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INTERNATIONAL WAR: DECLINE, CONSEQUENCES, AND "PAX AMERICANA"

John Mueller

The Ohio State University, U.S.A

bbbb@jmueller.com.

Abstract

The establishment and maintenance of any existing "world order" is primarily based on a general aversion to international war and does not depend on the United States. This perspective disputes two explanations that rely heavily on American activities. One contends that the United States, aided perhaps by the attention-arresting fear of nuclear weapons, was necessary to provide worldwide security and thus to order the world. The other contends that the United States was instrumental, indeed vital, in constructing international institutions, conventions, and norms, in advancing economic development, and in expanding democracy, and that these processes have crucially helped to establish and maintain a degree of international peace. This article traces the rise of an aversion to international war and argues that this, not US efforts, should be seen as the primary causative or facilitating independent variable in the decline of international war.

This perspective also suggests that world order can survive, or work around, challenges that might be thrown at it by the United States or anyone else, that fears that a rising China or an assertive Russia will upset the order are overdrawn, that there is scarcely any need for the maintenance of a large military force in being, and that, under the right conditions, international anarchy, could well be a desirable state.

Keywords: international war; war aversion; international anarchy; world order.

Introduction

The countries in Europe have managed to remain free from substantial interstate war for 75 years—the longest period of time since Europe itself was invented as a concept some 2,500 years ago (Mueller 2021a). As Oxford University historian Evan Luard has noted, "Given the scale and frequency of war during the

preceding centuries in Europe," this is "a change of spectacular proportions: perhaps the single most striking discontinuity that the history of warfare has anywhere provided" (Luard 1986).

Not only have developed countries, including the Cold War superpowers, managed to stay out of war with each other since 1945, but there have been remarkably few international wars of any sort during that period, particularly in recent decades. Indeed, over the last 30 years, there have been only three international wars as conventionally defined (at least 1000 battle or battle-related deaths). One was waged by Ethiopia and Eritrea in the last years of the 20th century. And the others, the only ones of the present century, are the brief regime-toppling invasions by the United States of Afghanistan and Iraq impelled by 9/11, wars that then devolved into extended counterinsurgency conflicts.

Although states may have largely abstained from conducting wars directly between themselves, the development has not necessarily led to the demise of warlike behavior in total. Indeed, states may well feel freer to engage in activities that might once have been taken to be a potential *casus belli*. Thus they still contest at other, less lethal, levels. These include tinkering in civil wars, seizing tiny bits of territory, firing shots across bows, lobbing cyber balloons, exacting economic sanctions, engaging in coercive economic diplomacy, attempting covert regime change, and poaching fish (Altman 2020; Braumoeller 2019). And civil wars continue, though perhaps declining somewhat in number since the 1980s (Mueller 2021a).

This article examines possible explanations for the decline of international war. Although the argument can only be sketched in the space available, it disputes those that attribute the decline to US security activities or to a US-led "world order." Rather, the rise of an aversion to international war is the most likely primary reason. Changes in ideas can often have substantial results, and it will be argued that much of the positive development of the post-

World War II era would likely have happened even without much American security participation. Moreover, the establishment of norms and institutions, economic advance, and the progress of democratization are not so much the cause of international peace and an aversion to international war as their consequence.

This perspective also suggests that world order can survive, or work around, challenges that might be thrown at it by the United States or anyone else; that fears that a rising China or an assertive Russia will upset the order are overdrawn; that there is scarcely any need for the maintenance of a large military force in being; and that, under the right conditions, international anarchy could well prove to be an entirely tolerable condition.

"Pax Americana" and the Rise of Aversion to International War

A number of explanations have been advanced by analysts to explain the remarkable decline of international war (Fettweis 2010; Pinker 2011, 2018; Goldstein 2011; Horgan 2012; Gat 2017). This article focuses on two, often but not always related, that claim the decline can be heavily attributed to the activities of the United States.

The first is that the United States has provided worldwide security and thus order, perhaps aided by the attention-arresting fear of nuclear weapons. This is often labelled "Pax Americana," and it relates to hegemonic stability theory in many of its forms. The second is that the United States was vital to construct international institutions, conventions, and norms; to advance economic development; and to expand democracy—and that these processes have ordered the world and crucially helped to establish and maintain international peace.

Along these lines, neoconservative writers Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol (2003) argue that "in many instances, all that stands between civility and genocide, order and mayhem, is American power." And former US

national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (2012) contended that "if America falters," the likely outcome would be "outright chaos" and "a dangerous slide into global turmoil." The United States, as Princeton's John Ikenberry (2017), writes, is the "guarantor of the world order."

These two explanations essentially rest on a counterfactual that is rarely carefully assessed by its advocates: if the United States had withdrawn from the world after 1945, things would have turned out much differently and, most likely, far worse.

Thus, political scientists Bruce Russett and John Oneal are among those who conclude that it was a US-supported European security community that made armed conflict between France and Germany "unthinkable" after World War II (2001; Thayer 2013). But it is entirely to look at the condition differently. The French and the Germans were once extremely good at getting into wars with each other, but since 1945 there seems to have been no one in either country who has advocated resuming the venerable tradition.

This reflects the fact that over the course of the twentieth century, a significant shift in attitudes toward international war took place—a change that scarcely needed the United States to provide either a militarized security environment built around nuclear fears or a set of norms, institutions, economic exchanges, and democracy. This can perhaps be quantified in a rough sort of content analysis. Before World War I, it was common, even routine, for serious writers, analysts, and politicians in Europe and North America to exalt war between states as beautiful, honorable, holy, sublime, heroic, ennobling, natural, virtuous, glorious, cleansing, manly, necessary, and progressive. At the same time, they declared peace to be debasing, trivial, rotten, and characterized by crass materialism, artistic decline, repellant effeminacy, rampant selfishness, base immorality, petrifying stagnation, sordid frivolity, degrading cowardice, corrupting boredom, bovine content, and utter emptiness (Mueller 1989;

Stromberg 1982; Brodie 1973). After the war, in stark contrast, such claims and vivid contentions are almost never heard.

It is not completely clear why World War I was such a turning point. There had been plenty of massively destructive wars before, many of them fought to the point of complete annihilation. And there were plenty that were futile, stupid, and disgusting—mud, leaches, and dysentery were not invented in 1914. One notable change, however, was that World War I was the first war in history to have been preceded by substantial, organized antiwar agitation (Beales 1931; Mueller 1989). Although it was still very much a minority movement and largely drowned out by those who exalted war, its gadfly arguments were persistent and unavoidable, and this may well have helped Europeans and North Americans to look at the institution of war in a new way after the massive conflict of 1914-18. At any rate, within half a decade, war opponents, once a derided minority, became a decided majority.

There were, however, two countries which, in different ways, did not get the message. One was Japan—a less developed but increasingly powerful state that had barely participated in World War I. Many people there could still enthuse over war in a manner than had largely vanished in Europe (Vagts 1959). It took a cataclysmic war for the Japanese to learn the lessons almost all Europeans had garnered from World War I.

The second country was Germany. In contrast to Japan, however, it appears that only one person there was willing to embrace international war, but he proved to be crucial—he was a necessary, though not, of course, a sufficient cause for the war (Mueller 2004, 2018, 2021a). As military historian John Keegan (1989) stresses, "only one European really wanted war: Adolf Hitler:" And historian Gerhard Weinberg (1980) concludes that Hitler was "the one man able, willing, and even eager to lead Germany and drag the world into war."

World War I made large majorities in Europe and North America into unapologetic peace-mongers, at least with regard to international war. Whether

one sees Hitler as a necessary cause or not, World War II reinforced that lesson in those places (probably quite unnecessarily), and it converted the previously militaristic Japanese in Asia.

The Consequences of the Change

Given this growth of aversion to international war, it seems unlikely that the United States, with or without nuclear weapons, was necessary for the international security that emerged after World War II, particularly in the developed world, nor was it required to institute new norms or institutions.

To begin with, as the United States was scarcely required to prevent war between Germany and France, the Cold War would likely have come out much the same no matter what policy the United States pursued. In particular, major conflict would likely have been avoided. As historian Vojtech Mastny (2006) concludes, all Soviet "scenarios presumed a war started by NATO" and "the strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place."

It could be argued, of course, that this was a consequence of American deterrence policy. However, those holding that deterrence policy was essential need to demonstrate that the Soviets were ever willing to risk anything remotely resembling the catastrophe they had just suffered, whether nuclear or not. In addition, Moscow was under the spell of a theory that said they would eventually come to rule the world in a historically inevitable process to which they would contribute merely by safely inspiring and encouraging like-minded revolutionaries abroad.

Accordingly, it seems unlikely that the United States (or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) was required to avoid war with the Soviet Union. In the end, although the United States did ardently seek to oppose the ideology and its appeals, Communism ultimately self-destructed. Its domestic problems derived from decades of mismanagement and mindless brutality and from

fundamental misconceptions about basic economic and social realities. And its foreign policy failures stemmed from a fundamentally flawed, and often highly romanticized, conception of the imperatives of history and of the degree to which foreign peoples would find appeal in the Communist worldview. As analyst Stobe Talbott (1990) puts it, the Soviet system went "into meltdown because of inadequacies and defects at its core, not because of anything the outside world had done or threatened to do." This suggests that the costly arms race was more nearly an indicator of international Cold War tensions than the cause of them.

Thus, insofar as good things have happened since the end of World War II, American security policy has been more nearly helpful than necessary, and its specific achievements in the twenty-first century have been more in dispensing war and disorder in places like Afghanistan and Iraq than in establishing peace and order.

The United States was certainly helpful after World War II in constructing international rules and institutions, promoting economic trade and development, and expanding democracy. But, as with security arrangements, it was scarcely necessary. The impelling, or facilitating, cause in the process again was the aversion toward international war. As scholar Richard Betts (1992) puts it for institutions of collective security: "peace is the premise of the system, not the product."

If international peace is the general expectation, it becomes much easier to create institutions and to construct rules and conventions intended to be supportive and reinforcing. But it is primarily the deep desire for peace that causes the conventions and rules, not the other way around. It is similar to the way that the rule about driving on one side of the street has been the result, not the cause, of a rather widespread desire to avoid being killed by oncoming traffic.

Thus, many of the institutions that have been fabricated in Europe are among the consequences of the remarkable international peace that has enveloped Western Europe since 1945, not its cause. If Europeans hardly needed the United States to decide that war among them was a really terrible idea, they did not need it to instill in them the notion that economic development and the quest for its ensuing prosperity was a good one. For example, it was the deep desire for international peace, not American machinations or simple economic considerations that was the impelling force for the creation of the coal and steel community between France and Germany, an arrangement that eventually evolved into the European Union. It is accordingly difficult to see why the institutions should get the credit for the peace that has flourished for the last three-quarters of a century in Europe, but they do (Russett and Oneal 2001; Ikenberry 2001, 2011).

There has also been a great expansion of international trade, interdependence, and communication, but this is more likely to be the consequence of peace than the cause of it. Moreover, any leadership in the process from the United States was substantially due to the huge size of its economy—all it had to do was allow access.

Peace may also furnish countries with the security and space in which to explore and develop democracy because democracy and democratic idea entrepreneurs are more likely to flourish when the trials, distortions, and disruptions of war—whether international or civil—are absent (Pietrzyk 2002; Thompson 1996).

Policy Implications

Over the twentieth century, particularly within the ever-enlarging developed world, something that might be called a culture of peace or an aversion to international war has been established for how countries relate to each other.

The United States may not have been crucial for this development, but a number of strategic and policy implications stem from it.

First, because the United States has not been crucial for establishing and maintaining world order, that order can survive, or work around to accommodate or undercut, various challenges that might be thrown at it by the United States—as during the administration of Donald Trump in recent years. However deflating this conclusion might be to American triumphalists, it is good news more generally: maintaining world order is based on a general aversion to international war and does not depend on the United States.

Second, the remarkable rise in aversion to international war suggests that a major war among developed countries, one like World War II, is extremely unlikely to recur. Contrary to many current fears, it is unlikely that this agreeable condition will be punctured either by the rise of China as a challenger country or by excessive assertiveness by Russia backed by its large nuclear arsenal.

China has become almost the quintessential trading state. Its integration into the world economy and its increasing dependence for economic development and for the consequent acquiescence of the Chinese people are crucial. Armed conflict would be extremely—even overwhelmingly—costly to the country and, in particular, to the regime in charge. The best bet, surely, is that this condition will essentially hold. Indeed, there is a danger of making a China threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy, by refusing to consider both the unlikelihood and the consequences of worst-case scenario fantasizing, and by engaging in endless metaphysical talk about "balancing" (Betts 2012; Kirshner 2020; Mueller 2021b). In addition, analysts point to a large number of domestic problems that are likely to arrest the attention of Chinese leaders in future years (Freeman 2018).

Concerns about Russian assertiveness have escalated since 2014 when there was an extortionary annexation of Crimea, a large peninsular chunk of

Ukraine, to Russia, and then a sporadic, and ultimately stalemated, civil war in Ukraine's east. Although the crisis created, as Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker notes (2015), "just the kinds of tensions that in the past had led to great-power wars," nothing like that took place. Moreover, the Ukraine episode of 2014 seems to be a one-off—a unique, opportunistic, and probably under-considered escapade that proved to be unexpectedly costly to the perpetrators. Massive extrapolation is unjustified and ill-advised (Person 2015; Bandow 2016).

Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping, like Hitler in the 1930s, are appreciated domestically for their success in maintaining a stable political and economic environment. However, unlike Hitler, both are running trading states and need a stable and essentially congenial international condition to flourish (Rosecrance 1986). Most importantly, neither seems to harbor Hitler-like dreams of extensive expansion by military means. It is true that both are leading their countries in an illiberal direction, something that might hamper economic growth, while maintaining a kleptocratic system. But this may be acceptable to populations enjoying historically high living standards and fearful of less stable alternatives. The two leaders (and their publics) do seem to want to overcome what they view as past humiliations. That scarcely seems to present a threat. The United States, after all, continually declares itself to be "the one indispensable nation"—suggesting that all others are, well, dispensable. If the United States is allowed to wallow in such self-important, childish, essentially meaningless, and decidedly fatuous proclamations, why should other nations be denied the opportunity to emit similar inconsequential rattlings?

Third, the rise of an aversion to international war suggests that there is scarcely a need to maintain a large military force by the United States (or pretty much another state). In fact, the achievements of the US military since World War II have not been very impressive. Some continue to maintain that it was the existence of the US military that kept the Soviet Union or China from

launching World War III. However, as suggested earlier, the Communist side never saw direct war against the West as being a remotely sensible tactic for advancing its revolutionary agenda. That is, there was nothing to deter. Moreover, for all the very considerable expense, the American military has won no wars during that period—especially if victory is defined as achieving a military objective at an acceptable cost—except against enemy forces that scarcely existed: Grenada, Panama, Kosovo, and Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991.

Maintaining huge and expensive US military force-in-being might make sense, despite the abundant record of failure, if there existed coherent threats that required such a force. Although there are certainly problem areas and issues in the world, none of these seems to present a security threat to the United States large or urgent enough. It may make sense to hedge a bit, however, by judiciously maintaining small contingents of troops for rapid response and for policing functions, a capacity to provide air support for friendly ground troops in localized combat, a small number of nuclear weapons for the (wildly) unlikely event of the rise of another Hitler, something of an effort to deal with cyber, an adept intelligence capacity, and the development of a capacity to rebuild quickly should a sizable threat eventually materialize

And there is a related issue: having a large force tempts leaders to use the military to solve problems for which it is inappropriate, inadequate, and often counterproductive. In the wake of the disastrous Vietnam War, Bernard Brodie (1978) wistfully reflected that "One way of keeping people out of trouble is to deny them the means for getting into it." More than forty years later, Brodie's admonition continues to be relevant.

Conclusion: Anarchy May Well Be Tolerable or Even Desirable

It has often been argued that, as Albert Einstein (1960) insisted, a world government is both an "absolute" and an "immediate" necessity for the demise of international war, something, he suggested, that might emerge naturally out

of the United Nations. As it happens, peace between major countries has been maintained and international war more generally has declined remarkably. However, the United Nations deserves little credit for this remarkable development, and world government none at all.

In fact, if the nearly 200 states that constitute the world order come to substantially abandon the idea that international war is a sensible method for solving problems among themselves, the notion that they live in a condition of "anarchy" becomes misleading. Technically, of course, the concept is accurate: there exists no international government that effectively polices the behavior of the nations of the world. The problem with the word lies in its inescapable connotations: it implies chaos, lawlessness, disorder, confusion, and both random and focused violence (Ellickson 1991; Bull 1977).

If that idea is abandoned—that is, if states understand that international war is not the way we do things anymore—"anarchy" could become a tolerable, or even a desirable, condition. It would be equally accurate to characterize the international situation as "unregulated," a word with connotations that are far different and perhaps far more helpful. What would emerge is what Germany's Hanns Maull (1990/91) calls a "system of cooperation and conflict among highly interdependent partners."

The constituent states may still harbor a great number of problems and disputes to work out. But to work to resolve such problems while avoiding international war, those states would scarcely require an effective world government—or the efforts of a "hegemonic" United States.

And in the meantime, sustaining a bloated military force and anachronistically pursuing self-fulfilling "great-power" rivalries comes at great cost. And it risks undermining efforts to address problems like pandemics and climate change that require international cooperation and scarcely have a military component.

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