**Commentary**
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# A Chain of Proxy Wars Looms Large Behind Gaza

Yauheni Preiherman

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**Summary**

Instability is spreading across the globe. While frightening, it is a natural manifestation of expanding great-power rivalry in a world in flux, where power disposition and hierarchies get increasingly questioned and, as a result, authority and leadership become openly contested and international institutions dysfunctional.

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Beyond direct tensions between great powers, the process manifests itself in two regional dynamics. First, pre-existing conflicts unfreeze, quickly and often unexpectedly. Just in recent years, we have seen the outbreak of a major war in Ukraine, recurring hostilities in the South Caucasus, growing tensions in Kosovo, on the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait, a string of crises in Africa, and now another war in the Middle East. Revealingly, according to the United Nations, the number of violent conflicts worldwide is now highest since World War II. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program has found that the total amount of conflicts across the globe fell in 1990-2007 and then started to grow in 2010. A decade ago, the number of active conflicts was nearly 70% lower than today.

Second, unlike in geopolitically calmer times, almost any regional conflict automatically acquires a proxy dimension. Instead of working together to extinguish such a conflict in the interest of stability, mighty external actors only add fuel to the fire as they try to use any chance to diminish one another's international clout amid structural transformations and uncertainties. This amplifies the magnitude and contagion of otherwise containable conflicts.

## Israel-Gaza War

These dynamics are at full display in the war between Israel and Gaza. Indeed, the fighting erupted unexpectedly. Just about a week before Hamas's attack on October 7, US national security advisor Jake Sullivan proclaimed that "the Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades". But once the hostilities flared up, it became clear that this was not just another spark of the protracted low-intensity conflict. In addition to the extreme levels of violence, international reactions also look different to the diplomatic routine of the previous decades. To be sure, the United States and other foreign powers are looking for diplomatic keys to preventing further vertical and horizontal escalation of the war and are calling on the belligerents to minimize bloodshed.

> However, such calls get lost behind geopolitically loaded rhetoric and lack of great-power cooperation.

Instead of working together to address ground-level challenges between Israel and Gaza with a view to ending the fighting, world powers are busy accusing one another of facilitating and benefiting from the war. From day one, Western voices did not hesitate to call Iran, Russia, and China by names. On the opposite geopolitical end, the narrative focuses on the West's "selfish interest" and malign role in the decades-long Middle East peace process. Incompatible stances are also entrenching in the respective discourses about the conflict's basic facts.

Thus, at the rhetorical level, Israel-Gaza war immediately became a proxy one. The hopeless impotence of the UN Security Council, where veto-holding powers take turns in blocking one another's resolutions, points to the same conclusion at the diplomatic level. The longer the fighting in Gaza lasts, the more likely it is that the proxy element will make its way to the battlefield and spread further across the Middle East. In fact, we already see growing numbers of drone and rocket attacks and airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, which even go beyond the proxy level and involve the US directly.

## All-Pervasive Proxy Process

Expanding great-power competition will continue to drive these dynamics. Proliferating instability means that key geopolitical antagonists stretch their resources and attention, which inevitably exposes weaknesses and deficits that opponents eagerly explore. Moreover, regional conflicts are more and more seen by great-power decision-makers through the tit-for-tat lens – as opportunities to inflict pain and damage on geopolitical competitors in return for their perceived hostile actions elsewhere.

> This logic quickly turns great-power rivalry into an all-pervasive proxy process.

For example, because of it, multiple Western attempts to cajole Beijing into playing a pacifying role in the Russia-Ukraine war have failed and will remain doomed as long as the geopolitical race to the bottom persists. While China seems interested in preventing the direst scenarios in Ukraine, it clearly sees opportunities to stretch the US power and further weaken Washington's positions in the non-Western world if the war drags on. Also, Beijing will not tolerate a major Russian defeat, either on the battlefield or diplomatic, which the US could take credit for. As a result, these basic geopolitical considerations outweigh other concerns China has towards the conflict in Ukraine.

Similarly, Moscow's attitude to the war in the Middle East is now shaped primarily by grand geopolitical thinking, where obstructing Western international sway and stretching American resources (so that to distract Washington from Ukraine) appear the primary goals. Hence, irrespective of the progress in the relations between Israel and Russia in recent decades and the seemingly warm personal ties between Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, Moscow acts in accordance with its overarching geopolitical rationale and perceives the Israel-Gaza war through proxy lenses.

Washington's analysis of the developments in the Middle East appears more nuanced, reflecting the complex geometry of the US interests and leverage in the region. However, even here numerous shades of grey become less relevant as great-power rivalry intensifies. President Biden's recent address to the nation, in which he presented the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East as two theatres of the same global struggle between democracies and autocracies, gives a major boost to the proxy-trend worldwide.

## A Global Chain of Proxy Wars?

If the trend remains undeterred, a chain of proxy wars will emerge, linking separate regional wars into a global belt of intractable instability.

> No magic recipe exists that could terminate the trend.

It results from global disorder and only the emergence of a new order will do the job. That will take time and more crises worldwide. However, international efforts could still help to at least slow down the process. That would give relevant actors additional time to adjust to these otherwise bewilderingly fast developments and, thus, lower the risks of most frightening scenarios.

As a starter, it is crucial not to overlook the proxy chain in-the-making behind the urgency of dealing with separate conflicts and media headlines they generate. Great powers should get serious about this big-picture development and not entertain hopes that they can ultimately benefit from it. Today's destabilized international system turns proxy confrontation into a much riskier enterprise than during the relative bi-polar stability of the Cold War. Especially as the institutional architecture of strategic stability and arms control, which used to reduce the hazards of direct great-power conflict, is in tatters.

Furthermore, the Biden administration is wrong to think that linking different regional conflicts into a single "democracies vs. autocracies" framework will help advance Western interests. Most non-Western nations simply do not buy this narrative and will try to avoid taking sides if the proxy chain expands. As a result, instead of mobilizing the world's majority to join the democratic camp, the approach rather incentivizes Washington's key geopolitical rivals – China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea – to double down on cementing a balancing coalition against the US.

Under these circumstances, diplomacy should be re-legitimized as the only way forward at a time when more and more actors across the globe conclude that military power is the only means to their ends. Therefore, latest attempts by the American and Chinese governments to revive high-level dialogue and exercise damage control should certainly be welcomed.

> Washington and Beijing should endeavor to set a positive modern example of great-power cooperation for the sake of preventing snowballing instability nobody will be able to control.

Finally, smaller states, especially ones that are most vulnerable to existing or potential proxy conflicts, should exert maximum diplomatic pressure on great powers to adopt less risky geopolitical behavior. For that, it is high time a XXI-century version of the non-aligned movement be initiated.

**Yauheni Preiherman**
*Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations*