

*Review*

# Relevance of Mary Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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Received 27th May 2014; Accepted 4 August, 2014

The nature and characteristics of war in the post-cold war era have been the focus of academic debates in the field of Peace and Conflict studies in recent years especially with regard to whether or not a distinction should be made between 'old' and 'new' wars. Mary Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis, a very significant contribution to these debates, argues that there is a distinction given that the actors, goals, methods and modes of financing wars in the post-cold war era have changed significantly as a result of globalization (Kaldor, 2006:1). While many critics disagree and argue that the distinction does not exist (Kalyvas, 2001) and claim that there is nothing new about 'new wars' (Henderson and Singer, 2002), others question the lack of adequate empirical and historical evidence (Chojnacki, 2006:48) and argue that the thesis lacks any measurable criteria. However, as Mundy (2011) rightly points out, our justifications for concepts such as the 'new wars' thesis should be based on their ability to confront and address the very circumstances they seek to improve rather than on claims of alleged coherence and reflections of history. While this article is not directed at refuting criticisms, it is important to note that the term 'new' used in describing these wars that were taking place in the 1990s in the Balkans and Africa did not refer to them as having no historical parallels or antecedents but referred to a different 'logic' from the wars that scholars and policy-makers were concentrating on (Kaldor, 2012). Regardless of its limitations, this article argues that Kaldor's 'new war' thesis has significant academic/analytical and policy relevance in the field of security studies and much more in the 21st century.

**Key words:** New wars, conflict, policy, organized violence, peace.

## OVERVIEW OF THE 'NEW WARS' THESIS

The challenges of conflicts and instability in many states in Africa in the last decades of the twentieth century have thrown up a lot of arguments about the novelty of these crises. Many scholars have tried to examine and theorize about them leading to several conclusions. One of such theorizing is by Mary Kaldor who emphasizes that 'a new type of organized violence developed' (Kaldor, 2006:1) within that period. According to Kaldor's thesis, there is a

distinction between old and new wars because the actors, goals, methods and modes of financing wars in the post-cold war era have changed significantly. First, the conflicts of the post-cold war era are characterized by new actors - no longer state armies but mainly non-state actors such as paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs and mercenary groups who are challenging the authority of the state (Kaldor, 2006:9). She explains that

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old wars were fought by states and these states, under the current tide, have lost their claim to the monopoly of violence (Munkler, 2002:16). Secondly, the 'new wars' is further characterized by a significant increase in civilian casualties - given that the main targets of the violence are civilians who are not clearly distinguished from combatants especially because the wars are more intra-state (Munkler, 2002:15). Thirdly, the goals of these new non-state actors are different in that old wars were fought for ideological and/or geo-political interests whereas the goals in contemporary wars are ethnic, religious or tribal with actors seeking to access the state for specific groups rather than public interest (Kaldor, 2013:2). Finally, another major aspect of Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis is the emergence of a new war economy which is sustained by illegal trade in drugs, weapons, resources such as oil or diamonds with these non-state actors seeking to maintain economic interests; it is also "globalised and decentralized with a low participation rate as well as a high unemployment rate" (Kaldor, 2006:10). This is different from the old wars in that states used to finance wars through taxation or outside patrons (Kaldor, 2013:3).

## RELEVANCE OF THE THESIS

### Academic/analytic relevance

The thesis has opened up a lot of scholarly debate, if nothing else, into the phenomenon of post-cold war conflicts. It has contributed to studies that try to push the boundaries of security studies beyond the traditional focus on national security to incorporate other threats like non-state actors, poverty, resource wars, migration, human rights abuse, refugee problems, identity, markets, Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and the environment, to mention a few (Dannreuther, 2008:121, Newmann, 2004:186). It offers new insights into the security discourse and challenges the conventional notions of security. Particularly, it contributes to the debates about the need for liberal internationalism, which seeks to transcend the power politics of international state of nature and govern it through international institutions and law, in responding to the peculiarities of contemporary warfare (Dannreuther, 2008).

Although the concept of 'new wars' has been heavily contested, a lot of academics, across disciplines, have dealt with the issue extensively in a way that has encouraged multidisciplinary approaches to conflict analysis. This has helped to expand the literature in the area by redefining concepts, policy perspectives and conceptual categories which can be used for research purposes into the complexities of contemporary wars. As Newman (2004) clearly notes, scholars have engaged with the subject extensively especially in discussing the nature, patterns, dynamics and trends of contemporary conflicts. Topical issues like the failed-state phenomenon

and human security have been extensively debated as well (Duffield, 2001).

The emphasis on context-specific case studies has also helped a lot because in depth analysis of single cases have been dealt with as different scholars have grappled with the challenge of filling the empirical gap of the thesis. Cases like Bosnia, Rwanda, Congo, Sierra-Leone and Liberia that may never have made it into certain books in security studies have been given quite some attention as a result.

The dominant traditional state-centric theories which regard states as the primary actors have been treated as universalistic and have been inadequate in explaining the dynamics of specific and contemporary wars in the post-cold war period. Violent conflicts in regions like the Balkans, sub-Saharan and the Horn of Africa cannot be explained using these state-centric models alone. This is because new wars are intra-state wars with groups within particular states fighting each other or against the state, each having multiple goals. Kaldor's thesis offers an alternative analytic framework because it takes into account the existence of these non-state actors and shows how they all contribute to the character of the wars. It also diverts attention from political ideology and shifts our focus to considering how other factors like ethnic and religious differences cause and sustain these wars.

Again, analysis that points to the state military as the only guarantor of legitimate protection and security (Malesevic, 2008:105) does not help to explain specific cases like the conflict in Congo and the wars in Iraq where, out of necessity, states had to rely on private security companies and/or mercenaries to use coercive violence for political ends. In this regard, Kaldor's thesis helps to identify and explain these forms of privatized violence and the consequences in their various contexts.

In terms of conflict analysis, it provides a framework within which the deep layers of these violent conflicts can be peeled back to reveal the underlying interests that are at play. For instance, the thesis points out the context of state failure and social transformation (Kaldor, 1999) within which these wars take place and links structural factors like "authoritarian rule, the exclusion of minorities from governance, socio-economic deprivation, inequity and weak states that lack the institutional capacity to manage normal political and social conflict" (Nathan, 2000:189) with psycho-cultural factors that focus on "feelings about personal and social identity, deep seated, socially constructed internal representations of self, others and one's social world that are widely shared by a group in a society" (Ross,1993). This combination of factors can explain why new wars are difficult to end.

It is also relevant in explaining the globalised war economy that shows how parties involved directly or indirectly profit from these wars. Duffield (2001:6) observes that this economy is decentralized and increasingly transnational. Furthermore, the different units involved in

the fighting fund themselves through plunder. The sophisticated weapons some rebel groups use in these wars point to the fact that they receive external funding and support. Many of these wars take place in regions with resources like diamonds or oil and this shows that beyond political ideologies, having access to these resources could be a motivation to sustain a conflict by all means. It explains why most of these wars persist and are difficult to end. Given that winning is not as important as it was in wars of conquest between states. They tend to spread and persist as Keen (2012) observes.

It explains the character of the mode of warfare in these conflicts especially the use of guerrilla tactics. While this might not be a new phenomenon, it does throw light on the methods used in these wars and helps to explain how and why civilians are targeted in these conflicts. Phenomena like genocide, ethnic cleansing, break-up of Yugoslavia, and state fragmentation in Africa, and others have received sustained attention as a result of the discourse on new wars.

It provides a further analytical framework into the North-south division of a 'zone of peace' in the developed industrial world, where power peace operates and 'zones of war' in the poorer developing world where pervasive conflicts and civil wars are present (Goldgeier and Mcfaul, 1992). This offers great insight into new wars as negative consequences of globalization which tends to enrich the north and further impoverish the south.

Analytically, therefore, the paradigm allows the discipline to have an alternative way of perceiving the changing forms of violence in a setting that is different, in a historical sense, from the pre-cold war period. As Malesevic (2008:109) rightly observes, 'the traditional geopolitical goals of nation states such as territorial expansion, colonial domination and imperial conquest have lost their legitimacy' at the state level and at the international level and are no longer adequate in explaining post-cold war conflicts.

### **Policy relevance**

Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis has opened up analysis into new policy perspectives in several ways. By linking security to non-traditional sources of threats, policy makers are offered a framework that could inform alternative action, other than purely military intervention. The nature of these contemporary wars requires different forms of intervention at various levels and in specific cases beyond just military intervention, humanitarian intervention has also been a significant part of international response.

The idea that intervention should be focused more on providing effective forms of local and international policing, to limit the activities of criminal elements in these wars, rather than just seeking to end the war, has been a regular part of this debate (Mueller, 2000:64-65).

It is argued now that this form of policing may have changed the character of the wars in Bosnia and prevented the genocide in Rwanda and in other conflicts where there have been massive violations of human rights.

The idea that civilians are targeted in these wars has contributed to policies like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) which was developed to form support in favour of international intervention in order to stop mass atrocities. By perceiving some of these conflicts as humanitarian crisis caused by state security forces, rebel groups and militias, the international community is forced to act in some respect. This is better than simply dismissing the conflicts as caused by primordial ancient hatreds or other causes where intervention is seen as useless. For instance, the United Nations Security Council has begun to push for intervention into the humanitarian situation in Syria as a result of "renewed calls for the establishment of humanitarian corridors, using the principle of the R2P as leverage" (Lehmann, 2013).

The thesis is relevant also in the area of post-conflict peace building. The recent attempts made by the international community and post conflict states especially in Africa shows that policies aimed at peace building emphasize not just cease-fires and peace agreements alone but also on structural changes to attend to some of the problems that contributed to the wars in the first place. Projects and programmes aimed at providing water, education, basic health services, jobs, reconciliation, and helping in re-integration of combatants have featured prominently. The African Union (AU) for instance has developed policy frameworks that go beyond limited intervention to incorporate long-term sustainable development programmes that will prevent a relapse and contribute effectively to reconstruction, security and development (AU PCR, 2013).

Policies aimed at conflict prevention also feature prominently because policy makers recognize that if the underlying conditions that enable these wars, such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, disease and illiteracy can be taken care of, most of these wars could be avoided. The Peacemaking and Conflict Prevention (PMCP) programme of the United Nations targeted at providing training and experience for preventing and resolving conflicts is one of such examples. Another example is the Conflict Prevention, Mitigation, and Response Programs in East and Southern-Africa (CPMR-ESA).

By paying attention to non-state actors like paramilitaries, rebel groups and militias as legitimate actors in these wars, policy makers have also come to terms with the need to strengthen international law. Prosecution of war crimes has been an important feature in this regard in response to the need to deal with the criminality that plays out in new wars. As Shaw (2000:173) rightly posits, there is a need for intervention, beyond humanitarian assistance, and through 'cosmopolitan law enforcement'

which must be understood in terms of political legitimacy and economic rebuilding. He emphasizes the need for new sets of principles, norms of behaviour and a positive political outlook that is tied to respect for the rule of law.

Policy makers have long been faced with the challenges of dealing with the reality of war economies (Taylor, 2013). The elaborate description of the globalised war economy in Kaldor's thesis helps in establishing the links between "globalised armed markets, traditional ethnicities and internationalized western-global intervention" (Shaw and Graham, 2000:172) and their role in sustaining these conflicts. An understanding of how the war economy of these conflict zones is sustained helps to guide policy makers in knowing what forms of intervention or financial assistance are appropriate in specific cases to avoid contributing to financing wars ignorantly. Furthermore, policy makers are trying to identify effective forms of regulation which would not make living any more difficult than it already is for civilians in these war economies (Lunde and Taylor, 2005). In some conflicts, where weak/failed states and political exclusion cause desperate elites to arm themselves and systematically sustain themselves through horrendous acts of human rights violations in order to gain control of oil, diamonds, gold and other mineral resources to enrich themselves, intervention in financial aid for reconstruction may only contribute to the goals of these elite (Collier and Hoeffler, 2002). The international community has become more aware of this and is beginning to seek to make war less profitable.

For states who may not be directly involved in these conflicts, their attention has been called to the problems of migrants and refugees, seeking to move away from the scenes of these wars as a result of the horrible assaults they may have suffered, and this has been a problem that many of these states have had to contend with. As Kaldor (2013) argues, "predatory social conditions" ruin the economies of neighbour states and regions of conflict by spreading refugees, illegal trade and identity –based politics. These neighbour states have been forced to review their policies on migration to be able to survive the spill overs of war. An example of this is how Chad was both involved and affected by the war in Darfur in 2003 (de Waal, 2008).

Policies that are focused on stemming the proliferation of small arms and light weapons which encourage continued violence are being emphasized by way of reducing the criminal activities that characterize some of these wars. The proliferation of light weapons and illegal trafficking of arms is a real security threat as it helps to escalate conflicts a great deal. Governments and non-governmental organizations have called on the arms producing countries to engage in collaboration that will limit the trafficking of these weapons. At the global level, the United States has been called upon to lead the process of ensuring that there are binding regulations to deal with these problems (Stohl and Hogendoorn, 2010).

Finally, at the international level, the inability of existing traditional institutions, which were set up to deal with the problems of first and second world wars, to grapple with the challenges of new wars has been brought to the front burner. There has been a sustained call for institutions and changes in international that can address the peculiarities of these wars. Institutions that can interact more deeply in an acceptable way are needed. For instance, because of the principle of non-intervention, some states resist intervention, especially in conflicts where the state is the culprit in violations of human rights.

## Conclusion

Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis should not be examined only as a way of describing data but rather as a way of explaining the nature of contemporary war that can offer both analytic/academic and policy relevance. It has opened up new scholarly analysis and new policy perspectives. Its usefulness lies in its capacity to direct research and provoke policy changes relevant to the realities of contemporary warfare. The usefulness of the approach lies not really in being able to make distinctions between different types of wars but in its ability to be effective in provoking and influencing policy and research. As Kaldor (2013:1) correctly emphasizes, this 'new wars' thesis should be understood as "a research strategy and a guide for policy".

Contemporary wars have serious implications for the already fragile social, political, cultural and economic institutions and structures of the states where they are prevalent and any framework that can guide policy change is invaluable.

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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