The Blurred Line Between Peace and War
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The American humorist Ambrose Bierce, in his Devil's Dictionary, defined Peace as, 'A period of cheating between two periods of fighting'.

Bierce was originally writing in the late 19th century, at which point the distinction between peace and war might have been thought rather clearer than it is now. A formal act would take place on the part of a government, sovereign or head of state, declaring a state of war between two or more countries. Eventually, a treaty or surrender would be signed and hostilities would cease, usually with some territory, money or both having changed hands. Civilians could reasonably expect that a declaration of peace meant safety, and war was a specific, time-bound event.

Examples of formal declarations of war can be found in the Old Testament and in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The Romans had a special religious ceremony for it. Chivalry demanded it. Thucydides blamed the outrage of a surprise attack *without* a declaration for the events that led to the Peloponnesian War. But was it ever really so clear cut? After all, Chivalry notwithstanding, a declaration of war *does* serve to tell the enemy you're coming, which military strategists from Sun Tzu onwards have generally held is a bad idea.

General John Maurice, in a study written in 1883, showed that war was declared only ten times between 1700 and 1870, while it was waged a further 107 times in that period without any declaration – and this was only counting wars in Europe and between European states. The First and Second World Wars were largely declared, but most major conflicts since 1945 have been undeclared wars. The Korean War was officially a police action. The Vietnam War, rather than being a war, was an 'authorized military operation' despite three times the tonnage of bombs being dropped on Indochina as were dropped by the US throughout WWII. The Falklands War went undeclared. Gulf War I was implementation of a UN Security Council resolution. Gulf War II was an extension of the War on Terror, itself an undeclared war. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 was undeclared, and the 2022 invasion was referred to as 'a special military operation'.

What we are currently experiencing is a state of what some analysts call 'permanent competition'. In this environment, peace is not the absence of conflict but the management of continuous pressure and contestation. States engage in a spectrum of activities—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—that range from cooperation to confrontation, with no clear dividing line. This condition challenges the idea of peace as a stable, achievable state. In a world of continuous strategic competition, peace becomes a temporary equilibrium, maintained only through vigilance, deterrence, and resilience. The Cold War - what Orwell called "a peace that is no peace" - exemplified this dynamic on a global scale: an era of "peace" that was, in reality, defined by espionage, proxy wars, and nuclear brinkmanship. Today's multipolar world—with tensions between the U.S., China, Russia, and many regional powers—has revived that logic in a new technological context. Non-state actors, cyber operations, and information warfare unfold beneath the threshold of open combat, yet they can destabilise societies as effectively as traditional wars once did.

One of the defining features of this blurred landscape is hybrid warfare, a concept popularized after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Hybrid warfare combines conventional military force with irregular tactics, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure to achieve strategic objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. Hybrid warfare thrives precisely in the grey zone between war and peace. It exploits the reluctance of democratic states to escalate conflicts without clear provocation. Actions such as election interference, infrastructure hacking, and social media

manipulation allow aggressors to weaken rivals without triggering the collective defence mechanisms associated with open warfare. The concept of victory itself becomes ambiguous: control is exerted not through territorial conquest but through the manipulation of information, perception, and trust.

As the word 'hybrid' suggests, this is not to say that the more traditional, kinetic modes of warfare have stopped, even between great powers. Russian bomber aircraft have tested British airspace more than two hundred times in the last twenty years. They have not been subtle about it. The bomber they use, the Tupolev Tu-95 referred to by NATO as the 'Bear', is a four-engined turboprop aircraft originally designed in 1951. It has contra-rotating propellers – which is to say that each of the four engines powers two propellers mounted one in front of the other, one propeller moving clockwise and the other anticlockwise. The tips of all these propellers move faster than the speed of sound, which makes this one of the loudest aircraft ever to fly. NATO has sonar nets on the ocean floor to detect submarines entering the Atlantic; they can hear this plane flying at 45,000 feet over the sea. Pilots sent up by multiple countries to intercept Bears have reported that they can be heard over the sound of the fighter jets they are sitting in. There are many useful words to describe these Russian bombers, but 'stealthy' is not one of them.

This, however, is another example of how societies are normalising low-level aggression as a constant background condition. If every cyber intrusion, data breach, hostile overflight or attempt at election interference is treated as "business as usual," the moral threshold for aggression erodes. The danger is not only perpetual conflict but desensitisation to its presence. States and societies now live in a condition of constant strategic friction—less a series of discrete wars than a permanent struggle for influence, legitimacy, and control.

In response, scholars and policymakers argue for reimagining what peace means in the twenty-first century. Peace must be understood not merely as the absence of kinetic violence but as the resilience of societies to withstand and adapt to multifaceted threats. This includes strengthening cyber defences, enhancing media literacy, securing supply chains, and building international norms for digital conduct.

At the same time, diplomacy and multilateral cooperation remain essential. Peace in the new world will not be a passive state but an active pursuit—an ongoing effort to maintain stability, truth, and human dignity amid the ceaseless tides of invisible conflict. Without such efforts, the world risks sliding into an era of perpetual grey-zone conflict where every act of peace conceals the potential for war, and the blurred line between the two becomes the liminal space we all live in.