War as a Phenomenon of Inquiry in Management Studies

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ABSTRACT   We argue that war as a phenomenon deserves more focused attention in management. First, we highlight why war is an important and relevant area of inquiry for management scholars. We then integrate scattered conversations on war in management studies into a framework structured around three building blocks – (a) the nature of war from an organizational viewpoint, (b) the actors involved in war and (c) war's contextual factors. This framework provides a roadmap to identify pressing questions that management scholars can address, thus laying the foundations of a programmatic theory for analysing war as a specific area of inquiry. We especially emphasize the recursive relationship between war and management theory, demonstrating how they can mutually inform each other. Finally, we highlight empirical challenges and offer specific recommendations to guide future management research on war. Aiming to stimulate a new scholarly conversation, this paper contributes to establishing a forward-looking research agenda that can help management scholars problematize key issues in the analysis of war.

Keywords: grand challenge, programmatic theory, research agenda, war

INTRODUCTION

Wars, broadly defined as 'armed fighting between two or more countries or groups' (Cambridge Dictionary), have existed since the beginning of human history. In *War Before Civilization*, the cultural anthropologist Keeley (1997) estimated that more than 90% of known societies throughout history have engaged in at least occasional warfare, and many have fought constantly. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program

(UCDP), in 2023, there were 59 active state-based armed conflicts worldwide, the highest number recorded since the Second World War (Davies et al., 2024). Currently, there are ongoing wars in various parts of the world, including the Russo–Ukrainian War, the Israel–Hamas War, and the Sudanese Civil War. Over the centuries, such wars as the Crusades (1096–1291), the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), the Second World War (1939–1945) and the Vietnam War (1955–1975) have significantly shaped the course of history, leading to the rise and downfall of political regimes, as well as genocides, major migration waves, and the establishment of and changes in national borders (MacMillan, 2020). Due to their widespread occurrence and significant short- and long-term socioeconomic consequences, wars represent a prime case of complex problems that demand urgent attention and effective solutions.

Although war and the military have profoundly impacted the intellectual foundations of management (George, 1968), war has not been extensively explored in the management literature. This neglect is noteworthy because, first, war can have far-reaching organizational implications, resulting in significant uncertainties and disruptions in the business context (Devinney et al., 2023; Eden, 2024). These implications can include the destruction or closure of companies (Cornwell et al., 2023), the disruption of supply chains (Srai et al., 2023), the activation of economic sanctions (Gaur et al., 2023), and price increases in key input factors. Second, war itself is a highly organized affair involving well-coordinated national armies and non-state armed groups. Furthermore, the outbreak and progression of wars are significantly shaped by the interests and decisions of distinct organizational actors, such as multinational enterprises (Dai et al., 2023), humanitarian agencies (Rauch and Ansari, 2025), private military companies (Baum and McGahan, 2013) and defence contractors (Kim, 2019). Given this intimate relationship between war and organizational issues, we argue that it is critical to bring war to the forefront of the management agenda. This argument echoes recent calls – in particular, in the *Journal of Management Studies* (Healey et al., 2023; Wickert et al., 2021) – to pay more attention to phenomenon-driven research on key societal problems. Aiming to stimulate a new scholarly conversation, we adopt a phenomenon-based approach (Fisher et al., 2021; Lumineau et al., 2025) to 'capture, describe and document, as well as conceptualise [war as] a phenomenon so that appropriate theorising and the development of research designs can proceed' (von Krogh et al., 2012, p. 278).

We first highlight why management scholars should consider war an important and relevant phenomenon and discuss research opportunities from a management perspective. In doing so, we emphasize the recursive relationship between war as a phenomenon of inquiry and management theory and explore how they can mutually inform each other. Second, we develop an integrative framework that organizes and connects the scattered conversations on war in management studies. This framework is structured around three building blocks – (a) the *nature* of war from an organizational viewpoint, (b) the *actors* in war and (c) the *context* of war – to analyse war as a specific phenomenon of inquiry in management. Third, we provide directions for research in management around these three building blocks and outline a roadmap to identify both pressing questions that management scholars can address by drawing on existing management theories and opportunities to build new or extend existing theories. Finally, we identify challenges and provide recommendations to guide future management research on war.

This paper thus makes three key contributions. First, we direct our attention to an important and relatively unexplored phenomenon in management studies – war – and elaborate on its fundamental interplay with organizational issues. Second, we advance a coherent framework that integrates existing conversations and serves as a roadmap for scientific discovery, laying the groundwork for a programmatic theory (Cronin et al., 2021; Lakatos, 1968) to analyse war as a distinct area of inquiry in management research. Specifically, by revealing a wealth of research possibilities and identifying the most pressing questions, we establish a forward-looking research agenda that can help management scholars problematize key issues in their analysis of war. Third, we extend this discussion of theoretical opportunities by analysing empirical and ethical challenges in order to provide guidance for future research on war in management studies.

THE VALUE OF A MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE ON WAR

Management Scholars' Mission to Understand and Tackle Grand Societal Challenges

Analysing war in management research is crucial, as highlighted by calls to address significant societal issues beyond the traditional contexts of management (Wickert et al., 2021). As George et al. (2016) note, scholars have a moral imperative to guide business leaders in tackling persistent global challenges. Wars, which affect millions of people across the world and both pose immediate threats and give rise to long-term socio-economic consequences,[1] are among these critical societal issues. By deepening our understanding of war's complexities, management scholars can conduct impactful research that benefits both the academic community and various stakeholders, from students to policymakers, thereby enhancing the connection between scientific research and organizational realities.

The Dual Pathways of Studying War in Management Research

Studying war within the context of management research offers valuable insights via two primary approaches (see Figure 1): (1) phenomenon-based research (*theory application*) and (2) phenomenon-based theorizing (*theory generation*).

Phenomenon-based research 'prioritizes achieving a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon itself' (Lumineau et al., 2025, p. 506). With the conceptual tools to understand 'how meanings, actions, and arrangements are constructed, perpetuated, and change across complex settings' (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019, p. 3), management scholars are well equipped to provide insights into the nature and complexities of significant societal challenges (Gümüsay et al., 2022; Wickert, 2024), including wars. Indeed, war itself is organized and managed, involving the complex interaction of different organizations, and thus poses questions innately relevant to management and organization studies. By further integrating management perspectives into the study of war, we cannot only explain how wars affect organizations but also gain a deeper understanding of war's underlying organizational, strategic, operational and human dynamics.[2]
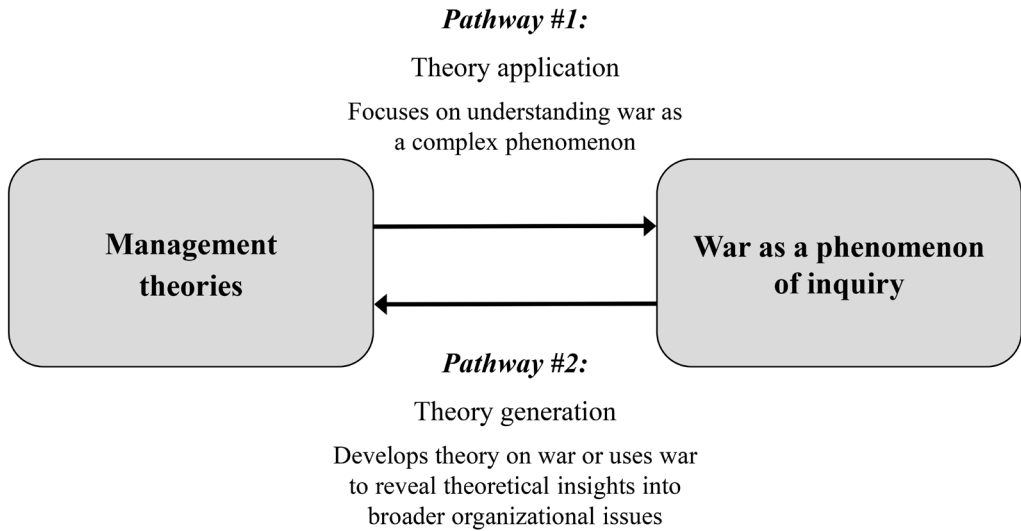
Pathway #1:

Theory application

Focuses on understanding war as
a complex phenomenon

**Management
theories**   **War as a phenomenon
of inquiry**

Pathway #2:

Theory generation

Develops theory on war or uses war
to reveal theoretical insights into
broader organizational issues

Figure 1. The dual pathways for studying war in management research.

Phenomenon-based theorizing, meanwhile, involves 'advancing [...] theories to ac-count for the observed phenomenon' (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 631). Management scholars can then develop theory on war or leveraging it as a revelatory context to generate theoretical insights into broader organizational issues. The revelatory nature of war can stimulate 'new ways of seeing' (Nadkarni et al., 2018) and become a sensitizing device by detecting anomalies not explained by existing theories (Siggelkow, 2007). Thus, the study of war can help management scholars generate new research questions and build new theories or extend and refine existing ones (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). War creates an extreme and high-stakes environment that places organizations under signif-icant pressure and uncertainty. In the relevance of context theorizing (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Johns, 2006), war can be particularly insightful, presenting certain man-agerial issues and dynamics in a more salient and transparent way than conventional settings (Hällgren et al., 2018). For instance, Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational leadership theory emerged from observing military leaders adapting their leadership style to changing circumstances on the battlefield and the competence of their subor-dinates. Similarly, Janis's (1972) analysis of the attack on Pearl Harbour and the Bay of Pigs invasion led to his theory of groupthink regarding dysfunctional decision-making under stress. In the next sections, we therefore discuss not only how management theory can inform the understanding of war but also how the study of war can inform man-agement theory.

Historical Connection between War and Management Practice and Theory

A third reason for management scholars to study war is that many aspects of manage-ment practice, particularly in the areas of organizational design, leadership, logistics and

strategic planning, have their roots in the military and the conduct of war (Soeters, 2020). Fundamental organizing principles, like the line organization with a clear chain of command and standard operating procedures, originated in military contexts before being adopted by civilian firms. The Roman army utilized a structured hierarchical system with defined roles and responsibilities, while military logistics practices, including demand forecasting and route planning, pre-dated modern supply chain management. Several other characteristics of contemporary organizations, such as assessment centres, occupational clothing and empowerment, first saw use in the military (George, 1968; Witzel, 2017).

Moreover, management as an intellectual discipline has a long-standing historical connection to war and the military (Augier et al., 2014). Ghemawat (2002, p. 39) notes that the organizational challenges of World War II and the allocation of 'scare resources across the entire economy in wartime led to many innovations in management science.' One of the most influential works on strategy, a term derived from the Greek $\sigma\tau\rho\alpha\tau\eta\gamma\acute{\iota}\alpha$, or the art of planning and directing military operations and actions, is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* (5th century BC/1963), which discusses principles and tactics for effective warfare, including the analysis of strengths and weaknesses, timing, deception and the use of surprise attacks. Likewise, *On War* by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1832/2008) has markedly shaped the field of management, and in particular strategy (Kornberger, 2013; Kornberger and Engberg-Pedersen, 2021), highlighting, for example, the immense uncertainty and complexity that decision makers face in the 'fog of war'.

ANALYSING WAR FROM A MANAGEMENT VIEWPOINT

Given its far-reaching repercussions, war is an established and widely researched topic across various social science disciplines (see the Online Appendix S1 for an overview). Each scholarly discipline takes a unique approach to the subject, reflecting its specific epistemic interests. For instance, political scientists examine the roles of political leaders, governments and international institutions in preventing and resolving armed conflicts, focusing on the causes of war, diplomatic strategies and the conditions of peace (e.g., Levy, 1998). Economists study the costs, benefits and economic drivers of war, such as how wealth disparities and competition for resources contribute to armed conflict, as well as its short- and long-term economic consequences, including its impact on international trade, employment and economic growth (e.g., Glick and Taylor, 2010). Sociologists, in turn, focus on the social causes and consequences of war, examining how inequality, ethnicity and social movements shape the likelihood of violent conflict and studying war's impact in terms of displacement, changes in cultural values and post-war career patterns (e.g., Modell and Haggerty, 1991). However, while these social sciences have generated significant insights, they have not paid much direct attention to the management and organizational aspects of war. Note that this does not imply we should disregard the contributions of other scholarly disciplines; on the contrary, we actively encourage management scholars to engage in interdisciplinary research, drawing on knowledge from other fields to analyse management-related issues in the context of war.

Despite the historical connection between war and management and increasing calls for a systematic inquiry into the topic (e.g., Cummings, 2022; Havrylyshyn et al., 2024; Meyer and Quattrone, 2023; Rouleau, 2023), management research has thus far paid somewhat limited attention to war, and existing research – ranging among such diverse areas as business ethics (e.g., Alzola, 2011), business history (e.g., Scherner et al., 2014), entrepreneurship (e.g., Salvi et al., 2025) strategic management (e.g., Pavićević and Keil, 2025), international business studies (e.g., Dai et al., 2013), organizational theory (e.g., Rauch, 2025), and operations and supply chain management (e.g., Jola-Sanchez et al., 2016) – remains largely fragmented.

To integrate the scattered conversations on war in management studies into a coherent body of knowledge, and to provide a systematic roadmap for future research, we develop an integrative framework, organized around three building blocks: (a) the *nature* of war from an organizational viewpoint, (b) the *actors* in war and (c) the *context* of war (see Figure 2). These conceptual pillars are informed by Whetten's (1989) suggestions on how to develop phenomenological theory. Taken together, the nature (i.e., what and why?), the actors (i.e., who?) and the context (i.e., when, where and how?) cover the key facets of an analysis of war as a specific area of inquiry in management studies.

In the following subsections, we first develop specific directions for future research related to each of these three building blocks (Directions #1, #2 and #3) and then discuss research opportunities that connect them (Directions #4, #5 and #6). Echoing calls for a phenomenon-based approach (Fisher et al., 2021; Lumineau et al., 2025), we link the phenomenon of war with theories and perspectives, showing how management scholarship can both uniquely contribute and generate valuable insights. Our framework thus
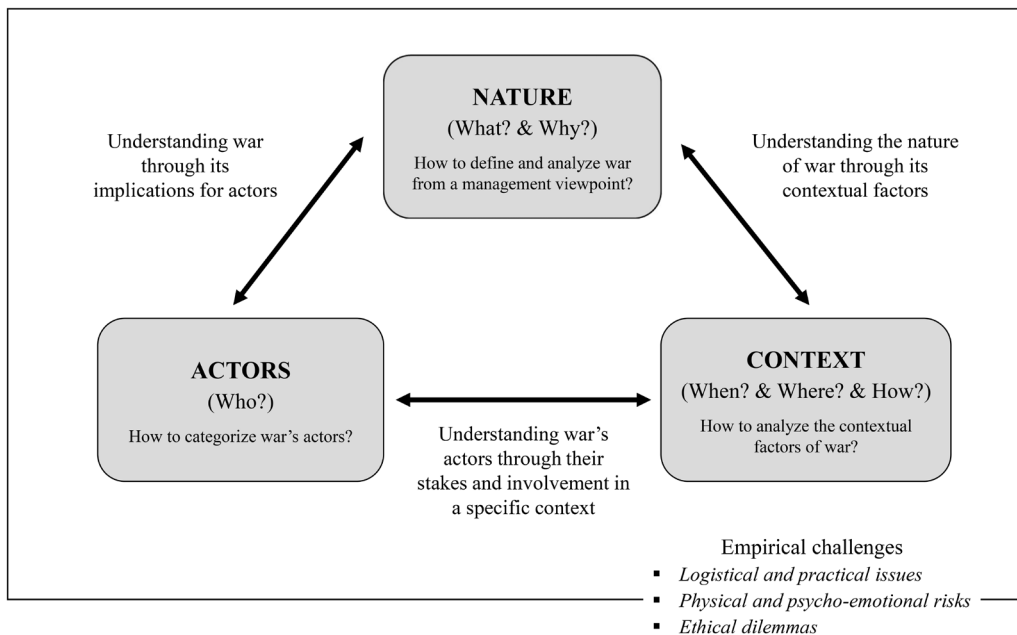

Figure 2. An integrative framework for studying war in management studies.

enables a systematic analysis of war as a phenomenon of inquiry, laying the groundwork for further investigation within the field. While certainly not exhaustive, our illustrative directions aim to inspire further research.

Direction #1: The Nature of War

Rather than analysing the precise nature of war, existing management research tends to use umbrella terms such as 'violent conflict,' which 'may include war, revolution, rebellion, insurgency, and sustained campaigns of violence and terrorism' (Oh and Oetzel, 2017, p. 715), or simply distinguish 'war' from other forms of political violence, such as terrorism and organized crime (e.g., Dai et al., 2017). Furthermore, such research generally portrays war as a harmful and threatening crisis situation that represents an extreme context for the actors involved (Hällgren et al., 2018). In one of the relatively few detailed accounts of war in the management literature, de Rond and Lok (2016) describe it as a situation where people encounter meaninglessness, immorality and/or abnormality in their work. Drawing on insights from an ethnography of a military medical team in Afghanistan (see also de Rond, 2017), the authors investigate how exposure to brutality and suffering in war zones invokes distinct emotional reactions and how the specific adverse environment shapes psychological injury from war. Other studies on war in management take a longer-term view focusing on its lasting effects, such as how the traumatic experience of war becomes inscribed in institutions (Klüppel et al., 2018) and instils enduring social values in a country's collective memory, such as suspicion and feelings of hostility toward the former opponent. For example, Li et al. (2020) examine the impact of prior country-dyadic military conflicts on the performance of and reactions to cross-border acquisitions and the occurrence of intergroup conflict between merging firms. Another exemplary paper on the long-term consequences of war is Koch-Bayram and Wernicke's (2018) study showing that CEOs who served in the US military during a war are less likely to engage in fraudulent financial reporting in their post-war careers due to enduring identity-based belief in honour, loyalty and integrity (Pavićević and Keil, 2025). Overall, existing management research views war primarily as disruption that significantly alters the status quo and leads to an unstable period of uncertainty and change or as a decisive historical event with persistent and long-lasting effects, without directly examining its unique features and organizational characteristics.

Moving away from the broad definition presented in the introduction and from the legal and political aspects of war,[3] in this section we discuss how to analyse the nature of war from an organizational viewpoint. Clarifying the construct of war in relation to organizational issues provides the community with common terminology to precisely articulate underlying ideas (Podsakoff et al., 2016; Suddaby, 2010). In addition, a clearly defined construct of war as it relates to organizational issues can help accurately capture its fundamental features while facilitating easier operationalization and empirical investigation (Schwab, 1980).

While existing management research on conflict (Lewicki et al., 1992; Lumineau et al., 2015), as well as that on crises and disruptions (Bundy et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017), offers a valuable foundation, we argue that the distinct characteristics of

war merit more focused attention within the field. A war is an intense armed conflict between two or more social entities (Oberschall, 1978), generally characterized by acute violence, destruction and mortality using regular or irregular military forces. It is 'a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed' (Clausewitz, 1832/2008, p. 83). Wars are characterized not only by considerable magnitude but also typically by the duration of the hostilities (e.g., the Reconquista, a war fought between the Catholic Spanish Empire and the Moors, spanned over 781 years, from 711 to 1492); this is in contrast to isolated acts of violence such as terrorist attacks, for example, 9/11 (Mainiero and Gibson, 2003). Hence, wars entail a high degree of uncertainty; tend to affect large populations beyond the boundaries of a single organization or community; and fundamentally alter economic, social and institutional environments. Unlike mundane business problems, most organizations have little or no experience in dealing with war (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015; Wenzel et al., 2021). In terms of the three criteria that Morgeson et al. (2015) used to analyse an event, wars tend to be *simultaneously* (1) highly novel, as they represent a break in expectations and are largely unanticipated and non-routine (Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011); (2) highly disruptive, as they reflect a critical discontinuity in the environment (Hoffman and Ocasio, 2001); and (3) highly critical, as they are 'important, essential, or a priority' to the actors (Morgeson and DeRue, 2006, p. 273) and often a matter of life or death.

War is also characterized by the intentional use of violence. However, in contrast to mundane, everyday violence, such as murder or robbery, which typically revolves around personal concerns, war involves organized violence. Specifically, war entails planned and coordinated collective efforts using hostility to compel one's opponent to submit to one's will (Clausewitz, 1832/2008). In contrast to crime, wars are conducted in the name of a political unit and are typically waged to achieve a higher goal or purpose, such as the cession of territory (e.g., the Roman Conquest of Britain, AD 43–84), the appropriation of valuable resources (e.g., the Opium Wars between China and Britain, 1839–1842 and 1856–1860), the overthrow of a hostile political regime (e.g., the War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021) or the enforcement of certain ideological values (e.g., the Crusades in the Middle Ages). As Clausewitz (1832/2008) famously noted, war can therefore be regarded as the continuation of politics by other means.

Moreover, despite the tremendous suffering and adverse effects that wars bring about, they are characterized by inherent ambivalence. For the parties initiating a war, there is a sense that, no matter how brutal and destructive, this war is justified and necessary. In contrast to the notion of grand challenges that represent significant and persistent societal problems (e.g., climate change and poverty), war may be seen as a necessary evil serving a higher purpose. The 'just war theory' (Walzer, 1977) posits that under certain conditions, war is morally defensible; that is, there are legitimate reasons for waging war. For example, a country may initiate a war to defend itself against an invading force or to protect its citizens from harm, as in the case of the British military operation in 1982 to retake the Falkland Islands after the Argentinian invasion, which Great Britain perceived as a threat to its sovereignty. Military interventions can also be launched to halt ongoing genocide and promote democracy and human rights. Hence, paradoxically, under certain circumstances, war may represent an unavoidable means of addressing the grand challenge of establishing peace, justice and strong institutions in the world.

Furthermore, war represents an interactive and conflictual physical confrontation between two or more parties in which each aims to morally and physically destroy its opposition or to weaken it to the point where it can no longer impose its will. Thus, war involves social, interactive and human components and has a manageable and controllable dimension. A war can end if all parties desire to do so or if a greater power compels the warring parties to stop fighting. This situation again differs from other types of crisis and disruption traditionally studied in management (Bundy et al., 2017; Gregg et al., 2022), such as the Challenger and Columbia space shuttle disasters (Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988); the nuclear meltdowns in Chernobyl and Fukushima (Hindmarsh, 2013; Min, 2024); natural catastrophes, including floods, hurricanes or earthquakes (Sanchez et al., 1995; Weick, 2022); and plagues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Muzio and Doh, 2021; Roulet and Bothello, 2023). Thus, while the current management literature offers valuable pathways into understanding the nature and organizational implications of war, the analysis of war also provides opportunities to build and extend theory. For example, war, as an extreme and prolonged crisis, pushes the boundaries of the crisis and disruption literature by introducing sustained uncertainty and intentional adversarial threats. Unlike short-term crises, war creates continuous disruption, requiring decision-makers to deal with a series of surprises and unexpected events (Ehrig and Foss, 2022; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015), as well as theories that address long-term resilience and adaptability.

In summary, we propose that war differs from other topics in the management literature due to (1) its high level of novelty, disruption and criticality; (2) its intentional use of organized violence to achieve a higher goal; (3) its intrinsic ambivalence; and (4) its relational and manageable dimension.

Direction #2: The Actors in War

Given the magnitude of armed conflicts, the war ecosystem typically comprises a broad variety of different actors who are involved in or affected by a given war.

States and the military. Wars are often defined as hostile armed conflicts 'between states' (e.g., Merriam-Webster Dictionary). States and their armed forces are therefore the central actors in wars. As centralized political organizations, states are often characterized by their monopoly over the legitimate use of violence (Weber, 1922/2019). Military efforts are supported by national militaries, highly organized forces intended primarily for conducting warfare. Various studies in management analyse military organizations and how they operate in times of war or in preparation for it. For example, Fraher et al. (2017) explore how US Navy SEAL commandos develop and sustain a capacity for 'mindfulness in action' despite the unpredictability of their operating environment and the danger inherent in their work. Relatedly, drawing on insights from an ethnographic field study of combat brigades, DiBenigno (2018) investigates conflicts between professional groups to achieve mission-readiness and soldier well-being. Other classic examples of this stream of research include studies by Weick and Roberts (1993) and Bierly and Spender (1995) that analyse coordination patterns during flight deck operations on a military aircraft carrier and the role of cultural norms in the organization of a nuclear submarine, respectively.

Non-state military organizations. States may be the central actors involved, yet many wars not only are fought between national armies but also involve non-state armed groups (e.g., Hezbollah, Hamas, Boko Haram and al-Qaeda) that actively use violence, including kidnapping, bombings and cyber-attacks, to achieve their goals. These organized armed groups tend to operate independently of national governments and the formal military structures of states, thus challenging the state's monopoly on violence and deviating from the traditional Westphalian sovereignty system of nation-states. Militias, terrorist groups, drug cartels, pirates and gangs fall into this category, with some exhibiting structural similarities to traditional state armed forces, while others operate as decentralized networks with fluid organizational boundaries.

Private military companies (PMCs), which constitute a particular subgroup of non-state military organizations, have gained increasing importance in modern conflicts (Baum and McGahan, 2013; Singer, 2003). Supplementing conventional military and security forces already serving governments, PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, Constellis and Academi (formerly Blackwater), provide armed combat or security services for payment. Private firms and non-governmental organizations can also employ PMCs to conduct security training, escort supply convoys and provide protection for company premises in war-riddled areas.

Other private firms. Other private organizations are also critical actors in war. First, various defence contractors have close business relations with the military and may profit from war (Kim, 2019; Sadri et al., 2023; Vergne, 2012). The term 'military-industrial complex' refers to the mutually reinforcing relationship of the defence industry with a country's military, its related government departments and even politicians. The largest private arms manufacturers in the world include Lockheed Martin Corp., Boeing and Northrop Grumman Corp. Large food service and facility management companies, such as Elior, Aramark and Sodexo, are also important military contractors. Furthermore, most major management consultancies, such as Booz Allen Hamilton, McKinsey and BCG, have specialized departments that provide specific advisory services in the field of defence.

Second, ordinary businesses can be involved in and affected by militarized conflicts. As suggested by prior research, wars significantly affect the business operations of both local firms (e.g., Hiatt and Sine, 2014; Jahanshahi et al., 2020; Sytch and Dukach, 2023) and multinational enterprises, including their subsidiaries operating directly in conflict-affected areas (e.g., Dai et al., 2013, 2017, 2023; Oh and Oetzel, 2017). In particular, research in international business has examined the roles of multinational enterprises and how wars impact their structures and (market entry and exit) strategies (e.g., Albino-Pimentel et al., 2021; Oetzel and Getz, 2012; Thams and Dau, 2023; Williams and Steriu, 2022; Witte et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2024). Dai et al. (2017), for example, found that when a war breaks out in a host country, otherwise highly valuable locations and resources can become sources of vulnerability and prompt the early withdrawal of foreign multinational enterprises. Oh and Oetzel (2017) further show that experiential knowledge about operating in conflict-affected environments is highly context-specific, and therefore difficult to leverage to other countries, while Oetzel and Getz (2012) observe that local stakeholder pressure (e.g., employees' fear of physical attacks) spurs firms to engage in conflict resolution and peacemaking, whereas international stakeholder pressure

is associated with indirect responses, such as collaboration with NGOs. In addition to direct exposure, firms can also be more indirectly affected by war through supply chain disruptions, market instability, political sanctions and war-related social movements. During the Vietnam War, for example, the Dow Chemical Company faced intense protests for supplying the US military with napalm. While in most cases, private firms suffer either directly or indirectly from the consequences of war, some firms may play an active role by deliberately fomenting conflict or collaborating with warring parties for personal gain. For example, the French firm Lafarge conspired with the Islamic State to keep running its production plant during the Syrian Civil War (Belhoste and Nivet, 2021) and the Standard Fruit Company (now Dole PLC) and the United Fruit Company financed guerrilla fighters and presidential campaigns during the Banana Wars in Latin America in the early 1900s.

International and non-governmental organizations. Transnational and intergovernmental organizations have become increasingly influential in modern military conflicts and their resolution. The United Nations (UN), the World Bank and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are notable organizations involved at this level. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinates international efforts to resolve global refugee problems, which are often directly or indirectly related to war. International military alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Arab League, also play a decisive role in many military conflicts. NGOs, including Doctors Without Borders, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Amnesty International and Oxfam International, provide humanitarian aid in the form of food and medical supplies, as well as demining in war zones.

Civilians. Civilians are arguably the main victims of armed conflict, as wars destroy communities and families and disrupt social and economic life (Eck and Hultman, 2007). Combatants often strategically target civilians, putting them at risk of rape or imprisonment during and after a war. However, civilians can also play an active role if they collaborate with the enemy or become partisans by joining resistance movements. War can also affect groups of people (far) beyond the battlefield. Civilians may have family members in war zones or may face travel restrictions, refugee flows (Guo et al., 2020; Pawlak, 2022) and economic consequences, such as shortages of or price increases in certain key products. In addition to these major groups of actors, other stakeholders in a war ecosystem include media and press agencies, journalists, civil rights movements, activist organizations and veterans.

Management scholars are particularly well positioned to leverage their expertise to analyse this complex network of actors involved in or affected by war. For instance, they can leverage stakeholder theory (Freeman et al., 2010) to illuminate the diverse effects of war on different actors. In a wartime context, organizations may find it challenging to allocate attention and resources in ways that balance the demands of the war effort with the often opposing needs of other important stakeholders. For example, during the Iraq War, companies such as Halliburton, which provided extensive support services to the US military, had to balance the reaping of economic benefits

with concerns about adverse effects on the firm's public reputation, as well as human rights abuses and other ethical issues. More broadly, understanding these intricate dynamics in the theatre of war can enhance our comprehension of how organizations navigate competing interests and diverse stakeholder expectations. Vergne's (2012) and Sadri et al.'s (2023) studies of social evaluation processes and the economic penalties of stigmatization in the global arms industry illustrate how the study of war actors can inform the literature on organizational stigma.

The study of the diverse ecosystem of war actors, including their respective interests, interactions and stakes, offers management scholars a range of further opportunities to develop or refine theories. Institutional theory (Scott, 1995) is particularly valuable for exploring the emergence of new types of actors and organizational forms, such as 'interstitial organizations' (Bátora, 2023; Villani and Phillips, 2021), which form and operate at the margins or boundaries of established social, economic or political systems (Furnari, 2014). By applying an institutional lens, management scholars can gain fresh insight into how these organizations often emerge in response to inadequacies or gaps in existing systems and are characterized by their ability to operate in a space that existing institutions do not fully regulate or define (Khanna and Palepu, 1997). Future research could also examine how the traditional institutional environment of nation-states and their armed forces is being challenged by the emergence of non-state military organizations. Private military organizations, for example, combine the rules, resources and practices of traditional state militaries with private market solutions. Further research on these war actors can extend our understanding of new forms of public–private partnership with their own institutional logic and governance forms (George et al., 2024). In addition, the involvement of international and non-governmental organizations in war reflects the increasing interrelation of global institutions and the blurring of boundaries between state and non-state actors. By studying these dynamics, scholars can extend their theoretical understanding of institutional change and the evolving relationships between traditional and emerging organizational forms in complex and contested environments.

Direction #3: The Context of War

The context of war refers to the various factors and circumstances that surround a particular military conflict, shaping its meaning, interpretation and significance. Understanding the context of war involves examining various aspects thereof, including the physical space and place, temporal factors, the socio-economic context, legal dimensions and technological and material elements.

Physical space and place refer to a war's location and environment. Geographical features, such as mountains, deserts or coastlines, can significantly impact military strategy and tactics. For example, mountainous terrain may favour defensive positions, while coastal areas may facilitate naval operations. The physical context also includes critical infrastructure, such as railroads or harbour facilities, which plays a vital role in moving troops and supplies during a war. In the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the lack of adequate transportation networks and communications infrastructure in Afghanistan's rugged terrain significantly challenged the Soviet military's ability to effectively deploy and coordinate its forces, ultimately contributing to its defeat. Additionally, climate and

weather conditions can affect logistical considerations, military operations and combatants' commitment and morale. Understanding the physical context is important for management scholars analysing war because it opens avenues for studying how organizations in conflict zones adapt to environmental challenges, optimize resource allocation and develop effective strategies to navigate the complexities of different terrains and climates.

Temporal aspects, including the timing, speed and duration of a violent conflict, play a crucial role in understanding the context and dynamics of war. Management scholars can examine 'war as an event' (Eden, 2024), that is, as a disruptive, exogenous shock with far-reaching consequences, to provide insight into the immediate challenges and response activities in the face of war (e.g., Ciravegna et al., 2023; Dai et al., 2017, 2023). In contrast, the study of 'war as a process' facilitates an understanding of how wars emerge, change and unfold over time (Williams et al., 2017), shedding light on the environments conducive to war, the complex social dynamics that promote it, the different developmental stages involved (including the underlying causal regimes and drivers) and its long-term effects (Klüppel et al., 2018). Thus, this perspective focuses attention on the historical context, including previous wars, the social embeddedness of ethnic conflicts and other critical temporal dynamics, such as shifts in power structures and the timing of engagements.

Societal and cultural aspects of war are also vital components of contextual analysis. War profoundly affects societies and cultures (MacMillan, 2020), for example, by shaping political institutions and instilling collective memories and beliefs. These effects, in turn, can impact the perceptions, motivations and behaviour of both soldiers and civilians, ultimately determining the conduct, outcome and aftermath of a war. In addition, the media, public opinion and propaganda can significantly affect the course of a war, as illustrated by the media coverage of the sinking of the USS *Maine* in 1898 ('Remember the *Maine!* To hell with Spain!'), which was blamed on Spain, sparking a public outcry and contributing to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War.

In addition, economic considerations are essential in the context of war, as they can not only provide an occasion for armed conflict but also significantly influence a belligerent's ability to sustain it. Factors such as resource availability, trade relationships and financial capabilities play critical roles in determining an actor's ability to wage and sustain war. For example, in the Gulf War (1990–1991), the economic strain of sanctions and war costs rapidly depleted Iraq's finances, undermining its ability to finance its military and maintain public support and ultimately contributing to its collapse. The economic context of war also includes its impact on the overall economies of the participating actors, encompassing consequences such as inflation, economic disparities, loss of infrastructure and shifts in labour force priorities.

The legal dimensions of war are also critical contextual factors. International law, such as the Geneva Conventions, the United Nations Charter and the laws of armed conflict, provides important frameworks that govern the conditions for initiating war, the conduct of hostilities, the prohibition of certain weapons, and the protection of civilians and combatants. Compliance with or violations of these laws can significantly impact the legitimacy of a war, public opinion about it and the prosecution of war crimes. Moreover, ethical considerations, such as the just war theory (Walzer, 1977),

the principles of proportionality and necessity, and the moral responsibility of soldiers and commanders, can also influence the conduct and outcome of war.

Technological and material aspects are also critical contextual factors in warfare. Advances in science and technology and the availability of new types of weapons profoundly affect military capabilities, operational tactics and the overall conduct of war. Technological developments, from gunpowder, radar, rocketry and nuclear bombs in the past to cyberwarfare, unmanned systems and precision-guided weaponry in the contemporary era (Coker, 2015; Lindee, 2020), have profoundly affected the nature and strategic implications of warfare. In exploring how drone operations have revolutionized contemporary warfare and how this emerging technology is disrupting the meaning and morality of the work undertaken by military personnel, for example, Rauch and Ansari (2022) illuminate the critical role of technological advances in shaping the conduct of war.

These contextual factors are interrelated and influence each other, shaping the course and outcome of a war. Management scholars can thus use their expertise in, for example, contingency theory (Donaldson, 2001), which posits that the effectiveness of organizational structures and strategies is contingent upon various external and internal factors, to examine how different contextual conditions affect organizational behaviour during war. In addition, war disrupts resource flows and creates extreme uncertainty, requiring organizations to adapt in ways that challenge and enrich resource dependence theory (Hillmann et al., 2009). One way war challenges the boundaries of this theory is by revealing how organizations navigate resource scarcity and competition in contested environments. For example, humanitarian organizations in war zones often depend on local actors such as governments, militias or private entities for access to transportation, security and supplies. These dependencies may force them to negotiate or collaborate with actors whose goals are misaligned or adversarial. Such scenarios challenge the theory's focus on a stable web of interrelationships and highlight the need to explore how organizations manage resource exchange and dependencies in fluid, high-risk and morally complex environments, thus offering new insights about how situational and locational factors complement, extend, or contradict resource dependence theory's general prescriptions (Jiang et al., 2023).

We summarize the key research directions related to each of the building blocks of our integrative framework in Table I.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE NATURE, ACTORS, AND CONTEXT OF WAR

Next, we provide directions for management research at the intersections of the three building blocks discussed above. Our intent is to offer a pragmatic and tractable framework for identifying opportunities for future research, which we illustrate by highlighting some pressing elements and issues rather than providing an all-encompassing list of potential topics (Table I).

Table I. A research agenda to investigate the three building blocks of war and their interplay

Directions	Illustrative opportunities for future research in management around Pathway #1 (Theory application)	Illustrative opportunities for future research in management around Pathway #2 (Theory generation)
#1: The nature of war	*Crisis and disruption theory*: explore how the unique organizational dynamics of prolonged armed conflicts (e.g., sustained uncertainty, intentional adversarial threats) influence decision-making processes within organizations operating in war zones.	*Just war theory*: develop theories on how the ambivalence of war as both a destructive force and a means to achieve higher goals, such as justice or sovereignty, shapes organizational resilience and ethical decision-making over time.
#2: The actors in war	*Stakeholder theory*: investigate how private military companies (PMCs) balance profit motives with ethical considerations and their role in shaping conflict dynamics within the war ecosystem.	*Institutional theory*: develop theories on how interstitial organizations, such as NGOs and PMCs, navigate the blurred boundaries between state and non-state actors in war environments to address gaps in governance and institutional frameworks.
#3: The context of war	*Contingency theory*: examine how the interplay between geographical features and resource scarcity in war zones influences organizational adaptation and decision-making.	*Resource dependence theory*: advance theory on how organizations navigate resource dependencies and ethical dilemmas in high-risk, fluid environments shaped by war's legal, economic and technological contexts.
#4: Interplay between the nature of and the actors in war	*Resource dependence theory*: investigate how different types of violent conflict (e.g., state-based wars, non-state armed conflicts, cyberwars) shape the resource strategies and operational adaptations of organizations in war zones.	*Sensemaking theory*: develop theory on how individuals and groups encounter uncertain futures and engage in sensemaking to navigate protracted situations of ambiguity, danger and moral dilemma.
#5: Interplay between the actors in and context of war	*Power dynamics theory*: examine how shifting power dynamics among state and non-state actors in war contexts are influenced by political, economic, and social contingencies.	*Organizational improvisation and bricolage*: develop theoretical insights into how organizations engage in improvisation and entrepreneurial bricolage to cope with persistent resource scarcity and innovate under challenging conditions.
#6: Interplay between the context and nature of war	*Complexity theory*: investigate how technological advancements, political alliances, or economic shocks act as tipping points in war, fundamentally altering its nature and outcomes.	*Event systems theory*: advance the understanding of how complex social processes, such as social movements or large-scale crises, unfold over time and are shaped by a chain of events that are temporally and causally connected.

Direction #4: The Interplay between the Nature of and Actors in War

First, we discuss the opportunities to combine the analysis of the nature of and actors in war. For instance, conventional state-based wars primarily impact military organizations through high casualties, while businesses in conflict zones face operational disruptions and shifts in consumer demand and investor confidence (Eden, 2024). In contrast, non-state armed conflicts challenge regular militaries to adapt to unpredictable risks and force governments to navigate complex negotiations with often illegitimate non-state actors. Furthermore, cyberwars represent distinct challenges that disrupt critical information systems and networks (Ashraf, 2021; Clarke and Knake, 2010), affecting how defence contractors develop technological solutions to protect against cyberattacks; businesses, such as banks and media companies, also face increased pressure to invest in cybersecurity measures (Kodama and Ladd, 2013). Thus, future research should further examine how different types of violent conflict and their specific characteristics, such as duration, intensity and geographic scope (Getz and Oetzel, 2010), affect organizational actors.

As we explain above, the analysis of war can help extend resource dependence theory (RDT), but RDT can also cast light on organizational dynamics at the intersection of the nature of and actors in war. With its focus on the flow of critical resources and the power dynamics they create (Hillmann et al., 2009), RDT provides valuable insights into the interests behind violent conflict and how different types of war shape the resource strategies of actors, such as rebel groups, multinational corporations and humanitarian agencies. This theoretical lens helps clarify how resource needs and dependencies vary across conflicts, informing issues like humanitarian aid distribution, the effectiveness of sanctions and the ethical dilemmas faced by businesses managing resources in war zones.

Analysing the nature of vis-à-vis the actors in war furthermore offers opportunities for theory generation. For example, treating war as a revelatory context holds promise to advance management theory on how individuals and groups manage their emotions in extreme situations and beyond (Ashkanasy et al., 2017). In a recent study analysing an extensive set of diaries of Médecins Sans Frontières personnel working in warzones, Rauch and Ansari (2025) explore how individuals cope with emotional distress and prevent mental breakdowns, ultimately revealing silence to be an effective emotional defence mechanism. Moreover, sensemaking theory (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), which describes how people assign meaning to their collective experiences, can be extended through the study of actors' involvement in wars. Previous research on sensemaking has focused primarily on analysing acute crisis situations, such as airplane accidents (Weick, 1990) or maritime disasters (Weick, 2022). Studying war presents an opportunity to gain insights into how individuals make sense of and respond to prolonged situations of uncertainty, danger and human suffering. Rauch's (2025) study, which examines how UN peacekeeping officers enact idealized futures by adhering to or adjusting their moral values in extreme contexts, is a case in point.

Direction #5: The Interplay between the Actors in and the Context of War

Management scholars can analyse the interplay between the actors in and context of war by drawing upon, in particular, the rich body of literature on power in organizational settings (Pfeffer, 1981) to understand how actors acquire, leverage and contest power in specific war

contexts. Power dynamics shape the relationships among state and non-state actors, military organizations, private firms, international and non-governmental organizations, and civilians. In times of war, these dynamics can shift rapidly due to changing contingencies, with certain actors gaining or losing influence due to changes in the political, economic or social context. For example, the Iraq War led to the rise of private military contractors such as Blackwater, which gained significant influence and operational roles amid US military resource constraints, thus shifting power dynamics, marginalizing traditional state military actors and raising ethical concerns about the privatization of warfare. Understanding how power dynamics evolve in response to changing contextual factors can help management scholars identify potential areas of intervention, collaboration, or competition among the various actors involved in war.

Another key aspect of the interplay between the actors in and context of war is the role of alliances and partnerships. Here, again, a rich management literature has much to offer (Lumineau and Oliveira, 2018). In the complex ecosystem of war, actors often form strategic partnerships to achieve common goals or counter the influence of other actors. The Cold War, for instance, was defined by a complex web of shifting alliances as the United States and NATO faced off against the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, with countries such as China and Yugoslavia navigating these tensions and forming alliances that influenced the balance of power, driven by changes in political leadership, economic considerations and evolving regional dynamics. Studying the dynamics of strategic partnerships among the actors involved in armed conflict can offer original insights into the factors that drive collaboration and competition in the theatre of war.

Exploring the interplay between the actors in and the context of war can also inform and advance management theory. For example, studying the extreme context of war may allow management researchers to gain new insights into how organizations manage resources in times of scarcity, thereby potentially advancing the literature on organizational improvisation and entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Miner et al., 2001). During the Russo-Ukrainian War, the lack of proper weaponry and extensive resource constraints, paired with advancements in technology (notably drones and artificial intelligence), spurred ingenuity among Ukrainian soldiers, ultimately leading to highly innovative solutions. Another case in point is Wiedemann et al.'s (2021) study, which, by analysing the puzzling case of the 1914 Christmas truce between Allied and German soldiers during World War I, reveals how context-specific conditions and resources, such as the proximity of trenches, shared customs and common language, and the freezing of the mud on the battlefield, facilitated improvisational behaviour.

Direction #6: The Interplay between the Context and the Nature of War

By examining how various contextual factors shape and are shaped by the unique characteristics of war, management scholars can gain invaluable insights into the complexities of armed conflicts and their organizational implications. To further illuminate this intricate relationship, management scholars can leverage complexity theory (Anderson, 1999), a framework that helps make sense of dynamic, constantly changing systems, such as those found in the context of war. Complexity theory moves beyond linear cause-and-effect models and embraces the interconnectedness, feedback

loops and emergent properties of complex systems. It recognizes that small events can cascade into large-scale consequences, and that predicting the future with certainty in such systems is inherently difficult. This resonates deeply with the unpredictable nature of war, where seemingly minor events can trigger major escalations, alliances can shift rapidly, and the outcomes of battles often defy conventional wisdom. A striking example is the First World War, which was triggered by an isolated act of violence, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. Moreover, while often remembered for its trench warfare, this gruesome stalemate was not the initial expectation. European powers entered the conflict expecting a short, decisive war of movement. However, the context – specifically, the introduction of new weaponry such as poison gas, machine guns and barbed wire – fundamentally transformed the nature of warfare.

By applying complexity theory, management scholars can bring a fresh perspective to the interplay between the context and nature of war. For example, they can explore how scientific breakthroughs and the introduction of a new technology – such as artificial intelligence, hypersonic munitions, or robotics (Lindee, 2020; Singer, 2009) – a shift in political alliances, or a sudden economic shock can ripple through the conflict ecosystem, changing the balance of power and leading to unforeseen consequences. By embracing the principles of emergence, adaptation and non-linearity, management scholars can develop more nuanced models of war dynamics, identify critical junctures and potential tipping points, and highlight the limitations of traditional, deterministic approaches to understanding and managing war.

More generally, given that war can rarely be understood as a single isolated act 'but rather [as] a *chain* of events producing a cumulative impact' (Roulet and Bothello, 2023, p. 772), studying the interplay between contextual factors and the nature of war can further enrich our understanding of how complex social processes, such as social movements, international tensions and large scale crises (Williams et al., 2017), develop over time and both shape and are shaped by economic, technological, cultural and societal aspects.

THEORIZING WAR IN MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Next, we discuss opportunities for management scholars to jointly address the nature of, actors in and context of war. Specifically, we suggest three main ways in which management scholars can study war (Directions #7, #8 and #9): depending on its relationship to other constructs and causal relationships, war can serve as an *explanans*, *explanandum* or *moderator* in a theoretical model. For each approach, we connect our ideas to major management and organization theories and develop recommendations for future research (see Table II).

Direction #7: War as Explanans

First, war can be approached as an explanans, used to explain or predict an outcome or phenomenon. As an explanatory variable, it is measurable as a dummy variable reflecting the presence or absence of war (e.g., Li and Vashchilko, 2010), as a categorical

Table II. A research agenda for analysing war in management studies

Directions	Illustrative opportunities for future research in management around Pathway #1 (Theory application)	Illustrative opportunities for future research in management around Pathway #2 (Theory generation)
#7: War as explanans	*Organizational change theory*: analyse how the intensity or type of war impacts organizational structures, strategic goals, and performance, such as global supply chain disruptions or foreign investment decisions.	*Imprinting theory*: advance theories of how historical conditions and traumatic societal shocks, such as war, trigger and imprint lasting institutional and cultural trajectories that significantly shape social values and organizational behaviour.
#8: War as explanandum	*Behavioural theory of the firm*: explore how organizational and behavioural factors, such as leadership dynamics, decision-making biases, and command structures, contribute to the outbreak, progression or resolution of war.	*Resource-based view*: extend and refine resource-based theories by examining how resource competition in extreme conditions, such as war, reshapes established assumptions, including resource heterogeneity and immobility.
#9: War as moderator	*Contingency theory*: investigate how war conditions, as a moderating factor, influence the relationship between institutional or organizational factors (e.g., leadership style or governance) and organizational outcomes.	*Situational leadership and organizational behaviour*: develop theories on how war moderates the effectiveness of organizational practices, such as bribery, collaboration or innovation, under extreme situational constraints.

variable reflecting distinct types of military conflict (e.g., Oh and Oetzel, 2017), or as a scale variable that reflects the intensity or severity of war (e.g., Li et al., 2020). In each case, one can examine war in terms of how it impacts organizational structures, strategic goals, and performance. This approach is well illustrated by Arikan and Shenkar's (2013) study on the impact of national animosity on cross-border alliance formation. Based on the premise that '[h]istory matters in international business' (Arikan and Shenkar, 2013, p. 1517), these scholars specifically examine the impact of the cumulative number of past military conflicts between two countries (the independent variable) on the number of strategic alliances between firms in that nation-dyad (the dependent variable). There are many opportunities to extend this rationale, as war is likely to have a wide range of both short- and long-term consequences for organizations, from disrupting global supply chains to impacting foreign investment (e.g., Gao et al., 2018; Nowinska and Olesen, 2025; Witte et al., 2017).

Scholars studying war as explanans can also build on the extensive literature on organizational change (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999). This theoretical perspective suggests that to survive and thrive, organizations must adapt to their environment. Specifically, in wartime, organizations, such as multinational enterprises, may need to change their strategies, structures, and processes to adapt to the demands of war, that is, by moving out of a conflict zone (Dai et al., 2017) or engaging with international and local shareholders (Oetzel and Getz, 2012). Management scholars can also draw on history-sensitive theories, such as imprinting (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Stinchcombe, 1965), institutional

theory (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995) and organizational path dependence (Sydow et al., 2009). By emphasizing 'the importance of past events for future action' (Sydow et al., 2009, p. 690), these theories appear particularly promising for analysing the long-term effects of 'traumatic societal shocks' (Klüppel et al., 2018), such as wars. They offer insights into how such events reshape institutional and cultural trajectories, as well as how the experiences of war become embedded in organizations and institutions and instil enduring social values and beliefs, including feelings of suspicion and hostility toward former adversaries (Arikan et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020).

Direction #8: War as Explanandum

Second, war as a construct may function as an outcome variable, that is, as something to be explained or predicted. We can study war as an explanandum in management research by examining how organizational and behavioural factors contribute to the outbreak, conduct, continuation, and eventual resolution of violent conflicts. For example, following social-psychological studies on the emergence and temporal fixation of dysfunctional behavioural patterns, one can consider war the outcome of a specific decision-making process or a certain sequence of actions. In his seminal work on the escalation of commitment, Staw (1981) analyzes the United States' deep involvement in the Vietnam War as the result of a policymaking process, which, due to both mounting investments of resources and emotions, became increasingly difficult to reverse over time (see also Michailova, 2022).

Wars are often initiated by a dominant coalition of decision-makers within administrations or organizations, such as political leaders or military officials. Management researchers can therefore examine how organizational factors and processes, such as organizational culture, leadership characteristics and the influence tactics of certain interest groups, contribute to the actual decision to go to war. For example, the George W. Bush administration's war on terror and, in particular, the decision to invade Iraq after the September 11 attacks, was driven by groupthink (Badie, 2010). In addition, as wars involve complex organizational structures that can impact the conduct of a violent conflict, such as military hierarchies (Holderness and Pontiff, 2012), we encourage researchers to explore how organizational design, command and control structures, and communication networks affect the dynamics and evolution of war. The behavioural theory of the firm (Cyert and March, 1963; Gavetti et al., 2012), which focuses on how and why decision-makers make boundedly rational choices in situations of uncertainty and complexity, seems particularly well suited for studying the complex behavioural dynamics and biases that lead to the outbreak and progression of war. In turn, insights gained from studying these processes in the context of war can also inform management research on behavioural strategy and organizational design, contributing to a more refined understanding of decision-making under risk and uncertainty.

Another framework that can support theoretical development on the reasons for armed conflicts is the resource-based view (Barney, 1991), which posits that organizations rely on critical resources to achieve their goals. Access to key resources, such as water, minerals or oil (as in the case of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which aimed to acquire the nation's large oil reserves), can be a decisive driver of war, as different actors competing for resources seek to secure them for their own use. Studying war through the lens of the

RBV not only highlights how access to and dependence on resources shape conflict dynamics but also provides an opportunity to extend the theory itself (Helfat et al., 2023). By examining how organizations mobilize, defend, or acquire resources in the extreme context of war, researchers can explore how traditional RBV concepts, such as resource heterogeneity and immobility, operate under conditions of intense competition, scarcity and instability.

Direction #9: War as Moderator

Third, war can be interpreted as a moderator of the conditions under which a theoretical model is most effective or relevant. By considering it as a moderator, that is, a variable or factor that influences the strength or direction of the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent one, we can study war as a critical contingency by examining how it interacts with other factors to impact organizational structures, behaviour and outcomes. Management scholars could thus draw, for example, on contingency theory (Donaldson, 2001), which suggests that the effectiveness of organizational structures and practices depends on specific contingencies or situational factors. In a war setting, contingency theory can examine how specific war conditions interact with other institutional and organizational factors, such as effective leadership style (Fiedler, 1967), to impact organizational behaviour and its outcomes. For example, Dimitriadis (2024) shows that during armed conflicts, which tend to reduce the ability of public officials to inspect, threaten and extort firms, bribery has a positive effect on firm performance.

Overall, the role of war as a construct in any theoretical model depends on its relationship to other constructs and its purpose within that specific model. By understanding the different roles that war can play, management scholars can develop more nuanced theoretical models that better explain and predict war as a complex phenomenon. Linking research on war to established scholarly perspectives can provide a stronger theoretical foundation and allow for a deeper examination of the mechanisms underlying armed conflicts.

CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN STUDYING WAR

While studying war provides numerous opportunities for management scholars, and the availability of grants and research budgets in this area is noteworthy, such research endeavours also involve considerable risks and uncertainties (Moss et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2024). We identify three specific challenges associated with being a war scholar and provide practical guidance and recommendations for addressing them. We then discuss various methodological approaches and potential data sources that allow for a relatively risk-free study of war.

Logistical and Practical Issues

First, after clearing the hurdle of securing research ethics review committee approval, collecting data in war zones involves considerable logistical and practical issues. The lack of a well-functioning support infrastructure makes data collection more difficult

and expensive than in traditional contexts, as researchers often face a mix of official and unofficial restrictions. Like war correspondents, scholars must organize their travel to conflict zones and seek support from on-site organizations, such as NGOs and national embassies, as well as rely on local informants (e.g., translators, drivers). In addition, collecting field data involve important practical research hurdles. We recall here a statement attributed to US Senator Hiram W. Johnson in 1917: 'the first casualty of war is truth'. Indeed, it is particularly challenging for war scholars to obtain reliable information, as most participants have other priorities and are likely to be more sceptical than usual about the researcher's intentions (e.g., political bias, espionage). Certain information may also be restricted because its release could jeopardize military operations. During the collection of such sensitive data, informants who share information with researchers may be treated as traitors by their peers and face social stigma. In addition to these reputational costs, informants must cope with emotional costs related to distress and with confidentiality concerns. War scholars must also be aware of information retrieval and hindsight biases when actors have difficulty talking about or remembering the past accurately (Fischhoff, 1975). There may also be social desirability issues when researchers try to capture sensitive issues that involve raw emotions and actions (Chung and Monroe, 2003). Thus, scholars studying war should respect informed consent and refrain from exploiting their informants' grief for their own purposes.

Physical and Psycho-Emotional Risks

Second, war scholars face significant physical and psycho-emotional risks. Being present in a conflict-ridden part of the world to gather insightful data can, of course, be extremely risky – literally a matter of life and death (Hällgren et al., 2018). Continuing our comparison to war correspondents, the Vietnam War saw the deaths of 68 journalists, and the International Federation of Journalists reported that 122 journalists were killed in 2024. In addition to risking their lives, scholars may become hostages or targets or be harassed or imprisoned. For their own safety, it is therefore crucial that researchers invest in effective training and equipment and follow the safety protocols and guidelines recommended by military personnel and other experienced professionals when conducting research in conflict zones.

Scholars should also be prepared to experience complex emotional responses. Conducting research in extreme contexts in general and in areas of war in particular can evoke 'feelings of helplessness, feelings of guilt or shame, and discomfort about one's role' (Claus et al., 2019, p. 162) and produce distressing, long-term effects that affect scholars' professional and personal lives (de Rond and Lok, 2016). As such, another significant risk is that of scholars suffering from the same psychological trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the individuals directly involved in the war. We therefore encourage management scholars planning to conduct fieldwork in unsettling war contexts to not only to engage in ongoing self-reflection and self-care practices, such as boundary rituals (Claus et al., 2019), but also to establish support networks for emotional well-being and seek assistance from mental health professionals when needed.

Ethical Dilemmas

Third, these challenges are often exacerbated by important ethical dilemmas. Amid situations of inhumanity and injustice, war scholars need to be aware of dual loyalties and check for potential conflicts of interest, especially when working with military or government agencies. Researchers should also avoid sensationalism and prioritize the dignity and well-being of participants over the ever-present desire to gather exciting information. Additionally, scholars must be mindful of the fact that their discourse and research output can be instrumentalized as part of information warfare and used as inputs of propaganda. Thus, while management researchers are prompt to address meaningful, socially relevant issues, they should also regularly reflect on the ethical implications of their research and critically evaluate the potential impact of their findings.

Despite the ubiquitous obstacles associated with collecting data in war zones, some management scholars pursue this challenging path. One notable example is de Rond and Lok's (2016) study on the 'psychological costs of war,' which draws on the extensive ethnography of a military medical team in war-torn Afghanistan. Specifically, the authors use thorough observations containing 'rich detail on personal reflections on the experience of war' (de Rond and Lok, 2016, p. 1970) and rather unconventional data, such as poetry written by the medical staff and more than 1000 photos taken by one author to document the psychological distress of war. Another exception is Rauch and Ansari's (2025) study of how individuals manage their emotions when exposed to brutality and suffering in war zones, which – in addition to the analysis of personal diaries – is based on non-participant observations during field trips to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen. Table III provides practical guidance and recommendations for addressing the challenges of studying war.

Methodological Opportunities for a Relatively Risk-free Study of War

Fortunately, management scholars have several promising avenues to study wars without the direct risks associated with collecting data in conflict zones. While primary data collection through interviews and observations in war-torn areas can be perilous, researchers can explore war from the safety of their offices through various methodologies. One option is to collect oral histories and personal testimonies. Scholars can interview individuals who have been directly involved in combat or those affected by war, such as refugees. These interviews can be conducted either remotely or in person after the informants return from the war zone. A notable example illustrating the significance of first-hand accounts is Stephen Ambrose's historical novel *Band of Brothers* (1992), which relies on in-depth interviews with World War II veterans to reconstruct the entire history and experiences of their particular military unit.

Technological advances have further expanded the possibilities for remote data collection, as they allow researchers 'to collect data remotely with respondents facing difficult circumstances (such as natural disasters or wars)' (Grégoire et al., 2024, p. 290). When conducted with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, surveys present another low-risk option for collecting data in non-traditional contexts (Kriauciunas et al., 2011). Additionally, controlled laboratory experiments – including immersive and virtual reality-based studies – enable researchers to simulate war-related scenarios and hence create situations that would be too dangerous or impractical to study directly. However,

Table III. Guidance and recommendations for addressing the challenges of studying war

Challenges	Guidance and recommendations
Logistical and practical issues	• Secure your field access to the conflict zone, for example, by partnering with an international organization, and take advantage of training sessions (e.g., language courses and expert workshops) before going into the field. • Make sure you have adequate funding and equipment and organize your trip to the conflict zone with proper planning and coordination. • Seek support from on-site organizations, such as NGOs or national embassies, as well as local informants, such as journalists, translators, drivers and fixers, who can help with logistics and provide valuable resources and insights. • Build rapport and trust with informants through respectful and transparent communication. • Respect informed consent and address the confidentiality concerns of informants and respondents. • Clearly communicate the purpose and potential risks of the research to informants and prioritize their well-being in all circumstances.
Physical and psycho-emotional risks	• Undergo safety training and invest in effective safety equipment. • Stay away from direct combat on the front lines and other high-risk areas, such as minefields and military checkpoints. • Adhere to safety protocols and guidelines recommended by military personnel and other experienced professionals. • Prepare for complex emotional responses and potential psychological trauma. • Establish an effective support network for emotional well-being and seek assistance from mental health professionals when needed. • Acknowledge feelings of vulnerability, despair and shame, and address them through self-care and support systems. • Engage in ongoing self-reflection and self-care practices to maintain resilience and cope with the extensive emotional challenges that accompany the research.
Ethical dilemmas	• Clearly define the purpose, scope, and boundaries of the research. • Engage in transparent and responsible reporting that presents multiple perspectives and avoids selective portrayals of the conflict. • Be aware of dual loyalties and potential conflicts of interest, especially when working with military and government agencies. • Avoid sensationalism and protect the dignity, psychological integrity, and well-being of all informants and respondents. • Ensure that the research findings are not instrumentalized, for example, by being used in propaganda campaigns. • Critically evaluate the potential implications of the research findings for participants, communities and societies. • Regularly reflect on the ethical implications of the research and seek feedback from peers and ethical review committees to ensure integrity.

as outlined by Wilson et al. (2010), such experiments carry their own practical and ethical challenges, particularly when recreating the emotional intensity associated with war.

Given the challenges of collecting data in war zones and securing participation from individuals due to confidentiality concerns, secondary data sources present exciting possibilities. Notable sources include official statistics, archival documents, new media coverage and historical records of war participants. Statistical data on military expenditures or casualty figures can be accessed from military organizations, government agencies, and research centres like the Institute of the Study of War (ISW) or from such resources as the Militarized Interstate Dispute database of the Correlates of War (COW) Project (e.g., Li et al., 2020). Notably, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is regarded as one of the most comprehensive databases on armed conflicts, providing a valuable source for researchers studying warfare (e.g., Oh and Oetzel, 2017).

Furthermore, employing historical research methods allows scholars to analyse wars throughout history by utilizing a diverse range of archival materials. The examination of transcripts from legal proceedings, satellite imagery, military documents and diplomatic communications enables researchers to reconstruct historical contexts and understand the dynamics of warfare over time. Analysing media coverage, such as the content of newspapers, social media platforms (such as X/Twitter or Telegram), online forums and radio and television reporting, also provides many opportunities to study war, for example, in terms of public perceptions, propaganda efforts and the impact of war on society. Additionally, personal records, such as memoirs and personal diaries (Alaszewski, 2006), offer invaluable insights into the emotional and psychological experiences of war participants. For instance, the renowned novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929/1996) by Erich Maria Remarque largely draws on the detailed war diary of the author's former classmate. Another example is Eugene Sledge's memoir, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981), which vividly illustrates the brutality, physical strain, and psychological toll of infantry combat during World War II. Recent management research highlights the potential of personal diaries in capturing complex experiences and emotions (e.g., Rauch, 2025; Rauch and Ansari, 2022, 2025). In their study on the work of military personnel engaged in the US Air Force drone program, Rauch and Ansari (2022) analysed 43 personal diaries in conjunction with in-depth follow-up interviews to delve into the diarists' 'experiences, feelings, and personal accounts, including reflections on their work, events, and lives' (Rauch and Ansari, 2022, p. 87).

In addition to written accounts, such as personal diaries and letters, the use of audiovisual data – including photographs, sound recordings and videos (Christianson, 2018; LeBaron et al., 2018) – represents another promising approach to gaining unique insights into wartime experiences. These materials capture aspects of organizational reality that may be challenging to convey through text alone, minimizing issues like recall bias (Ray and Smith, 2012). Kalkman's (2023) study of a military relief mission based on an analysis of personal photographs and videos shared by participants, as well as Fraher et al.'s (2017) study of US Navy SEAL operations, demonstrates the potential of this approach.

Overall, secondary data sources offer valuable alternatives for studying war, enabling researchers to circumvent the challenges of obtaining permission and access to participants in conflict situations. Table IV provides an overview of potential data sources that may allow for a relatively risk-free study of war.

Responsibility of the War Scholar

The role of management scholars studying war involves grappling with the limits of objectivity and recognizing the ethical implications of their research. This dual focus is essential in navigating the complexities of war and its impacts.

First, the study of war engages with significant epistemological debates around objectivity and subjectivity. While positivist approaches advocate for a scientific,

Table IV. Potential data sources that allow for a relatively risk-free study of war

Data sources	Examples
Oral histories and personal testimonies	Interviews conducted either remotely by telephone or video call or in person upon the informant's return from the war zone with individuals who have been directly involved in combat operations (e.g., active military personnel or veterans) or who have experienced or been affected by war (e.g., civilians, refugees, hostages, local journalists and other individuals who have lived through a war).
Survey data	Quantitative information collected through a standardized questionnaire from people who have experienced or been affected by war (such as veterans, war refugees or managers of local and multinational companies operating in war-affected countries).
Experimental data	Controlled laboratory experiments to study war-related scenarios, especially psychological processes and effects, such as (group) decision making, emotional reactions, and command execution.
Official statistics	Statistical data on various aspects of war, such as casualties, military expenditures or economic indicators, collected and organized by government agencies, international organizations (e.g., the United Nations or the World Bank), NGOs (e.g., Amnesty International), and research institutions, such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Correlates of War (COW) project.
Archival documents	Official documents from national archives or museums, transcripts from legal proceedings, policy documents, satellite imagery, GPS data, annual reports, logbooks, political pamphlets, meeting minutes, and official statements (e.g., military archival documents, intelligence reports, diplomatic negotiations, peace treaties and post-war reconstruction plans).
News media coverage	Newspapers; social media platforms (such as X/Twitter or Telegram); online forums; citizen journalism platforms; reports, photographs, and videos from newspapers and magazines; radio and television coverage, including propaganda campaigns.
Historical records of war participants	Diaries, memoirs, letters, poems, and other written accounts by individuals involved in the war, as well as audiovisual records, such as drawings, photographs, sound recordings and videos (e.g., captured by drones or bodycams).

objective lens, interpretivism and constructivism emphasize the importance of subjective experiences and social contexts. War scholars must accept that complete objectivity may be impossible, prompting a need for reflexivity – a critical self-examination of their biases and assumptions. This includes adopting a caring approach to theorizing that encourages exploration of diverse issues and methods, as highlighted by Howard-Grenville (2021).

Second, scholars must consider the implications of the knowledge they produce. Research on war mechanisms can be used for both beneficial and harmful purposes, necessitating a critical awareness of potential impacts. It is insufficient for research findings to be merely engaging; they must also undergo scrutiny regarding their societal consequences. Historical evidence shows that management principles, when applied without ethical considerations, have facilitated atrocities – such as those identified by Clegg (2009) when discussing bureaucratic rationality's role in the Holocaust. Thus, the pursuit of impactful research must be tempered with an awareness of unintended consequences, reinforcing the need for ongoing ethical reflection.

To mitigate the incidence and aftermath of war, a systems-thinking approach can be particularly beneficial. This perspective considers broader social, political, economic and cultural dynamics, helping foresee potential ripple effects. Engaging a variety of stakeholders – local communities, policymakers, military experts and humanitarian organizations – can unveil blind spots and identify adverse impacts early in the research process. Management scholars studying war should prioritize ethical considerations, focusing on justice and the risk of misuse, while demonstrating intellectual humility in acknowledging the complexities of war studies.

War scholars should also reflect on the performativity of their theories, as proposed by Hernandez and Haack (2023), considering how their insights influence social realities and policymaking. Transparency in research methods and findings fosters critical engagement from both academic and policy sectors. Interdisciplinary partnerships can further enhance understanding through diverse expertise. Ultimately, scholars studying war should aim to translate their insights into actionable policies that alleviate suffering and foster peace, ensuring that their research extends beyond the confines of academia.

CONCLUSION

Other social science disciplines have a long history of analysing war. Closer attention to this critical phenomenon among management scholars is long overdue. In this paper, we propose the foundations of a programmatic theory for analysing war from a management viewpoint. Our integrative framework centres on the nature of, actors in, and context of war to develop nine specific directions (summarized in Tables I and II) that management scholars are well positioned to analyse. Notably, we do not see any a priori restrictions on the involvement of scholars with different theoretical, epistemological and methodological backgrounds. Instead, our suggestions for future research highlight a wealth of connections between war and organizational issues for both micro- and macro-level scholars. Furthermore, we highlight many opportunities for a recursive relationship

between war as a phenomenon of inquiry and management theory, illustrating how they can mutually inform each other. Management scholars can study war in two primary ways: (1) phenomenon-based research (*theory application*), which prioritizes achieving a deeper, more nuanced understanding of war itself by leveraging existing theories; and (2) phenomenon-based theorizing (*theory generation*), which analyses war as a phenomenon to offer valuable insights for theory development. This bidirectional approach not only allows management theory to inform the understanding of war but also enables the study of the complex phenomenon of war to enrich and advance management and organizational theories. Overall, given its unfortunate recurrence, we believe management scholars should pay more attention to war and its far-reaching implications in order to prepare our societies if – or more likely, when – it occurs again.

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NOTES

[1] In addition to its extensive socio-economic consequences, war impacts our social lives in many, often subtle, ways (MacMillan, 2020): through language and metaphors (e.g., *War on poverty* or *Carthaginian peace*), public places and monuments (e.g., *Trafalgar Square* in London or the *Vietnam War Memorial* in Washington D.C.), public holidays (e.g., *Veterans Day* in the US or *ANZAC Day*, honouring all Australians and New Zealanders who served and died in wars), world-renowned books (e.g., Caesar's *The Gallic War* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), paintings (e.g., Picasso's *Guernica* or Goya's *The Disasters of War*), movies (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan* or *Braveheart*), and popular video games (e.g., *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty*).

[2] For instance, international business studies can explain how multinational enterprises are affected by and respond to war; strategic management can facilitate an understanding of the complex planning, decision-making, and resource allocation processes of the warring parties; and operations and supply chain management can analyze logistical challenges in war-torn environments. Moreover, organization theory can provide insights into how different actors coordinate their efforts in complex organizational structures during wartime and how wars both shape and manifest in institutions and organizations. Given that organizations and organizing play key roles in not only creating but also addressing grand challenges, a management perspective on war could eventually also facilitate the planning and implementation of conflict resolution, peacemaking, and post-conflict reconstruction initiatives (Joseph et al., 2025; Oetzel et al., 2010); that is, it could help develop effective solutions to end and mitigate the consequences of war.

[3] The Geneva Conventions of 1949 focus on "all cases of declared war or of any armed conflict that may arise between two or more high contracting parties, even if the state of war is not recognized." They also apply "to all cases of partial or total occupation of the territory of a high contracting party even if the said occupation meets with no armed resistance." States may be reluctant to admit they are engaged in a war; for instance, the Japanese refused to call the conflict against China for Manchuria (1937 to 1941) a war. It is noteworthy, then, that the Geneva Conventions apply to armed conflicts regardless of whether they are officially called wars.

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