



# A 21st Century Conflict

Paramie Jayakody on the changing dynamics of conflict in the modern world

The 21st Century can be defined by many things – globalisation, digitalisation, and urbanisation being major front-runners. The rise of knowledge economies has resulted in people across the globe being more connected than ever before. This has provided them with unique opportunities for collaboration, creativity, compassion, and awareness across many areas of life, be it politically, socially, or economically.

Recent decades have seen a pertinent push for change; pushed nations to develop more and evolve further; resulting in a more interconnected globe. The COVID-19 pandemic, unfortunately, proved regressive in terms of that shift, but resulted in furthering the acceleration of a new digital revolution. The pandemic changed globalisation – for many of the smaller countries – from an abstract concept to something very real.

## A Changing World

There are several notable aspects of the world we see around us today that give rise to the problems we need to overcome. Key challenges include:

**Political instability:** During the past few years, there has been a notable increase in political instability, with many countries undergoing massive political change within extremely short periods of time. This is often accompanied by revolution or the rise of militant groups. Countries such as Myanmar are prominent examples, where citizens' liberties are hindered under military rule.

**Economic instability:** The global economic recession and rising inflation hit the world hard, and smaller states – particularly those who rely on tourism – took the worst of it. The pandemic also served to widen the economic gap between

the rich and poor, and this issue has been the cause of conflicts and civil wars worldwide, and affected the stability of countries such as Iraq due to fluctuating oil prices.

**Climate change:** Evolving from a background problem to something that could no longer be ignored, climate change has forced many countries to put a hard stop to functions that had continued unhindered for centuries. It has also created/exacerbated conflict around resources, which, ironically, simply worsen the issue. In particular, the Russia-Ukraine war has had devastating consequences on the climate.

**Digitalisation gap:** In an era of knowledge and digitalisation, the lack of access to technology can have severe consequences on a nation and its economy, cutting them off from the flow of progress followed by the rest of the world.

## The Butterfly Effect

But what makes this century truly different from the others?

While the nature of conflict remains constant, I posit that there is now a difference in how conflict unfolds, and more importantly, how it is responded to.

For starters, globalisation and technological advancements have made even local conflicts a global concern. Each small issue has the potential to escalate to global levels, as we saw in the case of Black Lives Matter, where one death resulted in shockwaves across social media and months of global mobilisation. In addition, the aspect of cyber-warfare is one unique to our generation, and one used by state and non-state actors alike. This particular issue gained controversy with notable incidents such as Russia's involvement in the US presidential elections.

## No Longer Silent

One curious effect that this writer would largely attribute to the pandemic was the level of self-evaluation global society underwent in terms of their own lives and purpose. A curious phenomenon that halted hustle culture in its tracks, the pandemic forced everyone (for the most part) to sit at home with themselves. People were suddenly not okay with a number of things; not okay with mediocrity, not okay with being unhappy, not okay with being used and exploited, and not okay with lowering their standards. This was reflected mostly in work culture, with increasing demands for recognition of mental health, work-life balance, etc., but also in socio-political situations, with authoritarian decisions being challenged, such as in the case of Nigeria's digital currency rollout.

This newfound self-evaluation and the increasing levels of interconnectedness brought about through digitalisation will shape the remainder of the 21st Century. People are no longer satisfied with being silent bystanders, whether in their personal lives or regarding global issues.

## Changing Dynamics

The Black Lives Matter movement was perhaps one of the earliest post-pandemic movements, becoming a global phenomenon out in the streets even before the pandemic had subsided, escalating to new heights through global social media. Regardless of their own skin colour, humanity formed a solid wall of resistance against white superiority and police brutality.

Since then, we have seen a trend where all around the globe, citizens have begun to challenge decisions, make their opinions heard, and protest for their rights and freedoms. From the Aragalaya protests in Sri Lanka which challenged de-



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cadec-long systemic corruption that had brought the country to bankruptcy, to the white paper protests in China which called for an end to its strict zero-COVID policy, to protests across Hong Kong against the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill, the waves spread around the globe.

Urbanisation has ensured that most of the global population is concentrated in big cities; this has boded well for the newly-aware masses, who are able to mobilise and band together faster and concentrate on-ground conflict to key areas. The 21st Century and all its technological advancements offer a myriad of opportunities for dissent – from hacktivism to online coordination, mobilisation, and getting the word out internationally. On the flip side, it also presents opportunities for cyber attacks, mass surveillance and breaches of privacy. Thus, revolutions have become a multi-layered affair. In countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, popular uprisings have challenged traditional alliances and created new partnerships. This has even had implications for regional stability and global politics.

## From Apathy to Empathy to Liberty

To be apathetic is to be privileged. A negative trait, and a stark reminder of the status quo, it suggests a lack of interest or concern for important issues, including those related to politics and society. Libertarians, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of individual responsibility, engagement, and activism in pursuing their vision of a more just and prosperous society.

Murray Rothbard argued that empathy is a crucial aspect of understanding the human experience and promoting peaceful interactions between individuals. Rothbard believed that empathy was necessary for libertarians to understand the perspectives and experiences of those who may be harmed by government intervention and to advocate for individual freedom and responsibility in a compassionate manner. Another libertarian scholar who emphasised empathy was F. A. Hayek, who argued that a free market economy is more likely to promote empathy and cooperation than a centrally planned economy. Hayek believed that the decentralised nature of the market allowed individuals to better understand and respond to the needs of others, leading to a more compassionate and interconnected society.

Apathy no longer has a place in the world – even decision-makers are no longer immune. Empathy – across borders, across cultures, across the world, could be a new norm. Empathetic leaders are held in high regard while those like Putin are regarded with disdain. In the 21st Century, the real conflict is between sticking to the status quo, or standing up for the better life you know everyone deserves.

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