

The Obsolescence of Major War: *An Examination of Contemporary War Trends*

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For centuries, the threat of major war has loomed over humanity. Defined as protracted struggles among the leading powers of the international system that tend to have significant geopolitical consequences, major wars have often been viewed as inevitable, albeit infrequent, calamities whose existence has played an important role in interstate relations.¹ And yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the wake of the relatively peaceful end to the Cold War, this once prominent institution appears to be on the wane. Direct conflict among the great powers has been absent for more than half a century, and an unprecedented period of peace seems to have enveloped the developed world. Indeed, never before in history have so many well-armed great powers spent such little time warring with one another.² Coupled with a notable shift in attitudes surrounding warfare, this absence of major war has caused some scholars to begin positing its obsolescence, sparking a significant debate in the field of security studies and redirecting attention to the causes of war and the necessary conditions for interstate peace.

To be sure, the obsolescence of major war does not imply a decline in war in general. In fact, recent events would seem to indicate the exact opposite. As major war has declined, non-traditional threats to security, including guerrilla warfare and terrorism, have gained a new lease on life, resulting in more uncontrolled and irregular forms of conflict. Moreover, the decline in direct conflict between the great powers does not imply that these countries have abandoned war altogether. Interventions into the affairs of developing states, as well as proxy wars, remain as viable options for great powers to pursue.

Ultimately, although warfare itself is not dead, it would seem that major war is becoming obsolete. The trends this paper will examine to explain such obsolescence include the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons technology, the changing nature of the international economy, the spread of democracy, and the development of international norms and institutions.

Before proceeding, it would seem fruitful to clarify a couple of terms, the definitions of which will determine the scope of the argument to be pursued. As indicated above, major war may be defined as armed conflict among two or more great powers, referring to the few most powerful states in the international system.³ Though non-great powers may also be involved, it is great power participation that truly defines major war. Indeed, in light of the great powers' capacity to mobilize and project vast economic and military resources across the globe, the scale and destruction of great power conflicts would seem to be major in the most fundamental sense.

And yet, despite its seeming prevalence, for some individuals, this definition of major war is insufficient. Deeming it too narrow, various scholars have sought to broaden this definition to include such things as war among dominant regional powers, or even more broadly, all interstate wars that produce a minimum number of casualties.⁴ However, even if these broader definitions are valid, since interstate war in general seems to have been declining in recent centuries, adopting such definitions need not negate the thesis at hand.⁵ In this sense, the obsolescence of major war holds regardless of whether a narrow or a broad definition is adopted. Thus, given the fact that the decline in interstate conflict appears to be clearer and more pronounced among the great powers, it is largely for the sake of concision that the proposed definition of major war will be utilized.

In light of this definition, it would be useful to clarify which countries fall within the group of great powers. For our purposes,

eight countries currently appear to meet the criteria of economic and military supremacy: the United States, China, Russia, Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and India.⁶ Together, these countries account for more than half of the world's GDP and more than two-thirds of its military spending.⁷ Among them are the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, each of which, in addition to India, possesses large nuclear arsenals. And yet, despite their warring potential, peace between these powers has stretched on for more than half a century, a development that we will now examine in more detail.

Exploring Obsolescence

Since the end of the Second World War, direct conflict among the great powers has been seemingly non-existent, marking the longest absence of major war since the days of the Roman Empire.⁸ Given the scale and frequency of major war in previous centuries, this absence may be the single most important discontinuity that the history of warfare has ever seen.⁹ Though not without tension, great power relations are now generally characterized by a sense of peace, with states carrying out aggressions through diplomatic or economic, rather than military, means. Indeed, as the threat of major war has declined, most great powers have chosen to invest fewer resources in developing a strong military, undergoing a notable downsizing in both the size of their armed forces and the quantity of weapons at their disposal since 1945.¹⁰ While most great powers had possessed forces numbering several million men throughout much of the twentieth century, as of the late 1990s, the only states maintaining forces exceeding a million and a half were India and China, and at that time, China had announced it would be cutting half a million of its troops.¹¹ In addition to directly cutting their forces, most states have also eliminated conscription, a once useful system that provided a great deal of cannon fodder for the institution of major war.¹² Air forces, naval forces, and nuclear weapons stores have also witnessed similar reductions worldwide.¹³ Indicative of the

current sense of great power peace, these reductions would also seem to imply that none of the great powers anticipates a major war to break out any time in the near future, supporting the idea that major war is becoming obsolete.

However, having said this, it is important to note that, in and of itself, the extended absence of major war is a necessary, but not a sufficient, criterion for the obsolescence of major war. In fact, it is arguable that the current absence is not an indication of the institution's obsolescence, but simply a temporary period of peace within the broader cycle of major war, a cycle linked to the rise and fall of world orders.¹⁴ On this view, international stability is tied to the presence of a hegemon that is capable of maintaining order in an anarchic international system due to its economic and military supremacy.¹⁵ When such hegemony is challenged by a rising power, this theory asserts that major war is likely to break out as power becomes more equally distributed and the control maintained by the hegemon is lost.¹⁶ Thus, just as the hegemonic presence of Great Britain ushered in a period of peace during the nineteenth century, it would seem that the prolonged peace we are currently witnessing may be attributable to the dominance of the United States in the contemporary international system, a dominance that remains open to challenge, particularly by rising powers like China and India. In this sense, instead of indicating its obsolescence, the current absence of major war may simply be a temporary manifestation of American hegemony that will inevitably be challenged and lost in the future, thus continuing the cycle of major war.¹⁷

Though not entirely devoid of merit, one should be wary of accepting this argument. Historically, some periods of hegemony have witnessed a general sense of peace among the great powers, but this does not mean that international stability is inherently tied to a unipolar structure. Indeed, many studies find little to no connection between power configurations and the incidence of war in the international system.¹⁸ Nonetheless, even if it can be

accepted that war has been cyclical in the past, tied to changing power balances, economic waves, or otherwise, this need not imply that this cycle must continue, thereby discounting the thesis at hand. Even if the current period of peace is temporary, trends surrounding the frequency of major war for the past few centuries seem to indicate that such periods are becoming increasingly more frequent and may one day become the established norm.

In fact, extrapolating from the works of individuals like J.S. Levy and Evan Luard, both of whom have performed analyses as to the frequency of major war, it is arguable that the absence we are seeing today has been taking shape for centuries, with periods of great power peace growing in both frequency and length. Focusing on various periods between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, both Levy and Luard find the nineteenth century to be the most peaceful, followed by the twentieth, the eighteenth, the sixteenth, and the fifteenth centuries, with the seventeenth century appearing the most warlike.¹⁹ Undeniably, the placement of the twentieth century in this sequence is problematic, though understandable given the spans of time these two scholars were considering. In 1984, the last year examined by Luard's study, great power peace would have lasted for just under forty years, placing the twentieth century neatly between the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, which Luard records as having seen forty-three and twenty-seven years of continuous peace, respectively.²⁰ However, in light of the fact that the twentieth century saw no major wars between 1945 and its conclusion, exhibiting fifty-five years of peace that continues today, the twentieth century should arguably be readjusted in both Luard's and Levy's analysis as the most peaceful of those studied. Once this is done, it would seem that, with some exceptions, these analyses reveal an increasing tendency towards peace among the great powers, indicating that the current absence of major war may be the cementation of a trend that has been developing for centuries. Thus, if there is a cycle to major war, it would seem that we are witnessing its conclusion.

The significance of the current absence of major war cannot be stressed enough. And yet, while significant, it is important to note that the years following the Second World War have not been marked by absolute peace, not even for the great powers. Shortly after the conclusion of the Second World War, the Cold War broke out, a contest between the Soviet Union and the United States that would define the next few decades of history. Although most of the wars fought during this period took place in the Global South, the Soviet Union, the United States, and their respective allies often participated in these battles, providing logistical support or even their own military forces. These proxy wars, wherein powerful countries utilized civil conflicts in the developing world to carry out their aggressions and extend their influence, resulted in indirect engagement among great power forces.²¹ Thus, although the last half century or so has not witnessed a major war in the proper sense, the great powers have engaged in indirect battles against one another.

In the post-Cold War period, proxy wars are no longer a well exercised avenue for great power aggressions, and, as indicated above, in recent years, even the United States and the Soviet Union have undergone notable reductions in the size of their armed forces and the amount of weaponry at their disposal. Yet, in spite of this, many great powers continue to prepare for and engage in war. What is noteworthy, however, is that the wars in which great powers are currently involved seem to fundamentally differ from those of the past. No longer do such wars seem to be primarily about expanding territory or influence, nor are they fought between great powers. Rather, these wars now seem to be generally motivated by humanitarian concerns, taking the form of collective operations sanctioned by multilateral institutions that aim to ensure the stability of developing countries wrought by violence.²² The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) efforts in Kosovo in 1999 and, more recently, in Afghanistan would seem indicative of such forms of intervention, with many great powers working together to protect human rights and promote human security

worldwide. To be sure, such protection is more necessary now than ever before as less conventional forms of violence, such as terrorism, have begun to flourish.²³ Ultimately, although the great powers are still engaged in war, such aggressions are no longer targeted at one another, nor do they appear to be aggressions in the proper sense. It would seem that their engagement in battle has undergone an evolution away from major war to humanitarian interventions, an evolution that can be tied to the shifting perceptions of war among populations in the developed world.

Indeed, beyond analyses as to the frequency of major war, further support for the obsolescence of this institution can be found in a shift towards a non-militaristic political psychology.²⁴ Evidenced not only by the reductions in military preparedness worldwide, but also by cultural and political trends, this shift would seem to be cementing in the developed world, particularly among the great powers whose behaviour is our primary concern.

In the past, war has been glorified as a heroic and virtuous endeavour, an inevitable product of human nature that cannot be overcome.²⁵ However, after centuries of violent warfare on the European and Asian continents, beginning as early as the seventeenth century, these views surrounding war began to change throughout the developed world.²⁶ The first truly active and persistent group that sought to reform sentiments surrounding war appears to have been the Quakers, a religious group that formed in England in 1652 and espoused a strong reverence for life.²⁷ Though vocal, their initial impact was limited. It was not until the end of the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-1815 that anti-war sentiments truly began to flourish, with the Quakers and others establishing the first anti-war societies in Europe and North America.²⁸ With many minority groups opposing or prophesising the conclusion of war, including such note-worthy scholars as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, anti-war sentiment grew in the years leading up to the First World War, resulting in governments of major countries having to justify war in a way that had not been needed

in the past.²⁹ In some states, including Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Portugal, and the Netherlands, anti-war sentiment became so pronounced that governments sought to reform their foreign policy and avoid war altogether.³⁰

However, it was not until the cataclysm of World War I that anti-war sentiments moved to the forefront in great power societies.³¹ Novels and memoirs of the 1920s expressed these views profoundly and pushed them into even wider circulation.³² Such sentiments were also present in international politics as almost all of the great powers of the time pursued a policy of war aversion. Arguably, World War II would not have broken out if it were not for the charismatic Hitler or the aggressive policies of the Japanese.³³ The consequence of World War I was that most major countries had foresworn war, at least major war. World War II simply reaffirmed these sentiments.

The growing disdain for war continued throughout the Cold War period and appears to have cemented today among the great powers. In the United States, the world's current superpower, anti-war sentiment became particularly pronounced during the Vietnam War, and negative sentiments can be seen today surrounding the Iraq War in both the United States and the United Kingdom.³⁴ None of these were wars were major wars, but the message remains the same, namely that citizens in these countries are wary of devoting resources and lives to the pursuit of war. Indeed, as indicated above, most of the great powers have reduced the amount of resources devoted to developing strong militaries and are generally on peaceful terms with one another. Countries like Germany and France, which, for centuries, have devoted significant amounts of time and resources to directly fighting one another or planning to do so, are now engaged in peaceful relations. Even Japan, a striking former aggressor state, seems to have embraced peace.

Ultimately, it would seem that the current absence of major war is not simply a temporary lull, but a more lasting change that has been developing for centuries. Major war is not simply absent, it is obsolescent. A wide range of causes come together to account for such obsolescence, which we will now examine in greater detail.

Accounting for Obsolescence

For many scholars, accounting for the obsolescence of major war need not go any further than pointing to the aforementioned shift in attitudes surrounding war. For these individuals, this shift is the most evident way of explaining the decline in major war, attributing it to a moral enlightenment of sorts.³⁵ However, while such enlightenment may have contributed to the obsolescence of major war, it is very difficult to quantify and leaves many questions unanswered. After all, even if a widespread moral enlightenment could be identified, the question remains as to what caused it. That is, what caused people to begin re-thinking the institution of major war?

Generally speaking, it would seem that the obsolescence of major war can be attributed to the culmination of a number of historical processes that have affected the profitability of warfare. According to Carl Kaysen, for most of history, societies were organized in such a way that the potential gains to be realized from war far outweighed the costs.³⁶ Early, predominantly agricultural, societies were organized around landholding, with land serving as the primary means of economic and political power. In such societies, the gains from war were clear, namely control over land and the labour tied to it, resulting in increased power for the landholder. Compared to such gains, the costs were generally quite minimal. In fact, as the scale of war was fairly small due to simple weaponry, the damage wrought by war to the landholders was usually, at most, the loss of one year's harvest. Moreover, in these societies, as the landholders themselves were those who engaged in

battle, there was a direct connection between those who would feel the costs and those who would benefit from war. Undoubtedly, this made war a more reasonable endeavour to undertake.

Even when changes came to societies in the developed world at the end of the fifteenth century, with cities growing in size, trade increasing in importance, governments becoming more complex, and the scale of armed conflict becoming larger, war remained a profitable endeavour. Until the eighteenth century, the governmental system was such that only a small elite made decisions surrounding war and truly benefited from such. Those who bore the brunt of the costs of war, directly engaging in armed conflict on the battlefield, now had little to no say in the foreign policy direction of their country. The new hubs of economic activity in major cities associated with trade also made for more enticing targets to be captured. And yet, while the scale of war was growing and the benefits to be obtained increasing, the associated risks remained low. Although more damage could be done to a city than to agricultural land, cities often had the opportunity to surrender before succumbing to assault. Thus, although the costs and benefits of war were less clear cut during this time than they had been in the past, war still remained a profitable pursuit.

Beginning around the nineteenth century and continuing today, transformations in technology, economics, and politics would change the terms of the calculation surrounding major war, resulting in the obsolescence we see today. Firstly, the industrial revolution brought with it new, destructive weapons technologies that were capable of not only killing large numbers of people, but also destroying the increased productive capacity and infrastructure that came with this development, thereby increasing the costs of war. Secondly, the economy grew to be increasingly global in nature, resulting in the globalization of production and an increased economic interdependence among developed states, both of which reduced incentives for war. Thirdly, the spread of liberal democracy seems to have internalized these shifting calculations

surrounding warfare since those bearing the costs, namely the citizens, now have a direct say in government formation. In addition to this institutional constraint, a sense of common identity and values among liberal democracies has resulted in them almost never warring with one another. Finally, international norms and institutions, of which most great powers are prominent members, have developed to counter international anarchy, a leading contributor to major war. We will now turn to a more detailed examination of each of these developments.

The Destructive Capacity of Weapons Technologies

Paradoxically, as weapons technologies have improved and become increasingly more destructive, the likelihood of major war has declined significantly. Extending as far back as the fourteenth century to when gun powder was introduced into Britain, it would seem that the scale and destructive potential of war has only increased, the pinnacle of which was World War II, the most destructive war in human history.³⁷ To be sure, World War I was also a terrible war, and, arguably, World War III would be even worse, even if nuclear weapons were not utilized.³⁸ Since great powers possess large stocks of highly destructive weapons and have directly felt their devastating potential in previous wars, such technologies would seem to act as a deterrent to the outbreak of major war.

The major turning point in terms of the increasingly destructive capacity of warfare came with the Industrial Revolution, which began in Europe in the eighteenth century. Industrialization “replaced animal by mechanical and then electric power, natural and traditional materials by steel and manufactured chemicals, and small-scale handicraft by large-scale factory production.”³⁹ Together with improved transportation and communication, as well as the en masse movement of rural populations to urban areas, these changes profoundly increased the magnitude and efficiency of production and, with it, war.⁴⁰ Indeed,

war too underwent a process of industrialization during this time. More powerful weapons technologies, larger armies, and other improvements to transportation and communication increased the scale and power of war efforts.⁴¹ Unlike most wars of the past, wherein only a small segment of society had been involved, industrial societies geared the entire nation towards the war effort, resulting in highly destructive and costly wars.

Although, initially, these developments did not serve as a deterrent to major war, as time progressed, the physical costs associated with such total wars became evident, culminating in the catastrophic World Wars of the twentieth century. These wars, which saw the great powers mobilize their entire economies to devastate one another, far exceeded those of the past in terms of destructiveness and scale.⁴² The loss of life tied to these wars was significant, with ten million people dying fighting during World War I and another fifty million during World War II, though, in the case of the latter, more than half of those who perished were civilians.⁴³ Although these numbers do not necessarily indicate that the World Wars killed a larger proportion of these societies' populations than previous conflicts, insofar as life expectancy and quality of life had improved, the opportunity cost associated with these casualties was higher.⁴⁴ Moreover, the costs of these wars were not limited to casualties. Beyond these high death tolls, those states that saw the wars play out on their home soil witnessed the destruction of a large amount of their infrastructure and tangible capital stocks.⁴⁵ The diversion of their economies to the pursuit of war also resulted in most states losing years of domestic economic growth.⁴⁶ Overall, the damage wrought by the First and Second World Wars, and the memory of such, would seem to restrain any great power leader from undertaking aggression.

Although the Second World War witnessed the use of nuclear weapons, it is arguable that conventional weapons would have been sufficient to deter the great powers from engaging in future wars with one another. That is, as argued by John Mueller,

while certainly devastating, the destruction wrought by conventional weapons during these wars implies that, even if nuclear weapons had never been created, the great powers would still be averse to warring with one another.⁴⁷ As indicated above, it would seem that many of the great powers had been sufficiently sobered by the atrocities of the First World War and would not have engaged in the Second if it were not for Hitler's aggressive behaviour. To believe that they would then engage in a Third, even without the presence of nuclear weapons, thus appears questionable. Ultimately, nuclear weapons may have increased the destructive potential of major war, but this need not imply that the destruction before was not sufficient for deterrence to occur. As Mueller asserts, "A jump from a 50th story window is quite a bit more horrifying to think about than a jump from a 5th story one, and quite a bit more destructive as well; but anyone who enjoys life is readily deterred from either adventure."⁴⁸

That being said, although nuclear weapons did not necessarily instigate the trend towards obsolescence, they have certainly helped to entrench it and may even protect against the rise of another risk-accepting great power leader in the future, similar in kind to Hitler.⁴⁹ Indeed, nuclear weapons have changed the nature of war entirely. Following the introduction and use of nuclear weapons during World War II, their destructive power has grown in a seemingly unlimited manner. The introduction of hydrogen bombs in 1952-3 resulted in weapons that were three thousand times more powerful than the one that destroyed Hiroshima in the Second World War.⁵⁰ By 1960, ballistic missiles made it possible for such destructive weapons to be delivered from any point on the earth to another, with Multiple Reentry Vehicles (MRV) and Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRV) allowing for as many as ten nuclear warheads to be put on top of a single missile.⁵¹ Countries, or even humanity as we know it, could now be destroyed at the push of a button. Attempts to develop a "second strike capacity" to launch a counter-attack in the event of a nuclear war began to appear futile.⁵² All it would take was one

missile for everything to be lost. Given such destructive capacity, fears of conventional wars escalating to nuclear conflicts would seem to prevent great power countries, which have access to such weapons, either directly or indirectly, from engaging in direct conflicts with one another.

Before moving on, it should be noted that, in addition to becoming increasingly more destructive, recent advances in technology would seem to be moving countries away from traditional warfare, from major war as we know it. As the Internet and other information technologies grow in importance, we seem to be witnessing a shift towards the utilization of technologies that unleash damage on countries in novel ways, shifts to cyber war or strategic information warfare.⁵³ Though the specifics of these new kinds of warfare need not concern us here, it is interesting to note that as they continue to develop, the outbreak of major war will likely become even less probable.

Ultimately, the costs associated with major war have increased. However, while significant, this fact alone cannot account for the changing profitability calculations surrounding major war. One must also examine the benefits to be obtained. If the benefits have declined in conjunction with rising costs, then it is arguable that major war is no longer profitable and, thus, obsolescent. An examination of the expected economic gains from major war would seem to reveal that this is the case.

Declining Economic Gains

Throughout history, one of the primary motivating factors for engaging in war was conquest, the capturing of another state's territory and the resources it contained. As indicated above, conquest was especially profitable in landholding societies, where land was the main source of economic and political power. It was also a worthy endeavour in early trading societies where city centers became the hub of economic activity and contained

valuable assets that could be easily captured in war. However, the extent to which conquest is still a profitable endeavour in the contemporary world, such that the benefits of undertaking this activity exceed the costs, is questionable, especially for the great powers. Although the opportunity for a one-time looting remains, and is likely even more advantageous than it was in the past given the available loot, the long-term benefits associated with major war and conquest seem to be lost.⁵⁴ Ultimately, it would seem that, when dealing with wars among great powers, this endeavour is no longer beneficial for a number of reasons, including the growth of nationalism, the economic interdependence among states, and the increasingly global scale of production.

Beginning with the idea of nationalism, it would seem that as these sentiments have grown, the benefits associated with conquest have become less of a guarantee. Attacking a country with even a minor element of nationalist sentiment, which appears to be held in some form by all of the great powers, is a dangerous endeavour, as one risks ensuing political hostility on the part of the conquered.⁵⁵ Not only would the conquering states have to undergo the costs of stifling uprisings, but the energy and efficiency with which the conquered economy operates would likely be lost, leading to less than favourable results than the conquering state had hoped to achieve.⁵⁶ In this sense, rather than undertaking the risks associated with conquest, it would seem far more prudent to simply increase domestic production and continue engaging in trade with the rest of the world.

Indeed, in today's world, economic strength does not arise so much from the control of territory and resources as it does from access to global markets.⁵⁷ States now operate in a truly global economy, relying on one another for imported goods and serving as markets for one another's exports. Although such interstate trade has been occurring for centuries, the economic interdependence among states that we are witnessing today is truly unprecedented, with states' economic prosperity depending on

peaceful trading relations with other states. Possessing the strongest economies in the world, the great powers are especially dependent on these relations. In fact, it was their efforts that brought about the World Trade Organization (WTO), formerly the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), to supervise these trading relations and ensure that they proceed in an orderly manner. In this sense, to engage in war with one another and disrupt these critical relations would seem equivalent to economic suicide, boding particularly badly for their populations who rely on international trade for their well-being.⁵⁸ Thus, the loss of the significant economic gains that typically accompany global trade would seem to serve as another deterrent to the pursuit of major war.

Closely related to this, it is arguable that the significant decline in the benefits of conquest among the most highly advanced countries is due to changes in the structure of global production. Proposed by political scientist Stephen Brooks, this argument asserts that trade is being overtaken by global production as the most important integrating force in the international economy.⁵⁹ In fact, much of the trade in today's world is a by-product of the globalization of production, of the outsourcing of the production of goods and services to locations around the globe in an attempt to minimize production costs.⁶⁰ Such globalization is changing the incentives facing states and contributing to the shifting profitability of major war.

As Brooks suggests, the globalization of production has played a profound role in the transition of most modern states from economies based on land to ones based on knowledge and human capital, a fact that has greatly lowered the benefits of conquest.⁶¹ In the post-World War II period, the globalization of production has taken off as communication and transportation technologies have allowed development, research, and management to take place in one area of the world while production occurs in another. This trend has allowed the most advanced countries of the world to

increasingly specialize in knowledge-based industries as developing countries undertake the necessary production processes. As these changes have occurred, the benefits of conquest among great powers have significantly declined. Whereas, in the past, the economic assets available to the conqueror could be easily seized, whether in the form of land, machines, etc., this is no longer the case. After all, although they can be captured, human beings and the information they possess are highly mobile and difficult to definitively acquire.

The geographic dispersion of production associated with this globalizing process has also shifted the profitability calculations surrounding major war.⁶² As global firms, which are typically based in the great power countries, have been increasingly outsourcing their production to areas of the developing world, the idea of conquering a great power country has declined in appeal as such a conquest would likely only result in obtaining a small portion of the global production chain. Even until quite recently, if a state invaded a country with a particular production sector, it would possess the entire chain of production and be able to produce all of the necessary inputs for the particular good. However, to do so now would likely require conquering multiple countries. Although it may be argued that possessing even a small portion of the production chain is valuable, the point to be made here is that it is less valuable than it would have been in the past. The argument is not that there are no benefits to be obtained from one great power conquering another, but that such benefits are significantly declining.

The final point of Brooks' analysis that is worthy of note pertains to the role of foreign direct investment (FDI). Brooks points out that, in addition to the declining profitability of conquest, a substitute can be found in the form of FDI, which has become increasingly more prevalent since the Second World War. According to Brooks, FDI allows states to achieve many of the same benefits of conquest without actually undergoing any of the

costs.⁶³ In this sense, although not a perfect substitute, when combined with the decreasing profitability associated with conquest, it is arguable that FDI has further reduced incentives for engaging in major war.

Ultimately, it would seem that, economically speaking, the benefits to be attained from major war have declined to the point of virtual non-existence. Not only are the anticipated gains less significant, but major war would also likely disrupt the trade and foreign investment upon which the economies of these countries depend. In fact, those citizens whose livelihoods are contingent on these economic relations remaining stable can be expected to lobby against major war and in favour of great power peace. However, this is only truly possible in a democracy, the spread of which also seems to have contributed to the obsolescence of major war.

The Spread of Liberal Democracy

The spread of liberal democracy, referring to a form of democracy that embraces a market economy, juridical rights for citizens, and a government based on universal suffrage, is another factor often deemed to account for the obsolescence of major war, with many scholars noting that democratic states almost never war against one another.⁶⁴ This generalization, which is referred to as the “democratic peace,” has not yet been refuted by history, and while it could be argued that it is merely a coincidence, democracies having only existed for a short amount of time, it seems unlikely that this is the case.⁶⁵ As it stands, almost all of the great powers of the international system are democratic, with China being the only exception. Thus, if the democratic peace theory continues to hold with time, this could be another way to account for the obsolescence of major war.

To be sure, there are a number of possible reasons that liberal democracies may be averse to going to war with one another and why the spread of this political system has contributed to the thesis

at hand. For one, as simplistic as it may seem, there would seem to be a set of common identities and values that pervade these societies which may make them wary of fighting one another. According to Michael Doyle, liberal democracies typically subscribe to the basic notion that “states have the right to be free from foreign intervention.”⁶⁶ They have a mutual respect for one another as citizens of the world who are all deserving of the same rights. Liberal democratic societies are also characterized by norms of non-violence and, domestically, tend to avoid resorting to large-scale violence due to institutional structures for redress. As a result, it is arguable that two liberal democratic societies embracing this kind of political culture will take a similar non-violent approach when interacting with one another, choosing to use diplomatic means to solve disputes.⁶⁷ Moreover, closely tied to the idea of liberal democracy is the idea of secularism. Insofar as religious beliefs triggered many wars of the past, the official separation of church and state would seem to remove a strong motivator for violence from these states’ existing arsenal.⁶⁸

While these reasons help to account for the democratic peace, it would seem that certain institutional barriers exist within liberal democracies that may serve as a more telling indication as to why these countries are averse to engaging in war with one another.⁶⁹ Insofar as these states are characterized by universal suffrage, providing all citizens of a certain age with a direct say in who runs their country, governments require the consent of the public in order to operate legitimately. Such consent is dependent upon the government’s ability to provide for the economic and social well-being of its people, an endeavour that, as evidenced in the sections above, will likely not be best served through the pursuit of war. Indeed, in the short-run, the general public bears the greatest costs of war. They are the ones whose lives are lost in battle and the ones who feel the immediate economic hardships. Even in the long-run, it is unlikely that the populace will be compensated for its strain. Thus, by empowering those who pay the highest price for such conflict, it would seem that liberal democratic states best

internalize the shifting cost-benefit analysis of major war. The gap that was presented in former societies, wherein small elites benefited from and made the decision to go to war while the general populace suffered, no longer exists in democratic states, at least in theory.

Other barriers to the pursuit of war beyond the notion of universal suffrage also exist within liberal democratic societies. Even if they are not always mindful of what the electorate desires, democratic decision-makers are often institutionally handicapped in foreign affairs. In countries like the United States, the division of powers requires war to be consented to by multiple decision-making bodies, making the decision to undertake such efforts slow and time-consuming.⁷⁰ Moreover, the transparency of public business typically displayed by liberal democracies hinders the pursuit of war as it makes surprise attacks difficult.⁷¹ Viewed more positively, while such open communication deters major war, it also fosters a sense of trust among democratic states. Assuming the messages they deliver to their citizens align with their actual objectives, these states have a clearer sense of one another's intentions, facilitating the development of cooperative interstate relations.

Ultimately, a seemingly non-violent political culture, universal suffrage, the division of powers, and public transparency make it difficult for liberal democracies to engage in war, especially with one another. In this sense, insofar as most of the great powers fall into this category of states, it would seem that the democratic peace theory helps to account for the obsolescence of major war. However, having said this, it is important to note that while the spread of liberal democracy is a contributing factor to such obsolescence, it does not appear to be a cause in the proper sense. That is, it would seem unlikely that the spread of liberal democracy caused the shift in attitudes surrounding warfare or really contributed to the shifting profitability of such. Rather, liberal democracy is properly viewed as the political structure that

best internalizes and expresses such a changing view of major war. Similarly, international norms and institutions also seem to strengthen and provide an avenue through which these shifting attitudes can be effectively expressed.

The Development of International Norms and Institutions

The strengthening of international norms and institutions that seek to put an end to major war has been progressing for centuries. Beginning with such things as the Concert of Europe, it is arguable that these norms and institutions have managed to defray the anarchy of the international system which realists propose will lead to conflict. Closely tied to the argument that international stability is best served by the presence of a hegemon that can operate as an unofficial governmental body, realists hold that the lack of a central government to enforce rules in the international system makes war inevitable.⁷² To be sure, this seemingly Hobbesian argument is problematic for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its acceptance of war as a natural part of the human condition.⁷³ Nonetheless, even if this realist assertion can be accepted, existing norms and institutions to which the great powers subscribe may be able to counter the outbreak of major war.

In recent centuries, as the profitability of war has shifted, attempts to achieve international security and stability have increased. The first real development in this regard came with the League of Nations in 1919.⁷⁴ Although this attempt at collective security proved to be a failure in the lead up to the Second World War, it provided the basis for the United Nations, which serves as the closest thing to a world government that humanity currently possesses. Fostering international cooperation and discourse, the United Nations is joined by other organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the G8/G20. These organizations all work to ensure the proper functioning of the cooperative relations needed to keep war at bay.

Although these norms and institutions may not be *responsible* for the obsolescence of major war, they do serve as important checks on its outbreak, contributing to the installation of communities in which the willingness to wage war declines.⁷⁵ Violent force and coercion could be used to ensure state compliance with international norms, including those against conquest and the forceful revision of territorial borders; however, insofar as the military might of these organizations is provided by the great powers, there will always be at least a few of them who are above the rules in systems run by coercion.⁷⁶ In this sense, it would seem more effective for these institutions to create an environment where major war remains an unprofitable endeavour, fostering the three factors described above that contribute to obsolescence.

For example, many of these institutions, most notably the WTO, encourage economic interdependency and provide a positive avenue through which trading relationships can be effectively pursued and benefited from. Others encourage the liberal democratic sentiment that we are all members of the same community, all comprised of populations that have rights and responsibilities to one another on the international stage.⁷⁷ Potentially even more significant, most of these organizations provide avenues for mediation and conflict resolution outside of the scope of armed combat and facilitate the transparent processes that are required for arms reductions.⁷⁸

Ultimately, it would seem that there is a feedback loop of sorts at play with international institutions and norms and their relationship to the obsolescence of major war. While they reflect and are a product of the shifting profitability surrounding major war, they also provide a systemic means to invoke and continually reinforce these shifts. Although not as significant as the other three factors described above in accounting for obsolescence, in many senses, these international norms and institutions provide the bedrock that allows the other three to function, serving as the

avenue which unites the great powers under a common banner and allows them to engage in the cooperative relations needed to avoid major war.

Conclusion

For the foreseeable future, conflicts among the great powers appear unlikely. Once viewed as a heroic, even inevitable, endeavour, major war has been absent for more than half a century and shifting attitudes surrounding this institution would seem to imply that it does not lurk on the horizon. War among the great powers is simply no longer a rational, profitable pursuit. However, although major war is obsolescent, it would be an error to completely discount its possibility in the future. Indeed, while major war, devastatingly expensive and minimally useful, seems unlikely right now, what the coming decades could bring is unknown.

Despite military downscaling worldwide, all states retain the capacity to fight one another. Although significant, the trends indicated above that have contributed to the shifting profitability surrounding major war are not absolute, and the cost-benefit analysis could shift in years to come. Memories of past conflicts could fade. International institutions controlled by the now-powerful United States could crumble. Democracies could transition to authoritarian systems of governance that are generally less favourable to peace. Basic resources like food and water could grow increasingly scarce and, if trade could no longer provide all states with an adequate supply, wars of conquest may once again become profitable. The development of new great powers, which have not been as influenced by the developments that have contributed to great power peace, could fundamentally alter the international system. In essence, there are countless situations that could arise in the future to overturn the thesis at hand.

And yet, as it stands, major war appears obsolescent. Major war may not be impossible, but, based on current trends, we seem to be heading toward a time when its non-occurrence will become the norm, a time when international prosperity becomes fully realized.

Notes

- ¹ Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" *Survival* 40 (Winter 1998), 20.
- ² John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 5.
- ³ Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" 20.
- ⁴ For a thorough analysis of these and other definitions of major war, see Raimo Väyrynen, "Introduction: Contending Views," in *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 13.
- ⁵ Kalevi J. Holsti, "The Decline of Interstate War: Pondering Systemic Explanations," in *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 135-37.
- ⁶ Raimo Väyrynen, "Introduction: Contending Views," 13. The inclusion of India in this group may be open to contestation. Given its large population, accelerating economy, and possession of nuclear weapons, it arguably meets the criteria needed to be a great power. If not a great power, India is at least a rising power, soon to be included in this group of states, and its inclusion for our purposes simply subjects the validity of the given thesis to a higher standard.
- ⁷ Joshua G. Goldstein, Jon C. Pevehouse, and Sandra Whitworth, *International Relations* (Toronto: Pearson, 2008), 66.
- ⁸ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 3. To be sure, in 1962, India and China waged a border war against one another, but it is arguable that they were not great powers at the time. See Väyrynen, "Introduction," 14.
- ⁹ Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1986), 77.
- ¹⁰ Martin van Creveld, "The Waning of Major War," in *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 102.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid., 103.
- ¹³ Ibid., 104-5.
- ¹⁴ Goldstein et al., *International Relations*, 164.

- ¹⁵ Robert Gilpin, "The Rise of American Hegemony," in *Two Hegemonies: Britain 1846-1914 and the United States 1941-2001*, eds. Patrick Karl O'Brien and Armand Clesse (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), accessed January 1, 2011, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ipe/gilpin.htm>. This is referred to as "hegemonic stability theory."
- ¹⁶ Goldstein et al., *International Relations*, 68.
- ¹⁷ Holsti, "The Decline of Interstate War," 146.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 147.
- ¹⁹ J.S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 134; Luard, *War in International Society*, chp. 2.
- ²⁰ Luard, *War in International Society*, chp. 2.
- ²¹ Goldstein et al., *International Relations*, 36.
- ²² Väyrynen, "Introduction," 15.
- ²³ Michael O'Hanlon, "Coming Conflicts: Interstate War in the New Millennium," *Harvard International Review* (Summer 2001): 42.
- ²⁴ See John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*.
- ²⁵ John Mueller, "Is War Still Becoming Obsolete?" (paper presented at the Annual General Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, DC, August 29-September 1, 1991), 2, 13-18. According to Mueller, war is not inevitable. The argument that humans are naturally predisposed to engage in war is discredited by the fact that many countries, most notably Switzerland, have taken an entirely anti-war stance. Others have argued that, though not biologically necessary, war serves as a necessary social institution through which aggressions can be channelled, and until another device is invented to serve this function, war must continue. Viable alternatives seem to have been found in international institutions like the UN, an idea that will be examined at a later point in this paper.
- ²⁶ Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 25.
- ²⁷ Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 25.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 19.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 19-21.
- ³¹ Mueller, "Is War Still Becoming Obsolete?" 2.
- ³² Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?: A Review Essay," *International Security* 14 (Spring 1990): 45. Kaysen points to such works as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Germany), Robert Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (England), Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (France), E. E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room* (America).
- ³³ Mueller, "Is War Still Becoming Obsolete?" 20.

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- ³⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Opposition to Iraq War Reaches New High," *Gallup*, April 24, 2008, accessed January 11, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/106783/opposition-iraq-war-reaches-new-high.aspx>; "'Million' March Against Iraq War," BBC News, accessed January 11, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/2765041.stm>
- ³⁵ See Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*.
- ³⁶ Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?" 49-51. The points elaborated on in the rest of this paragraph and the next are all taken from these pages of Kaysen's article.
- ³⁷ Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 7.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?" 52.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid., 53.
- ⁴³ Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" 21.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?" 53.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Mueller, "Is War Still Becoming Obsolete?" 4.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ von Creveld, "The Waning of Major War," 98.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid., 99.
- ⁵³ Lawrence Freedman, "The Changing Forms of Military Conflict," *Survival* 40 (Winter 1998): 44-45.
- ⁵⁴ Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?" 54.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Väyrynen, "Introduction," 6.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Stephen G. Brooks, "The Globalization of Production and the Changing Benefits of Conquest," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43 (October 1999): 654.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 654-57. The rest of the argument outlined in this paragraph can be found on these pages of Brooks' article.
- ⁶² Ibid., 660-663. The argument in this paragraph is outlined in greater detail on these pages.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 665-666.
- ⁶⁴ Goldstein et al., *International Relations*, 89.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.

- ⁶⁶ Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (Summer and Fall 1983): 213.
- ⁶⁷ William R. Thompson, "Democratic Peace and Civil Society," in *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 215.
- ⁶⁸ Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" 23.
- ⁶⁹ Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete?" 57. The following argument can be found on this page of Kaysens' article.
- ⁷⁰ Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?" 26.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² Goldstein et al., *International Relations*, 60.
- ⁷³ See Mueller, "Is War Still Becoming Obsolete?" 13.
- ⁷⁴ von Crevel, "The Waning of Major War," 107.
- ⁷⁵ Patrick M. Morgan, "Multilateral Institutions as Restraints on Major War," *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Väyrynen (New York: Routledge, 2006), 160.
- ⁷⁶ Holsti, "The Decline of Interstate War," 142-143.
- ⁷⁷ Morgan, "Multilateral Institution as Restraints on Major War," 176.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 168-169.