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Let's (Not) Choose Sides and Fight

In the course of human events there are times when everyone seems determined to pick sides and brawl. A prime example was the First World War: over a dozen countries divided into two camps—the Allied Powers and the Central Powers—and fought for four years, with 40 million casualties. Afterward, few seemed to agree on what the conflict had been about (probably the best explanation was that it had been over tensions between a fading colonial superpower, Britain, and a potential rival, Germany). World War II, which left 60 million dead, was in many ways a continuation of the same conflict, with the terms of surrender for the first war setting a 20-year fuse for the second (the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty were partly a response to [German demands](#) at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, a reminder of how revenge echoes through history).

We appear to be sliding into a similar era, where a previously stable world order is failing and much of humanity seems to be preparing to divide and do battle. Many historians see the United States—which emerged as world hegemon after WWII—as a [decaying imperial hub](#), now facing an increasingly organized battery of opponents.

This time, hovering above the potential fray are profound environmental shifts, including climate change, the disappearance of much of wild nature, and resource depletion. As of 2025, global average temperature has risen 1.6 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial average, and the rate of warming is accelerating. We appear to be on course to reach 2 degrees C of warming around 2035—an amount of heating that, according to a recent research paper, "[The Future of the Human Niche](#)," by Tim Lenton and colleagues, might result in roughly a billion refugees.

At the same time, global energy from fossil fuels is set to start its inevitable decline after 2030 due to a combination of climate policies and the [accelerating depletion](#) of oil, coal, and natural gas resources. Since energy from renewables [won't fully replace](#) energy from fossil fuels, the result will be an overall decline in available energy, making economic contraction hard to stave off. [Declining population](#) in many countries will also present economic challenges. Energy transitions and economic disruptions both seem to [correlate with international conflicts](#).

In this article, I'll make a case for the increasing likelihood of conflict, internationally as well as domestically within the US, and then consider some novel ideas about conflict. As we'll see, either taking sides in an approaching battle, or refusing to do so, comes with a cost. We'll also see why the tendency to choose sides and fight is not uniquely human, though humans have developed it into a specialty. Finally, we'll explore how, as conflict approaches, mentally getting outside society's collective miasma of hostile emotions might help our own mental wellbeing, while also improving the survival prospects for our species.

Nation Against Nation

Since 1945, the US has been a military, financial, manufacturing, agricultural, scientific, and cultural global leader, acting in alliance with the UK, a selection of other European nations, and Japan. Much of the rest of the world supplied labor and resources at cut-rate prices and shouldered debt imposed by US-led international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Prior to 1990, the Soviet bloc posed a military and ideological counterweight, but it collapsed, leaving the US seemingly triumphant.

Decline is the eventual default path for empires, and the US is adhering to that historical trend: it has depleted its domestic resources, increased its people's economic inequality, built up staggering amounts of public and private debt, and pissed off a list of nations that it raided, demonized, invaded, or humiliated over the decades. The stage has been set for internal and external conflict.

Arguably the first round of that conflict started with the spectacular attacks of September 11, 2001, to which the US responded with senseless and ultimately self-destructive invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Those invasions happened to coincide with the [plateauing of global conventional oil production](#), which was in turn the backdrop for, and a [contributor to](#), the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. The US-led international order appeared to be on increasingly shaky ground. It was at about this time that Brazil, Russia, India, and China (soon joined by South Africa) began holding meetings to build ties of trade and strategic cooperation under the rubric BRICS.

Over the following 20 years, conflict was largely contained and imperial decline minimized as fracking made the US once again the world's foremost oil and gas producer. Meanwhile, China grew its economy rapidly, while oil-rich Russia under Putin became more authoritarian and looked for ways to regain its former superpower status.

Then, in 2016, Donald Trump landed on the American political stage. Among voters, he stoked long-festered White rural, working-class resentments resulting from growing domestic economic inequality and high rates of immigration; he ridiculed his country's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan; and he decried globalization as a "rip-off" of American wealth. If US-based globalist institutions (including the World Bank, the IMF, and USAID) were under fire previously, in the second Trump administration all are comatose or defunct. Using tariffs as a cudgel, Trump has introduced a nakedly nationalist, personal approach to international economic policy. Understandably, many formerly allied nations are looking to exit what's left of the US-led global order.

As of this year, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have joined the five original BRICS members. Together, the ten member nations represent 40 percent of the world's population and 28 percent of the global economy. China now operates the [world's biggest development bank](#).

The rise of BRICS comes as the US is at a crossroads in more than just politics. US tight oil (which has been the main source of global petroleum production growth since 2010) is set to start its inevitable [decline](#) within the next year or so, according to the [International Energy Agency](#). The peaking of US shale gas will come close behind. Meanwhile, President Trump has done his best to undercut US electrification and development of renewable energy (the fabled energy transition, undertaken mostly to blunt climate change). He is instead [promoting](#) the rapid development of energy-hungry AI and cryptocurrencies.

China, in contrast, is poised to profit from the energy transition: it leads in the export of all things electric and renewable, despite depending overwhelmingly on coal for its domestic energy. China [far exceeds](#) the US in electricity generation (and therefore the potential for development of AI). As oil and gas run out, the transition will demand more minerals, many of which China controls.

Will there be war between the US and its fraying alliance on one hand, and BRICS on the other? Currently there are visible flashpoints in the Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Iran conflicts. On July 7, Trump [posted](#) the following on social media: "Any country aligning themselves with the Anti-American policies of BRICS, will be charged an ADDITIONAL 10% tariff. There will be no exceptions to this policy." He had previously [threatened](#) that any move to replace the US dollar with a BRICS-backed international reserve currency would trigger 100 percent tariffs.

Given the apocalyptic potential of nuclear weaponry, the major powers wish to avoid direct all-out military engagement. What appears far more likely is a staircase increase in strategic resource wars over minerals, water, and arable land, along with proxy conflicts to test alliances and probe weaknesses. Instead of big, expensive weapons, smaller and cheaper drone and cyberweapons systems are likely to predominate. However, there is always the possibility that [limited skirmishes could metastasize](#).

Neighbor Against Neighbor

People are increasingly choosing sides not just internationally, but also within nations. I have written recently about the increase of [political polarization](#) in the United States and many European countries, and about the global [decline in democracy](#) and rise of autocrats.

Trends toward polarization and authoritarian rule are being driven by shifting demographics, by increasing inequality and economic precarity, and by new communication technologies (social media and AI) that amplify extreme beliefs. Each of these drivers is set to explode in dimension and impact. Ideology (e.g., capitalism versus socialism, or democracy versus autocracy) and religion will likely continue to provide people with immediate justifications for conflict, as deeper environmental and economic trends make

conflict more likely.

Measured levels of civil violence have declined in recent decades, as discussed by Steven Pinker in his book [The Better Angels of Our Nature](#). However, Pinker's analysis misses two of the main causes of the relative calm that much of humanity has enjoyed since World War II: the immense wealth produced by fossil fuels, along with soaring levels of food production (likewise tied to fossil fuels). Pinker also downplays the degree to which daily average numbers of violent incidents can greatly shift during times of all-out war between major military-industrial powers. The fact that global violence was held in check by an imperial power for eight decades (a period sometimes called "[Pax Americana](#)," in a nod to "Pax Romana" two millennia ago and the more recent "Pax Britannica") says little about how durable this peace may be as that empire declines, as the world warms, and as fossil fuels deplete.

In the US and some other countries, civil violence may increase in tandem with international conflict—or, as has happened repeatedly in history, war may serve to unify domestic sentiment against a common enemy. In either case, it is likely that nations will continue to see highly variable levels of internal strife, as is already the case: Jamaica's level of violent crime is [350 times](#) that of Singapore, and Norway is far less politically polarized than Argentina.

Belligerent Humans

It's tempting to think that choosing sides and fighting is just a human thing. But wars do happen elsewhere in nature. Some species are natural enemies: crows often cooperate to drive away hawks, which raid crow nests. And, in a few species, notably chimpanzees, individuals band together to attack other members of the same species. [Chimp wars](#) can be brutal. Animal conflicts are usually fought over scarce resources, access to potential mates, and territory.

However, because humans have language and advanced tool-making ability, we have developed fighting into a vastly more destructive enterprise. We use language to plan and coordinate attacks, and to demonize enemies—but also to negotiate peace. As for tools, while we humans have created technologies for every conceivable purpose, no field of endeavor has prompted more inventiveness than warfare. We have turned conflict into an art, science, philosophy, and business.

We humans also have more things to fight over than do other animals, thanks to language. Religion, money, trade, and political ideologies all derive from our talent for symbolic communication, and all provide justifications for organized mayhem.

Warfare has become so intensive that the casualties aren't just other humans. Just one example: the [Russia/Ukraine war](#) is ruining soils and water sources, and threatens both wildlife and domesticated animals. The Ukrainian government and environmental journalists have described the damage as [ecocide](#), and the consequences are forecasted to persist for centuries.

Indeed, humans' relationship with the natural world is often described in martial terms. Earlier in the Industrial Revolution, prior to the emergence of

the modern environmental movement, it was common to hear politicians and academics speak of the “conquest” not just of diseases but of nature generally. The trouble is, once we’ve declared war on nature, we all surely lose.

What If They Held a War and Nobody Came?

I came of age during the Vietnam War, and my generation was steeped in anti-war sentiment. It seemed easy then to think of all war as stupid. Things look different today if you happen to live in a country, like Ukraine, that’s being invaded (or, if you’re on the other side of the conflict, if you live in a nation, like Russia, that’s been vilified for decades by the global superpower). Similarly, within the US, neutrality looks like cowardice if you’re concerned that the nation is being taken over by authoritarian thugs (or, if you’re on the other side of the conflict, if you believe the country is being invaded by lawless immigrants). It’s not so easy to say, “Don’t fight,” when something apparently needs to be done to protect people you care about from an imminent threat.

I tend to side with the (perceived) oppressed over the (perceived) oppressor, and democracy over autocracy. But I also realize that the sides we choose are largely [determined](#) by geography and genes.

Understanding tends to blunt bloodlust. Humans are more likely to fight if they believe, “Those are bad people, they mean us harm, and we must kill them.” Once one starts inquiring deeply into the motives of the opposition, bloodlust tends to fade. Returning to the example of World War I: if more people had seen the conflict as “competition between a fading colonial superpower and a rising rival” and less as “a war of good against evil,” the public would have been less likely to endorse sending their sons into battle. Britain’s depiction of German soldiers as murderous Huns helped recruit soldiers; perhaps because Germany already had a larger standing army, its [propaganda tended to be more matter-of-fact](#), often featuring graphs of German resources in comparison to those of other nations. Demonization worked for Britain and its allies, and it has become central to modern propaganda ever since (the Nazis adopted it in the 1930s and helped make it a science).

Today, it would be harder to stoke homicidal zeal if everyone understood that behind all our hostilities is the simple, though stark, reality that humanity faces climate change and resource depletion, and that living space is likely to become more constricted. Widespread acceptance of that framing might inspire efforts to share what’s left peacefully while reducing the consumption of the richest nations and individuals.

I’m not suggesting that we can all simply summon a [“kumbaya moment”](#) and avert the looming hostilities. Our deck of cards is stacked (in terms of history, resources, trends, and personalities) toward conflict. But we can minimize the bloodshed if we never lose sight of our common humanity and creaturehood—that is, if we continually make the effort to see the world through the eyes of not just our allies, but our enemies as well, and through the “eyes” of the animals, plants, and ecosystems that we currently dominate.