

Book Review

The Art of War and Peace: Understanding Our Choices in a World at War

David Kilcullen and Greg Mills

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Published in 2024, *The Art of War and Peace*,¹ by David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, has emerged during a volatile time where the stability of the post-Cold War order is in flux. War in Europe and the Middle-East has returned; the utility and use of nuclear weapons has become a serious concern again; authoritarianism and identity politics are on the rise; direct conflict between the United States (US) and China is no longer discussed only theoretically; and non-state armed groups supported by powerful state actors, continue to proliferate in regions where Western democratic influence is now being replaced by authoritarian influence. These security concerns are interlinked with economic uncertainty as the Trump administration applies wide-scale tariffs and shuns multilateral trade agreements.² As Nick Carter notes in the foreword to the book, the contemporary strategic context is now ‘increasingly complex, dynamic and competitive’.³ Kilcullen and Mills take a wide-angled view of the state of the world and broadly discuss not just how to win wars in this challenging context but, more importantly, also how to win a durable peace.

Together, Kilcullen and Mills bring vast experience and expertise to the nebulous subject of war and peace. Kilcullen, who served the US and Australian governments for 25 years and was named one of the Foreign Policy Top 100 Global Thinkers in 2009, is currently a professor at University of New South Wales (UNSW) Canberra. He is a soldier-scholar with vast experience in practicing and writing about guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism. Mills, a prolific author on African political affairs, leads the Brenthurst Foundation in Johannesburg, is a member of the advisory board of the Royal United Services Institute, and is a former national director of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). Significantly, both authors have advised governments in conflict zones, and have personal experience in traversing the difficult and treacherous path from war to peace.

The Art of War and Peace, perhaps invoking in its title an understated intellectual homage to Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, Clausewitz’s *On War*, and Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, is fundamentally about why conflicts escalate, why peace efforts fail, and how sustainable peace might be achieved. Kilcullen and Mills argue that Western thinking since the Cold War has neglected to focus on the objective beyond war, and how to translate battlefield

victories into enduring and advantageous political settlements.⁴ The authors describe the de facto approach since the Cold War as a ‘battlefield-centric micro-view’.⁵ They go on to touch on a series of case studies of wars both “big” and “small”, and emphasise three issues that need to be kept in mind when analysing modern warfare: First, war changes not only in its character, but also in its purpose. Second, they emphasise the importance of all elements of national power being applied to create resilience and deterrence. This point also touches on a thread that runs through the entire book: no one is isolated from conflict. In an integrated, connected world, everyone is affected by war, even those far away from the epicentre of war. Third, the Kilcullen and Mills emphasise the importance of credible deterrence. By this is meant the credible communication of national ‘resolve, capability, and resilience’ to deter aggression.⁶

In discussing bigger wars, the focus is on the conflict in Ukraine, the potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, and the conflict in the Tigray region in Ethiopia.⁷ For Kilcullen and Mills, Ukraine and Taiwan offer lessons about the crucial need for deterrence and the adoption of asymmetric methods, the integration of technology, and the dire need for strong local leadership and support from international allies.⁸ The conflict in Tigray is described as flowing from a lack of leadership and how the lack of effective involvement by outside actors ‘feeds the delusions of leaders’.⁹ Although there is some resistance in academic circles to drawing explicit “lessons” from any conflict, the authors nonetheless come to crucial important conclusions about “big” wars. Keeping in mind especially the war in Ukraine – on which they argue the overall credibility of Western deterrence depends¹⁰ – the authors flesh out problems related to, among others, the internal and external consequences of propaganda; the under- and overestimation of the role of technology; the link between how wars are fought and the way war shapes participants’ ideas of future peace; and, the way military solutions in and of themselves are simply not enough to end wars.¹¹

In discussing smaller wars – low-intensity, irregular, limited-objective conflicts – Kilcullen and Mills focus on Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Angola, Liberia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. As with their focus on “big” wars, the authors draw several practical lessons in the movement from war to peace in “small” wars. Lessons include not becoming obsessive about battlefield metrics; the importance for local leaders to take leadership and ensure the alignment between international goals and local goals; avoiding ‘cockeyed theories and magic bullet solutions’;¹² the importance of winning the trust of local populations; and putting a premium on human agency over technological assistance.¹³

With this broad sweep of conflicts, Kilcullen and Mills move to a more theoretical yet still grounded discussion on translating tactical successes into enduring settlements. What emerges is a succinct list of dos and don’ts that should be integrated into staff-level courses on strategy and perhaps hung in presidential offices around the world. Notable points include putting politics at the centre, not personalities; creating national narratives and not relying on victim narratives; being inclusive of all parties to a conflict; and not trying to negotiate separate deals with different sides of a conflict.¹⁴

For this review, the first notable point that emerges from the book is the authors’ general insistence on non-military factors as these relate to the fighting and resolution

of wars, such as narratives, alliance dynamics, leadership, intelligence, diplomacy, and economics – all without losing sight of the role of the armed forces. Showing their Clausewitzian grounding, the authors ultimately teach that failures in conflict resolution can be attributed to failing to integrate these elements, especially the political dimension. This is not a controversial point or a particular new one, but it is one that unfortunately needs reiteration as global political and economic contexts continue to shift. This is also crucial as new leaders enter positions of power – leaders who do not necessarily have experience or extensive knowledge about the unpredictable political consequences of the use of force and who might maintain an unflinching faith in the decisive victory through overwhelming force. The second notable point is the authors' insistence that none is spared the consequences of conflict in a globalised world. Here is an interesting thematic overlay with Tolstoy's epic *War and Peace*, which echoes in the title of Kilcullen and Mills's book. Tolstoy was somewhat dismissive of the influence of "great men" and individual agency in directing history, famously claiming, with reference to Napoleon Bonaparte and Alexander the Great, 'kings are the slaves of history'.¹⁵ Tolstoy emphasised the role of those not in positions of immense political or economic influence, and how the course of war and its consequences are shaped by the actions of many, stating, 'the course of history depends on the actions of all the people who participate in the event, and not on the will of one man'.¹⁶ The overall point to be made is that in a world where none is spared the fallout of war, everyone has a role to play in addressing its course and resolution. At the very least, this means holding leaders fully accountable – not just for strategic choices as they relate to the fighting of war, but also for their narratives and choices that contribute to the wider context of the successful resolution of a war.

From the perspective of this review, the implication this book holds for the academy is not in its problematisation of war, but in its problematisation of peace. What is clear from the sheer variety of the case studies used in the book is that peace is not inevitable, that it can be misused for the purposes of war, and that peace does not guarantee its own continuation. While the strength of the book lies in the breadth of its scope, there is also an inherent weakness arising from this breadth, as many readers may find its treatment of individual cases to be cursory. Experts on individual cases will likely also identify contextual factors that the authors did not fully address in their analyses of such cases. Moreover, while the lessons the authors drew and the prescriptions that resulted from these lessons are analytically sound, their implementation remains profoundly difficult and complex and requires sound decision-making throughout societies, not just by individual leaders. With that said, it is clear that the authors indeed wrote the book not just for academics, strategists, and those in positions of political power, but also for the many – those who are not spared the consequences of war, who are not in positions of power, but who are able to hold leaders accountable through democratic mechanisms. The book is thus intended for wide readership, for anyone with an interest in political affairs, while it also serves as an excellent contribution to introductory courses in political science, international relations, and strategic studies.

David Jacobs 
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Endnotes

- ¹ DJ Kilcullen & G Mills, *The Art of War and Peace: Understanding Our Choices in a World at War* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2024).
- ² Reuters, 'Major Developments in Trump's Trade War', 21 August 2025. <<https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/major-developments-trumps-trade-war-2025-05-26/>> [Accessed on 29 August 2025].
- ³ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, xiii.
- ⁴ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 70.
- ⁵ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 70.
- ⁶ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 73.
- ⁷ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 75, 96.
- ⁸ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 107.
- ⁹ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 107.
- ¹⁰ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 115.
- ¹¹ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 119.
- ¹² Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 161.
- ¹³ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 158–66.
- ¹⁴ Kilcullen & Mills, *The Art of War and Peace*, 232–233.
- ¹⁵ L Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, L Maude & A Maude (trans.) (New York, Amazon Books, 2022 [1869]), 982.
- ¹⁶ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 982. The argument is also echoed by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a Soviet dissident, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970 in part for his opposition to the Soviet state. Solzhenitsyn, in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, emphasises the role of the citizens of a country, and how repression by a government cannot function in the first place if it were not for the passivity, fear and sometimes active collaboration of ordinary citizens. See A Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2018 [1973]).