

Something Invisible, but Essential, is Collapsing

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Many people are currently feeling a profound sense of anger regarding the war initiated by the United States and Israel against Iran. My focus here, however, is on exactly what this war is destroying—something difficult to visualize, yet essential for a sustainable society.

While the BBC refers to the conflict plainly as a “war,” much of the Japanese media utilizes euphemisms such as “attacks on Iran” or “the invasion of Iran.” This should not be dismissed merely as a quirk of Japanese politeness. Rather, it reflects a dangerous tendency to avert our eyes from a reality we would rather not confront. To build a future, we must first have the courage to face reality directly and honestly.

Even so, President Trump’s actions have become increasingly difficult to tolerate. This military campaign constitutes an unconstitutional act—conducting operations against a sovereign state without the approval of the U.S. Congress. It stands in direct violation of the U.S. War Powers Resolution, the United Nations Charter, and the core tenets of international law. Yet, no country or international institution has been able to restrain these actions. The world now finds itself in a precarious situation where rules are incapable of curbing reckless behavior. One can only hope that the current political climate will eventually shift, and that the decisions that led to the war against Iran will later be carefully examined and evaluated within the United States, resulting in the corrective measures or legal judgments necessary to prevent such actions from recurring.

According to a March opinion poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun, 82% of respondents did not support the U.S. attack on Iran, while 51% disapproved of Prime Minister Takaichi’s refusal to clearly state whether the U.S. attack should be regarded as legal. As the international order continues to erode, it is critically important to reverse the political climate that assumes laws and rules no longer need to be followed. Otherwise, the restoration of the international order will become increasingly difficult.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of Spain was one of the few world leaders to criticize the United States explicitly over the war against Iran. In a televised address, he warned that “major wars have often been triggered by miscalculations, technical failures, and unexpected events, setting off chain reactions that spiral beyond control.” The early termination of the war against Iran, together with the war in Ukraine, is a deeply shared hope among people around the world. Indeed, every possible effort should be made to prevent the emergence of further dangerous chain reactions.

The issue of environmental indicators has long been one of my primary areas of research as an environmental scholar. In designing such indicators, what matters most is ensuring that they focus on the essential aspects of a problem while making them as understandable and visible as possible. For this reason, I may be more conscious than most people of the importance of “visualization.” At the same time, however, I also recognize that there are crucial realities that indicators can never fully make visible. The “political climate,” “international order,” and “chain reactions” mentioned above are all extremely difficult to quantify. Yet they are profoundly important because, if weakened or lost, they can fundamentally destabilize the very foundations of our lives and well-being.

In everyday life, many people tend to understand the current situation simply as follows: “The war against Iran leads to rising gasoline prices.” More accurately, however, the situation should be understood in this way: “The war against Iran destroys the international order, which in turn contributes to rising gasoline prices.” Even if the war itself eventually comes to an end, profound long-term consequences will remain if the international order is not restored, including increasing difficulty in resolving future multilateral challenges. For example, it could become normalized for countries to stand by without intervening even when another sovereign nation is unjustly invaded. Concerning global environmental issues, there is also a serious risk that the collective commitment and capacity to implement global decarbonization could be weakened. It is therefore essential not only to address immediately visible problems such as rising prices, but also to restore those invisible yet indispensable foundations that are quietly collapsing without our notice.

The war against Iran has once again compelled me to recognize both the profound folly of war and the extent to which war constitutes a major obstacle to

sustainability. To make these realities more “visible” utilizing quantitative evidence, several data points and observations related to war are presented below.

First, what does war destroy, and what is ultimately lost as a consequence? War destroys human lives, infrastructure, including homes and buildings, and the natural environment. In terms of sustainability indicators, these are respectively categorized as “human capital,” “built capital,” and “natural capital.” Sustainability assessments generally regard a society as sustainable when these three forms of capital are maintained without significant decline over time. War, however, inflicts severe damage on all of them.

Concerning human capital, for example, major conflicts since the 1990s—including the Gulf War, the Yugoslav Wars, the war in Afghanistan, and the Iraq War—each resulted in approximately 130,000 to 300,000 deaths. Moreover, civilians accounted for roughly 30% to 90% of those fatalities. In addition, the number of people wounded in war is typically several times greater than the number killed.

Regarding built capital, it has been estimated that during roughly the first year of the Russia–Ukraine war, direct damage to Ukraine’s housing, infrastructure, and other physical assets reached approximately US\$147.5 billion. This amount was roughly equivalent to Ukraine’s GDP in 2019–2020. The figure clearly illustrates the immense scale of destruction caused by the war. Furthermore, because ordinary daily life and economic activity are severely disrupted during wartime, the total damage—including indirect economic losses—is estimated to be approximately four times greater than the amount of direct physical destruction alone.

As for natural capital, war causes forest loss through the use of weapons, soil and water contamination from heavy metals and other toxic substances, and air pollution resulting from explosions and fires. In many cases, these scars remain long after the war itself has ended. In Laos, for example, an estimated 80 million unexploded landmines from the Vietnam War still remain, obstructing the effective use of national land. Thus, Laos has made the removal of these unexploded weapons its “18th SDG,” treating the issue as a major national priority. More broadly, research has shown that countries that have experienced

armed conflict tend to score significantly lower on environmental performance indicators, and that recovery often takes as long as 20 to 30 years after conflict ends.

Moreover, in addition to causing severe local environmental destruction, war also accelerates global warming. For example, greenhouse gas emissions generated during the four years of war in Ukraine have been estimated at 311 million tons. Compared with national emissions rankings in 2024, this would make the war the world's 19th-largest emitter of greenhouse gases. This is roughly equivalent to the United Kingdom's annual greenhouse gas emissions.

These data clearly demonstrate that war destroys the very foundations of environmental civilization, reverses the achievements of past economic development, and obstructs future prospects for sustainable development. War is therefore a profoundly irrational act that must be ended immediately—not only from a humanitarian viewpoint, but also from an environmental perspective.

(Translated by Hideyuki MORI)