cultural contexts. As Judith Butler reminds us, even the act of defining war is never neutral, it is always an exercise of power.[39] Definitions of war determine who counts as a legitimate actor, which forms of violence are permitted, and what responses are imaginable. This conceptual terrain is not static but continually remade through discourse. Yet the discursive constitution of war is not merely deliberate or strategic, as pre-supposed by rationalist explanations. It also functions ironically. A central paradox of (Western) modernity is that it defines itself through a normative aversion to war, even as it reproduces the discursive conditions for its recurrence. It is this tension which imbues the language of war with special resonance. Precisely because war is seen as exceptional, its invocation, whether metaphorical or literal, carries extraordinary weight. It legitimates actions, suspends norms, and mobilises publics. It provides a discursive toolkit to political actors, which, at the same time, whilst constitutive of war, cannot be recognised as such by the commitments of the ordinary security language which assert a hegemonic grip over the 'common-sense' of day-to-day politics. In this sense, war is not simply spoken about; it is spoken into being.

To understand the force of modern war discourse, it is important to grasp the ironic function of its proliferation. That is, a significant

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[37] Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers, eds., *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[38] Christopher Coker, *Barbarous Philosophers: Reflections on the Nature of War from Heraclitus to Heisenberg* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 12.

[39] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2016).

factor in generating these linguistic evocations of war is the normative aversion to war that is deeply embedded within Western modernity. This aversion, while often articulated in moral or legal terms, is better understood as a structural feature of modernity's teleological historical imagination, a worldview that envisions history as a linear journey from barbarism to civilization, violence to order, a war of all-against-all to peaceful society.[40] Within this frame, war is typically cast as a tragic deviation from reason, a residual pathology of pre-modernity, or a necessary evil to be overcome in the name of human progress.[41] Yet, paradoxically, the same modern imaginary that denounces war as barbaric also depends upon war for its foundational ordering functions: from colonial conquest to state formation and humanitarian intervention.[42] As Jens Bartelson has compellingly shown, modern political thought contains a deep ambivalence about war's status. While modernity affirms a principled rejection of war as morally suspect and politically pathological, it also resuscitates an ontogenetic understanding of war, one that portrays war not as a breakdown of order, but as a generative force through which political communities are born, borders are drawn, and historical legitimacy is claimed. Bartelson identifies this as a revival of the Roman tradition in which war is conceived as a "productive force in human affairs that ought to be harnessed for political purposes, such as the creation of a peaceful political and legal order".[43] In this view, war becomes the midwife of order: destructive but also constitutive.

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[40] Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, transl. Sean Franzel, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford University Press, 2018); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2007).

[41] Immanuel Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch', in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (Yale University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300128109-012; G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. T. M. Knox (Oxford University Press, 2015).

[42] Charles Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime', in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Dietrich Rueschemeyer et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1985); Jens Bartelson, *War in International Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Mahmood Mamdani, 'Responsibility to Protect or Right to Punish?', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4, no. 1 (2010): 53–67.

[43] Bartelson, *War in International Thought*, 180.

This ambivalence is not merely theoretical, it has structured the historical and discursive life of modern international order. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century wars, driven by interventionist or developmental logics, have not simply violated modernity's moral stance against violence, but have relied upon it. Indeed, as scholars have pointed out, the colonial and imperial projects of European powers were underwritten by the very idea that war, though abhorrent in principle, could be justified as a vehicle of civilizational uplift.[44] The same logic animates the 'democratic peace' thesis, liberal humanitarianism, and even certain socialist universalisms, all of which presume that violence may be necessary in the short term to realise a more peaceful global order in the long term. The irony is thus structural. Modernity condemns war in order to legitimise it. That is, war gains discursive power precisely because it is framed as an aberration. The greater the normative aversion, the more potent its invocation becomes. In this sense, the rejection of war does not render it obsolete; it makes war more rhetorically powerful, more available as a tool for the declaration of existential stakes. Because war is seen as the ultimate negation of order, invoking it, whether metaphorically or literally, becomes a way to demand exceptional measures, galvanise publics, and consolidate political authority.[45] As such, peace is ontologically negated, its attainment ever dangled just beyond the nose by subjective, power-laden, universalising discursive frames, whose claims create its demand in the first place.

In this context, we see how the concept of war carries a powerful resonance that extends far beyond its material realities. The meta-

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[44]   Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2000); Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader*, ed. Douglas Mackay Kellner and Stephen Eric Bronner (Routledge, 1989); Jessica Whyte, 'The "Dangerous Concept of the Just War": Decolonization, Wars of National Liberation, and the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 9, no. 3 (2018): 313–41, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hum.2018.0017.

[45]   Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics, and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester University Press, 2018); Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner, 1998).

phorical use of war draws on this resonance to become pervasive, shaping and reflecting societal currents in profound ways. On the one hand, the abstract aversion to war amplifies the impact of its invocation, imbuing this language with a unique sense of gravity and urgency. These deployments constitute a conscious (re-)framing of political action. We can refer here to securitisation, the process by which actors make discursive moves in order to elevate issues above (and thereby place them outside) the ordinary business of politics by identifying a referent object to which they pose an existential threat, and convincing a significant audience to accept this move.[46] By successfully framing issues as existential threats, successful securitisations permit – or even require – an extraordinary response, thus endowing and legitimating specific forms of 'norm-breaking' power on political authorities.[47] Securitisation is useful here, as it points up how security, "is a practice not of responding to enemies and fear but of creating them".[48] In this sense, the language of war could be seen as a particular genus of securitization.[49] The 'securitizing' dimension of these deployments represents the surface current. Embedded within the cultural aversion to war (despite specific policy choices), actors consciously rely on the force of this discourse.

As noted above, war is first-and-foremost treated as a stable, bounded event in mainstream IR and political discourse more generally. And these discourses are themselves imbued with ideological commitments which naturalise certain assumptions about the human condition, which may establish and normalise the 'event' of war as inevitable. Given this, there is a lack of recognition about how such

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[46] Barry Buzan, 'Rethinking Security after the Cold War', *Cooperation and Conflict* 32, no. 1 (1997); Ole Wæver, 'Fouc', *Journal of International Affairs* 48, no. 2 (1995).

[47] Julie Wilhelmsen, 'How Does War Become a Legitimate Undertaking? Re-Engaging the Post-Structuralist Foundation of Securitization Theory', *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 2 (2017): 167–68.

[48] Jef Huysmans, *Security Unbound: Enacting Democratic Limits* (Routledge, 2014), 3.

[49] This suggestion builds on Vuori's recognition that distinct forms of securitization inform different responses and entail divergent consequences. Juha A. Vuori, 'How to Do Security with Words: A Grammar of Securitization in the People's Republic of China' (University of Turku, 2011).

deployments of the language of war are not merely rhetorical. Rather, they participate in a continual renegotiation of what war is, and what it means in world politics. Whilst these invocations participate in reshaping its boundaries, legitimating new forms of organised violence, and reconstituting its societal and political significance, beneath the surface, political actors *perceive themselves and their discursive actions to be external to the occurrence of war as a central problematique of world politics*. These dual currents reflect an underlying tension: the simultaneous rejection of war and its embrace as a framework for action. The historical deployment of war language has profound implications for the boundaries and practices of organised violence. These invocations redraw the markers and boundaries of what constitutes legitimate violence, legitimating certain practices while excluding others. For example, historical patterns such as 'permanent security' seeking,[50] and the 'forever wars' of the contemporary era illustrate how the language of war can entrench and normalise particular forms of state violence. This tension highlights the complexity and ambiguity of war as a concept, revealing its capacity to both inspire and constrain human action.

The core claim here, is that, in reconstituting the scope and meaning of war, these discursive practices inadvertently generate the conditions for large-scale conflict. Thus, efforts to delineate and avoid war, which occur within thus contributes to its perpetuation, highlighting the paradoxical nature of modern attitudes toward violence. Now, the manner in which this occurs is historical. We propose that any enquiry into how this process unfolds will be compelled to reconstruct a conceptual and cultural apparatus that operates across two embedded levels.

1. Broader conceptual and cultural contexts: How foundational ideas about international politics, including human nature, anarchy, sovereignty, just order, legitimacy, and the ethics of war, are constructed and interpreted within specific historical contexts. These

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[50] See A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Human Rights in History (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

provide the 'wide circles in the distance',[51] within which concep-
tualisations and framings of war must be established, and to which
they inescapably refer. Given the force of the language war, it is
reasonable to suppose that these concepts enter into a dialectical
relationship with discursive deployments no less than the prac-
tice of war itself. To this historical enquiry we could turn to any
number of discursive fields. The most convenient for this specific
purpose might be examination of those which seek to codify and
enact particular scripts of world politics, *as well as those which
seek to contest and disrupt these*. Typically, this might incorporate
international legal discourse, diplomacy, philosophy, literature,
and historiography. In short, those fields which both reflect and
create the conditions of a potentially conflictual (international)
universe. This context can be seen as establishing the dimensions
or the orientation through which the specific social-political vo-
cabularies must progress, in order to speak on and to establish the
cohesiveness of these contentious issues.

2. Framing of specific issues and relationships: How these are creat-
ed, interpreted, and described using the language of war. A histor-
ical enquiry will ask after the mechanisms and conditions under
which these contingent war-like framings emerge, gain salience,
and spread across constituencies. It is important, first of all, to
recognise that these framings, which can include metaphors of
conflict, struggle, and war, are contingent. If we recognise the de-
cision (against the broader ideological context discussed above)
to militarise particular 'inter-national' issues and interactions, as
a *decision* (one which depends upon fundamental commitments
that are largely naturalised and taken-for-granted by traditional
Realist, rationalist, or geo-strategic, thinking,) the next move,
then, must be to also recognise that this process of deciding which
issues and which relationships to frame militarily is variant across
time and space. Undertaking this endeavour in history, can (and

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[51]   Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 2, The Use of Pleasure*, transl. Robert
Hurley (Penguin, 1992), 62.

should) lead to the problematising of historical narratives taken as mainstream which assume away, or intentionally neglect, alternative scripts. Why, for example, or *under what conditions* are certain geo-strategic 'interests' privileged, often against the explicitly stated objectives of particular social groupings. The famous turn to nationalist militarism and away from the internationalist solidarity and pacifism by socialist organisations across Europe during the First World War stands as a case in point. By exploring this process and uncovering its dynamic interplays empirically, that is to say, within defined historical contexts, this framework can provide a platform from which to unpack and disrupt the war vocabularies of our own contemporary world political moments.

As discussed above, the claim is not that deployment of the language of war in some way brings a society 'closer' to a political condition of war outside, and existing independently of, the discursive field. The task, rather, is to explore the constitutive process by which the deployment of these vocabularies re-makes and generates new conditions of conflict. This is contrary to how many prominent mainstream approaches seek to explain the 'recourse to war'[52] (and with very limited success, judged even by their own ontological standards[53]). As a starting point for historical enquiry into these mechanisms, it is proposed that contingent, warlike framings and metaphors are generated from a circulation between three primary constituencies. (1) 'Domestic' publics: These include the general public, political factions, civil society groups, and the media within a state. (2) Political elites: These include state leaders, diplomats, military officials, and policymakers who make strategic decisions. (3) 'International'

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[52] E.g., John A. Vasquez and Paul D. Senese, *The Steps to War* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and John A. Vasquez, eds., *What Do We Know about War?*, Third Edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Cornell University Press, 2013); Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Insiders' Game: How Elites Make War and Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

[53] John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 110 (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

actors and institutions: These consist of other states, international organizations, and transnational actors engaged in diplomacy or conflict. The operation of these circulations might not be in the nature of an exchange of ideas, but rather of one of the co-constitutions of the texts and constituencies themselves, through a pluralised process approximating to what Leader Maynard, in the context of mass atrocities, describes as the making of a 'radicalised security policy'.[54] War 'expands' within these circulations. Its presence as a political action is (re-)formulated/negotiated/imagined through a situated conceptual vocabulary, out from which the language of war (metaphors, designations, securitizations) is extracted and deployed, innocently of the discursive makings of conflict. By exploring the ironic generation of inter-state war within these discursive deployments, we gain insight into the enduring power of war as a concept and practice, and the ways in which it continues to shape world politics.

Conclusion

This article has laid the foundations for and put forward a historically grounded exploratory framework for understanding how war is spoken into being. First, taking an interpretivist approach and challenging mainstream positivist views, it has explored the 'ordinary security language' that shapes how war is discussed and interpreted in modern Western public and elite discourses, as well as in mainstream IR. By analysing selected seminal works associated with Realism, it has identified fundamental assumptions about human nature, the state, and the nature of the international system. These assumptions are accepted as common sense and regarded as universally valid, forming the core of the conceptual universe from which this 'language of war' draws its vocabulary. Second, adopting a historical perspective, it has outlined a theoretical framework for exploring how the 'ordinary security language' contributes to creating conditions that make

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[54]   Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*.

inter-state war more likely. In doing so, it has argued that material conditions alone cannot simply account for the phenomenon of war. More fundamentally, war is a product of a series of discursive acts, including metaphors and symbolic invocations, that unfold in public and elite discourses. The 'language of war' thus deployed not only reconstitutes the scope and meaning of war, but also, as a result, inadvertently generates the conditions for large-scale conflict.

We have proposed that, in order to explore how this process unfolds in specific historical contexts, it is necessary to decipher to interactive discursive levels. First, 'wide-circles in the distance', how certain foundational concepts are naturalised and operationalised as a common-sense backdrop for how the world is, and thus for the telos and possibilities of political (human) thought and action, will provide the basic ideological context. This is to recognise the contours of the mental world in question. Deciphering (or recovering) the scope of any such imaginative universe in full is not possible. Restricting ourselves to a world condition framed by Western modernity, we can sketch the broad contours of core ideas such as human nature, science, the state, the international, etc. Indeed, as shown above, certain of these are concretised in a particular vocabulary which is highly influential in shaping the common sense of actors and analysts in world politics. Second, and within these 'wide-circles', boundaries which are often unspoken and not taken to be problematic or open to sensible discussion, the everyday practice of politics will witness the deployment of war language, whether via metaphor or symbolic invocation, to describe, communicate, and make sense of particular interactions, relationships, and even categories of actors. Overlaying both of these levels, within the historical condition of Western modernity, at least, is an 'ordinary security language' which both responds to and shapes the process of militarising world politics through the co-option and power of common-sense frames such as defence, nation, family, masculinity, etc.

This has been a theoretical article which seeks to provide guidance for empirical exploration. This framework is explicitly rooted

in the broadest context of Western modernity. How informative it can be outside of this remains an open question. The framework does not presume a stable discursive context for war any more than it supposes the stability or timelessness of 'war' as a social practice itself. We might be able to hypothesise certain stable features, such as abstract revulsion at large-scale human and environmental destruction, but equally we could see these very possibilities as themselves opened-by and contained within the world political possibilities established by Western modernity. As such, the future development of this research agenda will consist in exploring the emergence and constitutive effects of the language of war within the context of specific moments in Euro-Western history. By focusing especially on prominent historical moments, such as the First World War, or various well-known colonial conflicts, the broader aim will be to demonstrate the contingency (and problematic nature) of certain ideas, perspectives, and notions which enables a more critical reflection on the hegemonic discursive framing of a contemporary world politics which appears to be increasingly militarised, destructive, and cynical.

While the focus of this article has been inter-state war specifically, this does not mean that the analytical framework we have proposed is irrelevant to other forms of mass violence, including civil wars, genocides, and mass atrocities. The vocabulary of ordinary security language and the militarised discursive framings of actors, units, and events are equally pertinent to these other forms of conflict. Indeed, civil wars might even be a clearer and more explicit examples, since they require a process of othering, of making and remaking groupings, identities, and mutually hostile collectivities, in a similar way to inter-state war, but from within a context where the 'naturalness' of such categories is far *a-priori* less taken-for-granted. The process of othering is very complex and is often very difficult. For instance, we need only look at the exceedingly high levels of 'intermarriage' and 'ethnic-mixing' in Yugoslavia before the civil war and the extraordinary lengths to which the colonial Belgian authorities in Rwanda had to go to formalise and essentialise the categories of Tutsi and Hutu.

Of course, 'ethnicity', the idea that gives rise to concepts in civil war literatures such as ethnic bargaining, can be seen alongside other discursively constituted ideas, such as the scope of the 'state' and the resourcisation of the environment and the natural world, among others. Therefore, in short, it is highly plausible that our framework can also be turned to the analysis of civil wars. However, the conditions and the processes of this likely vary in certain ways from major inter-state conflicts. Hence, whilst this article primarily focuses on inter-state conflicts, future research on civil wars can be a profitable endeavour.

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