

Will It Never Stop? From Forever War to Eternal War

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"It is time," President Biden [announced](#) in April 2021, "to end the forever war" that started with the invasion of Afghanistan soon after the tragic terror attacks on this country on September 11, 2001. Indeed, that August, amid chaos and disaster, the president did finally pull the last remaining U.S. forces out of that country.

A year and a half later, it's worth reflecting on where the United States stands when it comes to both that forever war against terrorism and war generally. As it happens, the war on terror is anything but ended, even if it's been overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and simmering conflicts around the globe, all too often involving the United States. In fact, it now seems as if this country is moving at breakneck speed out of the era of Forever War and into what might be thought of as the era of Eternal War.

Granted, it's hard even to keep track of the potential powder kegs that seem all too ready to explode across the globe and are likely to involve the U.S. military in some fashion. Still, at this moment, perhaps it's worth running through the most likely spots for future conflict.

Russia and China

In Ukraine, as each week passes, the United States only seems to ramp up its commitment to war with Russia, moving the slim line of proxy warfare ever closer to a head-to-head confrontation between the planet's two great military powers. Although the plan to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia clearly remains in effect, once taboo forms of support for Ukraine have over time become more acceptable.

As of early March, the United States, one of more than 50 countries offering some form of support, had allocated [aid to Ukraine](#) on 33 separate occasions, amounting to more than [\\$113 billion](#) worth of humanitarian, military, and financial assistance. In the process, the Biden administration has agreed to provide [increasingly lethal weaponry](#), including Bradley fighting vehicles, Patriot missile batteries, and [Abrams tanks](#), while pressure for even more powerful weaponry like Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMs) and F-16s is only growing.

As a recent Council on Foreign Relations [report](#) noted, Washington's aid to Ukraine "far exceeds" that of any other country.

In recent weeks, the [theater of tension](#) with Russia has expanded beyond Ukraine, notably to the Arctic, where some experts see potential for direct conflict between Russia and the U.S., branding that region a "future flashpoint." Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin recently raised the possibility of storing [tactical nuclear weapons](#) in neighboring Belarus, perhaps more of a taunt than a meaningful gesture, but nonetheless another point of tension between the two countries.

Leaving Ukraine aside, China's presence looms large when it comes to predictions of future war with Washington. On more than one occasion, Biden has stated publicly that the United States [would intervene](#) if China were to launch an invasion of the island of Taiwan. Tellingly, efforts to fortify the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region have ratcheted up in recent months.

In February, for example, Washington unveiled [plans](#) to strengthen its [military presence](#) in the Philippines by occupying bases in the part of that country nearest to Taiwan. All too ominously, four-star Air Force **General Mike Minihan** went so far as to suggest that this country might soon be at war with China. "I hope I am wrong. My gut tells me [we] will fight in 2025," he wrote in a [memo](#) to the officers he commands in anticipation of a future Chinese move on Taiwan. He also outlined a series of aggressive tactics and weapons training maneuvers in preparation for that day. And the Marines have been [outfitting](#) three regiments for a possible future island campaign in the Pacific, while [war-gaming](#) such battles in Southern California.

North Korea, Iran, and the War on Terror

North Korea and Iran are also perceived in Washington as simmering threats.

For months now, North Korea and the U.S. have been playing a game of nuclear chicken in parallel shows of missile strength and submarine maneuvers, including the North's mid-March launch of [an intercontinental ballistic missile](#) capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and, at least theoretically, reaching the U.S. mainland. In its leader Kim Jong-un's words, it was intended to "strike fear into the enemies" of his country. In the last days of March, his military even launched a reputed underwater [nuclear-capable drone](#), taking the confrontation one step further. Meanwhile, Washington has been intensifying its security commitments to South Korea and Japan, flexing its muscles in the region, and upping the ante with the [biggest joint military drills](#) involving the South Korean armed forces in years.

As for Iran, it's increasingly cooperating with an embattled Russia when it comes both to [sending drones](#) there and receiving [cyberweapons](#) from that country. And since Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the [JCPOA nuclear treaty](#) with Iran in May 2018, tensions between Washington and Teheran have only intensified. International monitors have recently concluded that Iran may indeed be approaching the brink of being able to produce [nuclear-grade](#) enriched uranium. At the same time, Israel has been ramping up its threats to attack Iran and draw the United States into such a crisis.

Meanwhile, smaller conflicts are sizzling around the globe, many seemingly tempting Washington to engage more actively. On President Biden's agenda in his recent meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, for instance, was the possibility of [deploying](#) a

Canadian-led multinational force to Haiti to help quell the devastating gang violence ravaging that country. “We believe that the situation on the ground will not improve without armed security assistance from international partners,” a National Security Council official [told](#) NPR’s *Morning Edition* ahead of the summit. [Trudeau](#), however, backed away from accepting such a role. What Washington will now do — fearing a wave of new immigrants — remains to be seen.

And don’t forget that the forever war on terror persists, even if in a somewhat different and more muted form. Although the U.S. has left Afghanistan, for instance, it still retains the right to conduct “over the horizon” air strikes there. And to this day, it continues to launch targeted strikes against the al-Shabaab terror group in Somalia, even if in far lower numbers than during the Trump years when drone strikes [reached](#) an all-time high of more than 200. So far, the Biden administration has launched 29 such strikes in the last two years.

Image: US Joint Chiefs Chair, General Mark Milley (L) paid an unannounced visit to a US military base in Northeast Syria, March 3, 2023 (Source: [Indian Punchline](#))



American drone attacks persist [in Syria](#) as well. Only recently, in retaliation for a drone attack against U.S. troops there that killed an American contractor and wounded another, as well as five soldiers, the Biden administration carried out [strikes](#) against Iranian-backed militias. According to National Security Council spokesperson [John Kirby](#), President Biden has still not ruled out further retaliatory acts there. As he told Margaret Brennan on *Face the Nation* at the end of March, referring to ISIS in Syria, “We have under 1,000 troops [there] that are going after that network, which is, while greatly diminished, still viable, and still critical. So we’re going to stay at that task.”

Other than Syria and Iraq (where the U.S. still has [2,500 troops](#)), the war on terror is now particularly focused on Africa. In [the Sahel](#) region, the swath of that continent just below the Sahara Desert, including Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mauritania, and Sudan, among other countries, the legacies of past terrorism and the war in Ukraine have reportedly converged, creating devastatingly unstable and violent conditions, exacerbating what USAID official [Robert Jenkins](#) has called “decades of undelivered promises.”

As journalist [Walter Pincus](#) put it recently, “With little public notice, the two-decades-long U.S. war on terrorism continues in the Sahel.” According to the 2023 [Global Index for Terrorism](#), that region is now the “epicenter of terrorism.” The [largest U.S. presence](#) in West Africa is in Niger, which, as Nick Turse [reports](#), “hosts the largest and most expensive drone bases run by the U.S. military,” intended primarily to counter terrorist groups like Boko

Haram, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. [Weapons](#) from the war in Ukraine have found their way to such terrorist groups, while climate-change induced weather nightmares, deepening food insecurity, and ever more dislocated populations have led to an increasingly unstable situation in the region. Complicating things further, [the Wagner group](#), the Russian mercenary paramilitary outfit, has been offering security assistance to [countries in the Sahel](#), intensifying the potential for violence. U.S. [military forces](#) and [bases](#) in the region have grown apace as the war on terror in Africa intensifies.

Legislative Support for Eternal Warfare

Legislative moves in Congress unabashedly reflect this country's pivot to Eternal War. Admittedly, the push for an ever-expanding battlefield didn't start with the great-power conflicts leading today's headlines. The 2001 congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which paved the way for the invasion of Afghanistan, gave the president essentially unlimited authority to take offensive action in the name of countering terrorism by not naming an enemy or providing any geographical or time limits. Since the fall of 2001, just as [Representative Barbara Lee](#) (D-CA) predicted while casting the only vote against it, that AUMF has served as a presidential "blank check" when it comes to authorizing the use of force more or less anywhere.

Former State Department lawyer [Brian Finucane](#) has pointed out that the perpetuation of "much of the legal, institutional, and physical infrastructure that underpin this decades-long" war on terror is now being extended to the Sahel, no matter the predictable results. As Soufan Group terrorism expert Colin Clarke told me, "A global war on terrorism has never been winnable. Terrorism is a tactic. It can't be fully defeated, just mitigated and managed."

Nevertheless, the 2001 AUMF remains on the books, available to be tapped in ever-expansive ways globally. Only this month, Congress once again voted against its [repeal](#).

Admittedly, the Senate did [recently repeal](#) the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the use of force that undergirded the Iraq War of 1991 and the 2002 invasion of that country. Notably, a new amendment proposed by [Senator Lindsey Graham](#) (R-SC) to also create an AUMF against Iran-backed militias in the region was defeated. As recent military engagements [in Syria](#) have shown, new authorizations have proven unnecessary.

Congress seems to be seconding the move from Forever War to Eternal War without significant opposition. In fact, when it comes to funding such a future, its members have been all too enthusiastic. As potential future war scenarios have expanded, so has the Pentagon budget which has grown astronomically over the past two years. In December, President Biden [signed](#) the [2023 National Defense Authorization Act](#), which granted the Pentagon an unprecedented \$816.7 billion, [8% more](#) than the year before (with Congress upping the White House's suggested funding by \$45 billion).

And the requests for the 2024 budget are now in. As Pentagon expert [William Hartung](#) reports, at [\\$886 billion dollars](#), \$69 billion more than this year's budget, Congress is on a path to enacting "the first \$1 trillion package ever," a development he labels "madness." "An open-ended strategy," Hartung explains, "that seeks to develop capabilities to win a war with Russia or China, fight regional wars against Iran or North Korea, and sustain a global war on terror that includes operations in at least [85 countries](#) is a recipe for endless conflict."

Whatever Happened to the Idea of Peace?

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, there is a widely shared sense that it's going to last and last — and last some more. Certain experts see nothing short of years of fighting still on the horizon, especially since there seems to be little appetite for peace among American officials.

While French **President Emmanuel Macron** and German **Chancellor Olaf Scholz** have reportedly urged Ukrainian **President Volodymyr Zelensky** to consider peace talks, they seem to have few illusions about how long the war is likely to go on. For his part, [Zelensky](#) has made it clear that, when it comes to Russia, “there is nothing to talk about and nobody to talk about over there.” According to [Alexander Gabuev](#), a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the mood in both Moscow and Kyiv could be summed up as “give war a chance.”

With President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping. Photo: Sergei Karpukhin, TASS



China is, it seems, an outlier when it comes to accepting a long-term war in Ukraine. Even prior to his visit to Russia in late March, **President Xi Jinping** offered to broker a ceasefire, while releasing a [position paper](#) on the perils of continued warfare and what a negotiated peace might aim to secure, including supply-chain stability, nuclear power plant safety, and the easing of war-caused global humanitarian crises. [Reportedly](#), the summit between Xi and Putin made little headway on any of this.

Here in the U.S., calls for peace talks have been minimal. Admittedly, last November, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff **Mark Milley** [reportedly told](#) the Economic Club of New York, “When there’s an opportunity to negotiate, when peace can be achieved, seize it. Seize the moment.” But there has been no obvious drive for diplomatic negotiations of any sort in Washington. In fact, [John Kirby](#), the National Security Council spokesperson, responded to President Xi’s proposal this way: “We don’t support calls for a ceasefire right now.” The Russians, he claimed, would take such an opportunity “to only further entrench their positions in Ukraine... [and] rebuild, refit, and refresh their forces so that they can restart attacks on Ukraine at a time of their choosing.”

Disturbingly, American calls for peace and diplomacy have tended to further embrace the ongoing war. The *New York Times* [editorial board](#), while plugging future peace diplomacy, suggested that only continued warfare could get us to such a place: “[S]erious diplomacy has a chance only if Russia accepts that it cannot bring Ukraine to its knees. And for that to happen, the United States and its allies cannot waver in their support [of Ukraine].” More war and nothing else, the argument goes, will bring peace. The pressure to provide ever more powerful weapons to Ukraine remains constant on both sides of the aisle. As [Robert](#)

[Wicker](#), the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee put it, “[T]his approach of ‘more, better, faster’ would give the Ukrainians a real shot at victory.”

Whether in Ukraine, in the brewing tensions of what’s being called a “new cold war” in Asia, or in this country’s never-ending version of the war on terror, we now live in a world where war is ever more accepted as a permanent condition. On the legal, legislative, and military fronts, it has become a mainstay for what passes as national security activity. Some of this, as many [critics contend](#), is driven by economic incentives like lining the pockets of the [giant weapons-making corporations](#) to the tune of multibillions of dollars annually; some by what passes for ideological fervor with democracy pitched against autocracy; some by the seemingly never-ending legacy of the war on terror.

Sadly enough, all of this prioritizes killing and destruction over life and true security. In none of it do our leaders seem to be able to imagine reaching any kind of peace without yet more weapons, more violence, more conflicts, and more death.

Who even remembers when the First World War was known as “the war to end all wars”? Sadly, it seems that the era of Eternal War is now upon us. We should at least acknowledge that reality.

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