Has Violence Declined in World Politics?

A Discussion of Joshua S. Goldstein's *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide*

Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide. By Joshua S. Goldstein. New York: Dutton, 2011. 400p. $26.95 cloth, $17.00 paper.

Violence is an ever present and very visible feature of our political landscape. And war—its strategy, its preparation, and its conduct—remains a central preoccupation of political elites and of political scientists. In his new book *Winning the War on War,* Joshua S. Goldstein sifts the statistical and historiographical evidence to tell a story of how we seem to be winning the long-term fight against war, and why. Goldstein places major emphasis on the rise of international peacekeeping, but he also discusses alternative explanations, such as the liberal peace. In this symposium a number of scholars of international politics, comparative politics, and political theory have been asked to comment on Goldstein's book and on the broader theme it addresses.—Jeffrey C. Isaac, Editor

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Joshua Goldstein has written a provocative book that distills a great deal of information about war, peacekeeping, the United Nations, mediation and diplomacy, and the peace movement into an exceptionally readable and accessible format for a lay audience. This is difficult to do, and it is done well here.

The book makes two important arguments—one about the decline of war over the long sweep of history, the other about the effectiveness of peacekeeping—both of which I agree with. However, it also suggests a causal connection between them that leaves me quite skeptical. It is hard to see how peacekeeping could explain the long-term downward trend in war given its relatively recent invention. Moreover, while peacekeeping has been shown to be effective at preventing the resumption of specific wars, its effects on the overall level of war in the world are neither straightforward nor yet known, as I explain in the following.

As its subtitle suggests, *Winning the War on War* argues persuasively that deaths from war have declined dramatically over time.[1] Because we do not tend to examine war from a long historical perspective,[2] we fail to appreciate this truly monumental fact enough, and Goldstein thus provides an important corrective. The book (Chapter 10 in particular) is to be commended for dispelling key myths that have taken hold in the discussion of war and the human catastrophes that accompany it. For example, the notion that civilian deaths used to make up about 10% of deaths from warfare but now make up about 90% is, as the author rightly points out, oft repeated but factually unsubstantiated. The idea that war is somehow now much more brutal than it once was is simply not historically accurate. Indeed, as Goldstein shows, war has become less brutal (in terms of overall numbers killed) and less frequent.

The book probably overstates the claim a bit because it does not take into account advances in health care.[3] War has become less deadly not (only) because there is less of it but (also) because all sorts of things have become less deadly than they once were, including tuberculosis, measles, gangrene, childbirth, and so on. Advances in health care mean that many fewer people die from war; those wounded in battle are much more likely to survive than they once were. To determine how much of the decrease in war deaths is due to a decline in war and violence, and how much to penicillin and other medical advances, we really need data on war casualties, including those wounded as well as deaths. But my guess is that we would still see a marked decline in violence, and so this is a quibble about degree, rather than an outright rebuttal to Goldstein's first argument.

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Chapter 2 describes human existence, from prehistoric times to the present, as a series of periods, each less violent than the last (a few ups and downs notwithstanding). This represents a fundamental change in a key facet of international relations, and of the human condition. And it raises a critically important question: Why is war declining in frequency and deadliness?

Goldstein's second argument is that peacekeeping is much more effective than many think. Here, it is not at all surprising that I agree, as the author bases his argument in part on my own research showing that peacekeeping significantly reduces the chance that war will resume.[4] Chapters 3–6 provide a highly readable primer on the invention of peacekeeping during the Cold War and its development since then.

My only quibble here is the repetition (pp. 103–4) of the oft-made argument that the difference between the success and failure of peacekeeping is determined by the "consent of the parties" or their will for peace. If this were true, it would be hard to argue that peacekeeping had any causal effect; peacekeeping would "work" when it was not needed and would "fail" when it was needed most. The key to establishing a causal effect of peacekeeping is determining how the presence of peacekeepers alters the incentives of the peacekept.[5]

Fewer people are dying from war than at any time in human history. And international society has created a well-developed (if far from perfect) system of diplomacy, mediation, and especially peacekeeping. But is there a causal relationship between these two things? Goldstein notes that "we cannot prove that peacekeeping caused the greater peace of the 1990s compared with the Cold War years, nor even that peacekeeping played the most important role in it" (p. 108). But he dismisses several possible alternative explanations, including the evolution of civilization and norms against violence, nuclear weapons, economic prosperity, the democratic peace, and the end of the Cold War. And he states that "the kind of explanation we want would kick in mainly after 1945, and would accelerate after 1989" (p. 44). The strong implication is that peacekeeping fits the bill. I am skeptical for two reasons.

First and foremost, the UN system of peacekeeping might be able to explain the decline in violence after World War II (when the UN was created and peacekeeping invented) and especially after 1989 (when peacekeeping was applied to civil war in earnest), but it cannot possibly explain the decline from prehistoric times to World War II. The system of peacekeeping and peacemaking is thus likely endogenous to the longer trend documented by Goldstein in Chapter 2. Peacekeeping may now be contributing to the continued decline, but it is simply too recent to explain the long sweep of history. We thus still require an explanation for this longer trend.

Second, it is doubtful that peacekeeping can explain all of the decline of violence even after 1945. Goldstein talks about the emergence of zones of peace in East Asia, China, and Europe (pp. 289–90). But it is very hard to claim that peacekeeping is responsible for peace in these zones, since there has been very little peacekeeping in those regions. Something else must be going on as well.[6]

None of this is to say that peacekeeping has *no* effect in terms of reducing the level of violence in the system overall, only that its effects are necessarily limited in both time and space. Moreover, the net effect of peacekeeping, even recently and in zones where it has been used with frequency, is not straightforward and remains to be tested empirically. We have strong evidence showing that peacekeeping prevents the resumption of wars that have already occurred,[7] but it is less clear what prevents the outbreak of war in the first place, or whether peacekeeping shortens war once under way. Peacekeeping also appears to have changed the decisiveness of war in ways that have contradictory effects.

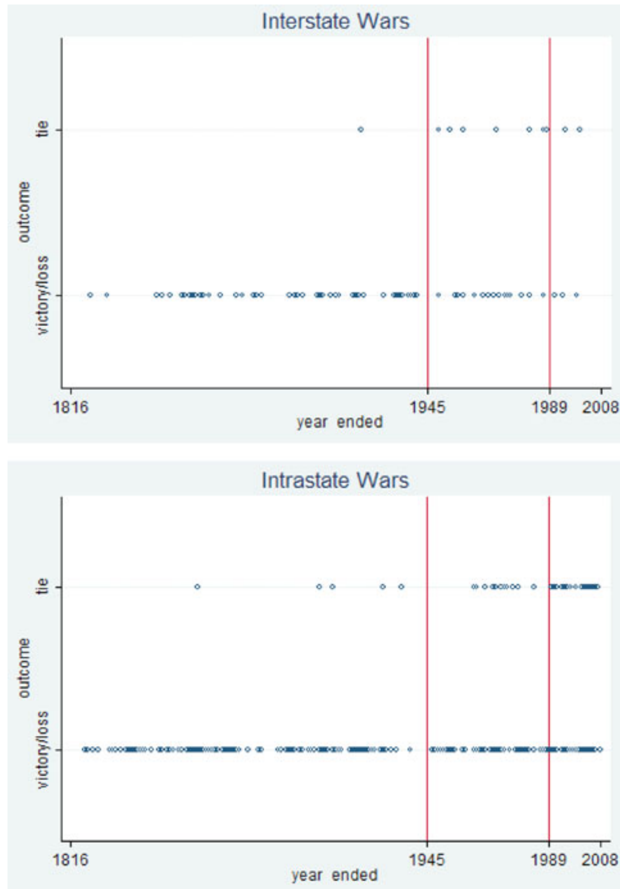
Studying the effects of preventative diplomacy is difficult—successful cases are by definition dogs that did not bark. But to my knowledge, there are no empirical studies suggesting that the preventative efforts of the international peacemaking operations that Goldstein credits have gotten more effective over time.[8] It is possible that what he dubs the "unarmy"—the nonmilitary forces that work for peace, such as diplomacy and mediation, humanitarian assistance, and women's role in peacemaking (Chapter 7)—is better than it used to be (or than its predecessors) at preventing the outbreak of war, but we simply do not know.

Whether peacekeeping shortens wars once they have started is also debatable. Michael Gilligan and Ernest Sergenti find that peacekeeping interventions are ineffective at ending wars and that the arrival of UN peacekeepers has no significant effect on the duration of war.[9] However, it may not be the arrival of peacekeepers during ongoing wars that shortens wars but, rather, the prospective availability of peacekeeping to maintain peace once achieved that allows some wars to end that would otherwise last longer. Another long-term temporal trend in warfare, one that is more clearly attributable to peacekeeping, suggests that this might be so. Let me elaborate.[10]

Wars have become much more likely than in the past to end in a draw rather than a clear victory for one side and a loss for the other. This is true for both interstate and civil wars, although the timing of the shift is different for the two types of war. It occurs after World War II for interstate wars and after the end of the Cold War for civil wars, lining up exactly with the invention of peacekeeping after 1945 and its extension to civil wars after 1989.

This trend shows up in multiple data sets, but one suffices to make the point here. In the latest version (v.4) of the Correlates of War (COW) data, there is only one war that ends in a tie or stalemate from 1816 to 1945: the Franco-Turkish War (1919–21). This represents under 2%

Figure 1
War outcomes over time



of all wars (and only 0.3% of all dyads) in this period. After World War II, 29% of all wars (and 37% of all dyads) end in a tie.[11] Among civil wars, under 3% end in a tie in the period from 1816 to 1945. There is an uptick after World War II, with ties representing 15% of wars from 1946 to 1988, but the dramatic rise occurs after the end of the Cold War, with 44% of post–Cold War civil wars ending in a compromise or stalemate.[12] Figure 1 shows the time line.

How might we explain the decline of victories in both interstate and civil wars, and the timing thereof? For war to end in a draw, two conditions must obtain: that neither side can defeat the other outright and that belligerents can agree to stop fighting, settling for a draw rather than pushing on for a decisive outcome. There is little evidence that belligerents' ability to defeat each other outright has changed over time. What has changed is that there is now a mechanism, peacekeeping, that can help solve the well-known commitment problem[13] that otherwise leads belligerents to continue fighting, even when the war has stalemated. This is the only explanation that can account for the change in outcomes in both types of war, as well as the timing of those shifts.

Alternative arguments, including changes in the relative capabilities of belligerents, war-fighting strategies, the offense–defense balance, patterns of intervention and balancing behavior, terrain, population growth, the issues over which wars are fought, or regime type, cannot explain the change in war outcomes adequately. All of these explanations fail either because the purported explanatory variable does not change over time in a way that fits with the shift in outcomes or because it does not actually help predict war outcomes. Peacekeeping is the only potential explanation that passes both tests, for both civil and interstate wars.

What are the implications of this finding for the relationship between peacekeeping and the overall level of war and violence in the international system that concerns us here? On the one hand, if this argument is right, there is a set of wars that end sooner than they would have otherwise, implying that the availability of peacekeeping prevents a great many war-related deaths.[14] Another war-reducing effect of this change may follow, although this is admittedly more of a stretch. Wars that end without a clear victory for one side are not particularly useful as a decision mechanism "to resolve issues that cannot be reconciled by other means."[15] A decline in the decisiveness of war could thus conceivably contribute to war's obsolescence over time.[16] On the other hand, we know that wars that end with a clear victory lead to a more stable peace than do draws.[17] So peacekeeping, by allowing wars to end sooner, but less decisively, may leave issues to fester that would otherwise be resolved, eventually leading to repeated fighting that would not otherwise occur.[18] Peacekeeping makes war less likely to recur in the hardest cases, where there is no clear winner, but it may make war more likely to end with no clear winner, adding to the number of hard cases.

The net effect is thus hard to calculate. The short-term benefit of ending wars more quickly, along with the very long-term (possible) effect contributing to the obsolescence of war, may well outweigh the negative effect of indecisive, and therefore unstable, outcomes, particularly when one considers the well-established effect of peacekeeping in stabilizing otherwise unstable peace. But much of this is quite speculative. We know that peacekeeping makes particular wars less likely to resume, all else equal. And there is good (though less well-confirmed) evidence that peacekeeping makes wars more likely to end in a draw. But the purported effects on the duration of stalemated war, on the overall stability of peace in the international system, let alone on the obsolescence of war, have yet to be shown empirically.

Winning the War on War gets many things right: Fewer people are dying because of war; the purported vast increase in the ratio of civilian to military deaths is a myth; and peacekeeping is effective at preventing the resumption of war. I agree with most of its recommendations (Chapter 12): We should fund the UN and peacekeeping operations better

than we do; the UN should create a standing army of peacekeepers ready to deploy quickly (though I do not necessarily agree that it should be staffed with troops from the Permanent Five members of the Security Council—some of the legitimacy of peacekeeping comes from fact that it is *not* staffed by Great Powers); we should continue to develop tools of conflict prevention; and we should fly the UN flag on May 29 for international peacekeeping day. I have mixed feelings about the book's argument about the responsibility to protect (R2P). Goldstein presents it as part of an ongoing trend that will contribute to a more peaceful world (pp. 322 ff). I support R2P on ethical grounds, and think it will lead to a more just world, but there is a tension here that goes unremarked. Another word for *military intervention,* even if its motive is humanitarian, is *war.* R2P may well increase violence rather than reduce it.

While I agree with the book's two core empirical claims, I remain quite skeptical of the causal story that (appears to) hang them all together: that UN peacekeeping and peacemaking can explain the long sweep of history toward greater peace. Peacekeeping cannot explain the decline in armed conflict from prehistoric times through 1945, and it is not yet clear how much of the decline since then can be attributed to peacekeeping. We may be winning the war on war, but we do not yet know why.

Notes

1 Along these lines, see also Mueller 1989 and Pinker 2011.
2 For an exception, see Holsti 1991.
3 Thanks to Nisha Fazal for pointing this out.
4 Fortna 2008.
5 Ibid, Chapter 4.
6 One possibility is that the world's hegemon is essentially a status quo power (U.S. shenanigans in Iraq notwithstanding). Toward the end of the book, Goldstein conflates the effects of U.S. intervention and UN intervention, but these are very different explanations.
7 Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Fortna 2008; Gilligan and Sergenti 2008.
8 For a recent report on preventive missions, see Gowan 2011.
9 Gilligan and Sergenti 2008.
10 The argument that follows is made in much more detail in Fortna 2009.
11 The same dramatic increase in ties can be seen in the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) coding of war outcomes, or in Stam's 1996 data. See Fortna 2009. (Note that the figures given here are updated from those in Fortna 2009, which used version 3 of the COW data.)
12 This increase after 1988 is also visible in more detailed civil war databases, such as Doyle and Sambanis 2006. Note that there is no additional increase in the number of interstate wars ending in a tie after the Cold War ends (the percentage increases slightly, but not significantly, if one counts by war, and decreases if one counts by dyad, probably due to the many multilateral wars involving the United States in this period).
13 Walter 2002.
14 Note that this effect will not necessarily show up in a simple comparison of the duration of wars where peacekeepers deploy (or even where they are available to deploy) and where they do not. This is because there are two types of war: those that end in victory for one side relatively quickly, in which case peacekeeping is moot; and those that get bogged down in stalemate, in which case peacekeeping can help them end sooner than they would otherwise.
15 Holsti 1991, xvi.
16 Mueller 1989.
17 See, among others, Fortna 2004; Licklider 1995; Maoz 1984; Toft 2010; Werner 1999.
18 Luttwak 1999.

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Joshua Goldstein has two goals in this book. First, he seeks to make the case that there has been a marked decrease in warfare since 1945, and especially since the Cold War ended in 1989. There is no question that he succeeds on this count. Second, he attempts to explain what caused this change, which is important to know because it helps us understand whether this trend is likely to continue. On this point he is far less convincing. His explanation—which emphasizes the importance of the United Nations—not only is poorly developed but also contains a significant logical flaw. Nor is it well supported by the evidence presented in the book.

Let me lay out the central claims in *Winning the War on War* and then assess them.

A War-Winning Institution

It is important to understand that Goldstein is not making the argument that Steven Pinker makes in his recent book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). Pinker maintains that violence of all kinds has been declining over the course of human history, whereas Goldstein focuses more narrowly on war. Moreover, Goldstein believes that peace has been on the rise only since 1945. In fact, he maintains that "the twentieth century may indeed have been the bloodiest relative to population but is not really much different in character than earlier 'bad' centuries" (p. 37). Of course, it was the first half of the twentieth century, with the two world wars, that accounts for much of that murder and mayhem.

This observation implies that something important happened shortly after World War II, altering the course of international politics in a significant and benign way. We need to know what changed, what accounts for the stark differences in the patterns of war between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. We need to know why "peace is increasing," why Goldstein believes that "year by year, we are winning the war on war" (p. 6).

Although the author applauds the good work the "international community" is doing to promote peace, he maintains that the UN is principally responsible for the decline of war since World War II. "The UN," he writes, "lies at the heart of the 'war on war'" (p. 8). He cautions, however, that the UN "has many problems . . . but they should not distract us from the tremendous good that the UN has accomplished . . . in reducing war since 1945" (p. 8).

According to Goldstein, the key UN mission principally responsible for its effectiveness is peacekeeping. In a

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brief but important section that deals with "The Question of Causality," he writes: "The kind of explanation we want would kick in mainly after 1945, and would accelerate after 1989. The UN system in general, and peacekeeping in particular, fit the bill in this regard" (pp. 44, 316). In other words, progress in peacekeeping after 1989 explains why the post–Cold War period was more peaceful than the Cold War (p. 72). Goldstein gives some but not much credit to "a vast but disorganized mass of people and organizations working for peace around the world." He calls these nonmilitary forces "the Unarmy" (pp. 177–79). He also maintains that the concept of "responsibility to protect" (R2P), which the UN formally adopted in 2005, promises to further reduce the number and lethality of wars in the decades ahead (pp. 322–26).

Finally, Goldstein stipulates that he does not believe that the decrease in warfare since 1945 is due in any meaningful way to nuclear weapons, the advance of civilization, the spread of democracy, increasing prosperity, or the end of the Cold War (pp. 6, 42–44).

Flaws in the Argument

What is wrong with Goldstein's story? For starters, it is paradoxical for Americans like this author (as well as Pinker and John Mueller)[1] to suggest that war has effectively been burned out of the international system. After all, the United States has fought six wars since the Cold War ended: Iraq (1991), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001–present), Iraq (2003–11), and Libya (2011). By my count, we have been at war during roughly two out of every three years since 1989, and there is the possibility of more wars to come against countries like Iran and Syria. There may be a worldwide decline of conflict, but it certainly does not apply to the United States, which appears to be addicted to war.

Second, Goldstein does not provide a theoretical explanation for the way in which an international institution like the UN helps bring about peace. To be sure, there is a substantial body of literature dealing with international institutions that affect state behavior.[2] Indeed, the dominant school of thought, liberal institutionalism, maintains that institutions can alter state preferences and therefore change state conduct. In this view, international institutions are important actors in international politics, powerful enough to help push states away from war and to promote peace.

There is an alternative realist perspective, with which I am identified, that maintains that international institutions cannot do much to push the great powers around. These organizations are essentially useful diplomatic instruments that the great powers employ to pursue their own selfish interests. When a powerful state does not like the policies being pushed by an international institution, it either ignores them or works to change them.

One would expect Goldstein to engage in this debate and make the case—liberal or otherwise—that international institutions can affect the behavior of the great powers in important ways, and thus foster peace. But he says almost nothing about this subject, and the reader has little idea what he thinks about the relationship between international institutions—specifically the UN—and the leading states in the world.

This brings us to the third problem with *Winning the War on War.* Almost all of Goldstein's evidence supports the realist position that international institutions have little independent influence on the major powers. This contradiction matters greatly for his argument because it is the great powers that dominate and shape international politics and cause its deadliest wars. Consider the Cold War, for example. One would expect him to argue that the UN—the key player in his story—had a significant effect on relations between the superpowers from 1945 to 1989, and thus it accounts in good part for the relative peacefulness of that period. But he makes no such argument and, of course, cannot because the UN was virtually powerless when it tried to push a policy that one of the superpowers opposed. Thus, it is hard to see how Goldstein could maintain that the UN played a key role in promoting peace during the Cold War.

We see the same problem at play in the post–Cold War period. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States was by far the most powerful state on the planet. How much influence has the UN had on American foreign policy since 1989? The answer, as Goldstein's own account makes clear, is hardly any. When the United States grew disenchanted with UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in the mid-1990s, for example, it used its Security Council vote "to bar a second term" and instead insisted on putting Kofi Annan ("the U.S. favorite") in his place (p. 111). When the United States could not get the UN's permission to invade Iraq in March 2003, it simply ignored the UN and went to war anyway. It had done the same thing four years earlier (1999) when it initiated a war with Serbia over Kosovo. The UN's inability to put limits on American behavior is one of the main reasons why the United States has been so warlike since 1989.

None of this is to deny that Washington views the UN as a useful diplomatic instrument. After all, it helped legitimize the first Gulf War in 1991 and the Libya War in 2011. The more important point, however, is that Goldstein provides little evidence that the UN has had a significant effect on the behavior of the major powers, which are largely responsible for determining the broad contours of world politics. Thus, it is hard to see how he can argue that the UN is the principal cause of the decline in warfare since 1945.

This problem brings us to the fourth flaw in the book. Goldstein's story about how the UN brings about peace focuses mainly on minor powers, not the great powers, and is concerned with UN peacekeeping efforts in those smaller countries. There is no question that the UN has

played an important role in helping to shut down some deadly conflicts over the past six decades, although it has also had its share of failures, as the author makes clear. Nonetheless, the UN should be celebrated for its efforts to keep the peace in some war-torn areas, which have undoubtedly reduced the level of human suffering there.

Yet this emphasis on minor powers, and especially on peacemaking, creates serious problems for Goldstein's argument. Minor powers are not the main driving force in international politics, and thus their behavior cannot tell us much about why armed conflict has been on the decline since 1945.

The focus on peacekeeping creates an even bigger problem. Goldstein's enterprise is heavily dependent on his ability to explain why war has not been breaking out as often as it did in the past. That means he has to be concerned about the causes of war and peace. But peacekeeping occurs *after* a war breaks out, and thus has little to do with why wars break out in the first place. In other words, UN peacekeeping, which is the centerpiece of Goldstein's argument, cannot account for the reasons that wars do or do not happen. Therefore, it cannot explain the drop in the number of armed conflicts since World War II. It can only explain why some wars were shut down after they started, a matter that is largely irrelevant for explaining why war has declined since 1945. This is a fatal flaw in his argument.

To take this assessment a step further, it was widely recognized by the early 1990s that UN peacekeeping had little influence on the outbreak of war. To address the problem, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali wrote a report in 1992 called "An Agenda for Peace." Goldstein notes that it described peacekeeping "as a stage in managing conflict, following 'preventive diplomacy' and 'peacemaking'" (p. 74). The report maintained that the UN should go beyond peacekeeping and "address the deepest causes of conflict." It also recommended that member countries assign military forces on a permanent basis to the UN. The report, Goldstein tells us, "ran into serious opposition from the permanent Security Council members and never got off the ground" (p. 74).

The bottom line is that while there has been a decline in armed conflict since 1945, and especially since 1989, the author's explanation for this development is not persuasive. UN peacekeeping has its virtues, but there is no reason to think it has been a major force for peace during and after the Cold War. Indeed, some of the alternative explanations that Goldstein dismisses are more compelling.

Alternative Explanations

Consider the impact of the nuclear revolution and the end of the Cold War on peace in Europe, the region of the world that has seen many of history's bloodiest wars and has also caused numerous wars in other regions of the world. Europe, which was at the center of the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, has been remarkably peaceful since 1945. During the Cold War, however, the continent was almost completely occupied by two rival alliances—NATO and the Warsaw Pact—that were armed to the teeth and run by the United States and the Soviet Union, two countries that disliked each other intensely. Yet there was no war between them, and no European crisis that seriously threatened to escalate into a war. The main reason was that both sides had huge nuclear arsenals, which meant there was a grave danger that if fighting broke out between them, it would escalate to the nuclear level and both sides would end up getting annihilated. Nuclear weapons, in other words, were a major force for peace in the Cold War.

When the Cold War ended, the United States could have removed its troops from Europe, but it did not, mainly because American and European leaders feared that Europe would then go "back to the future."[3] They believed that the United States acted as a pacifier in Europe and naturally wanted American troops there to stay put and NATO to remain intact. In fact, the Russians shared that sentiment, although they did not like NATO expansion. The key point here is that Europe has been peaceful since 1989 in large part because the United States continues to act as a pacifier in the region.[4]

The UN and R2P

A final word is in order about Goldstein's embrace of R2P, which calls for initiating wars against countries that commit serious crimes against their own civilian populations. That doctrine, which goes well beyond peacekeeping, can only be implemented under UN auspices. If the major powers, especially the United States, get serious about this doctrine, there should surely be a significant *increase* in the number of wars fought in the future. After all, there are more than a few countries at any one time that are behaving badly toward some portion of their civilian population. That almost certainly means that war would be with us for the foreseeable future and Goldstein's hope of winning the war on war would fail. He might argue that these are good wars (a distinction he avoids in his book), but this development would also keep the United States addicted to war for some time to come.

Fortunately, R2P is not likely to gain much traction, simply because it will be difficult to get the Security Council to sanction R2P operations. This is certainly true with regard to recent events in Syria: The United States and its European allies have been pushing to intervene in Syria, but China and Russia will not agree to an R2P operation in that country. If this case is a harbinger of what is to come, the UN might end up making a more substantial contribution to world peace. To do so, however, it would have to act in ways that cut against Goldstein's prescription for "what we can do" to make the world more peaceful (p. 308).

Notes

1 Mueller 1989.
2 For an overview of the various positions in this debate, see Mearsheimer 1994/95.
3 See Mearsheimer 1990.
4 See Mearsheimer 2010.

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Winning the War on War is an influential new addition to the growing literature on the decline of war.[1] That literature demonstrates that contrary to popular images of continuous warfare, we have been living in a historically unprecedented era of relative peace. In the nearly seven decades since World War II, there have been no wars between major powers[2] or between advanced industrial countries, continuing a five-century decline in major-power war that was interrupted only by the two world wars.[3] The major powers continue to arm and continue to intervene in weaker states, and minor powers continue to fight, but the frequency of interstate wars, which has fluctuated around a stable average for about three centuries, has declined since the mid-1980s. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War is the world's only war between states in the last decade. Europe, the historical cockpit of major-power warfare, has been remarkably peaceful, other than the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. East Asia, which was the most conflictual region in the world for the first three decades after World War II, has seen a striking decline in armed conflict of all kinds since 1980, to the point that conflict analysts now speak of the "East Asian Peace" and analyze its facilitating conditions.[4] Civil wars, which accelerated sharply and steadily in frequency in the late 1950s and reached a peak in the early 1990s, have declined irregularly since then, with an uptick since 2003.[5]

Joshua Goldstein recognizes that multiple factors have contributed to the decline of war, and argues that a reasonable explanation "would kick in mainly after 1945, and would accelerate after 1989" (p. 44). Goldstein argues that a key factor fitting this criterion is the United Nations system in general and peacekeeping in particular.[6] For him, UN diplomats and peacekeepers are the "central thread" in reducing the levels of violence in conflict-ridden countries and in keeping the peace in postwar societies.

I leave it to others to comment on the causal impact of peacekeeping, a question that raises difficult methodological issues.[7] Instead, I expand on Goldstein's brief treatment of other explanations for the long peace since World War II (pp. 42–44), and then use the pre-1914 era (which the author mentions briefly [pp. 6–7]) to illustrate the hazards of extrapolating from recent trends.

Explanations for the Recent Decline in War

As suggested, different kinds of war (and of violence more generally) have declined at different rates and beginning

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at different times. This implies that different factors account for these noncorrelated phenomena and that a single integrated explanation, desirable in principle, is probably out of reach.[8] Testing the validity of alternative explanations requires a sophisticated research design, but here I can only provide a brief summary.

With respect to great-power war, the single most important driver of its decline over five centuries is the growing severity or lethality of warfare, which increases the costs of war relative to its benefits.[9] In addition, the benefits of war gradually diminished with the consolidation of the modern state system and the gradual settling of territorial borders,[10] and later with industrialization and the growth of economic interdependence. These factors diminished the territorial basis of military power, decreased the utility of territorial conquest relative to trade as strategies for the cumulation of wealth, and increased the economic-opportunity costs of war.[11]

Scholars have given more attention to explanations of the "long peace" since World War II.[12] The leading factors that Goldstein (pp. 42–43) briefly mentions—changing norms of violence, nuclear weapons, growing prosperity, the democratic peace, and the end of the Cold War—require some elaboration. Norms of behavior (and the broader category of attitudes toward war) unquestionably shifted after the two world wars,[13] and the romantic militarism and social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century have vanished.[14] The question is the extent to which shifting attitudes toward war are endogenous to the increasing destructiveness of war, especially with the emergence of nuclear weapons. Autonomous attitudes toward war may help to explain postwar norms against territorial conquest[15] and Western (and especially European) hesitancy to intervene in ongoing conflicts, but they have had less causal impact on superpower behavior and on regional conflicts.

The conventional wisdom is that nuclear weapons played a stabilizing role during the superpower rivalry of the Cold War period. They reinforced deterrence by enormously increasing the costs of war and reducing any uncertainty about those costs.[16] Although some have questioned the stabilizing effects of nuclear weapons,[17] the majority who accept the idea of a nuclear peace between nuclear powers are more confident than those who do not that future Sino-American disputes—over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or other issues—will be resolved peacefully. Of course, inadvertent wars occasionally occur,[18] and there is no reason to believe that the psychological biases driving threat perception and decision making have diminished in any way,[19] but psychological biases must overcome much greater structural disincentives than they faced in the past in order to lead to war.

Whether further nuclear proliferation would be stabilizing is a different question, one that has generated considerable debate.[20] Critics emphasize crisis instability between states with limited weapons and insecure second-strike capabilities, which can generate temptations for preemption. In addition, fears that an adversary might soon acquire nuclear weapons capability increase incentives for a preventive strike to eliminate or delay that possibility.[21]

Goldstein mentions prosperity as a source of peace. Growing prosperity undoubtedly helps to explain the decline of civil wars,[22] although the organizational strength of the state is an equally important factor.[23] The idea of economic forces pushing toward peace among advanced industrial states is usually framed in terms of economic interdependence rather than prosperity, and in fact the "capitalist peace" now rivals the "democratic peace" as primary explanations for the near absence of wars between democracies in the last two centuries.[24] Both contribute to peace in the West, but neither can explain peace between the superpowers during the Cold War.

Finally, Goldstein invokes the end of the Cold War as an explanation for the decline in civil war since 1989, emphasizing the withdrawal of external financial support for rebels.[25] Many go further and argue that U.S. hegemony has helped to maintain order and minimize the numbers of wars, and that the decline of U.S. dominance will increase the likelihood of conflict.[26] They often refer to power-transition theory, long-cycle theory, and theories of unipolarity, which argue that high concentrations of power significantly reduce the likelihood of great-power war by eliminating hegemonic rivalry and counter-hegemonic balancing.[27] However, the theoretical linkages between unipolarity and other forms of warfare (major–minor, minor–minor, and internal) are less well developed, and one can find lengthy periods of relative peace in multipolar worlds.[28] Hegemonic theories have important but conditional implications for the consequences of a possible Sino-American rivalry for dominance, but no clear implications for other forms of warfare.

The Hazards of Forecasting

Goldstein emphasizes that the continued decline in war is not inevitable (pp. x, 6, 42), but he is cautiously optimistic about the future. I agree with him that the likelihood of a major–major war is quite small (though nontrivial in the case of a Sino-American war), but I do not share his optimism about other types of war. The combination of resource scarcities (especially food and water), droughts and other climatological shocks, and ensuing migrations, along with certain demographic trends (the anticipated increase in potentially disaffected young male populations in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Middle East),[29] and the lack of congruence between state and national boundaries[30] could create conditions conducive to civil wars and their possible internationalization. Numerous flash points, in the Middle East and elsewhere, make it unlikely that the relative interstate

peace of the last decade will persist. However, rather than defend these speculative remarks, I want to emphasize the hazards of forecasting.[31]

Imagine a *Perspectives on Politics* symposium on the decline of war taking place a hundred years before this writing, in early November 1912. The dialogue would have focused on Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910) and perhaps on Ivan Bloch's book subtitled *Is War Now Impossible?* (1899). Each argued that a war between the leading industrial powers would be long, economically devastating, socially disruptive, and consequently irrational. Pessimists might have noted that a war had begun in the Balkans a few weeks before, but no one expected the major powers to intervene, and in fact they did not. Contributors would have noted that they were living in one of the most peaceful periods in modern history. The "long peace" between the major powers of Europe had persisted for more than four decades, the longest such period in four centuries. A hegemonic war involving nearly all of the major powers had not occurred for nearly a century. In addition, the average duration of great-power war and median number of battle deaths in wars continued to decline. The four great-power wars since the Congress of Vienna had each lasted less than a year on average, reflecting a significant decline from the wars of previous centuries. There had only been one European war in the previous three decades (the Greco-Turkish Thirty Days' War of 1897),[32] and the frequency of civil wars had declined by half over the previous four decades.

True, there had been frequent crises involving the major powers—over Morroco in 1905, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, and Agadir in 1911—but each crisis had been resolved peacefully, enhancing confidence in the effectiveness of crisis management. True, some military leaders had advocated a preventive war, but those pleas had been rejected by statesmen like Otto von Bismarck. No European great power had incorporated preventive war into its national security strategy or publically used preventive logic to justify military action.

There were other grounds for optimism. A *détente* continued between the two leading European powers, Great Britain and Germany, enhanced by the strong commercial and financial relationships between the two countries. The historically unprecedented levels of economic interdependence further reinforced the peace, based on the increasingly popular arguments of Norman Angell, Manchester liberals, and others that wealth was based on credit and commerce, and that territorial conquest was no longer an efficient strategy for increasing wealth. The leading powers had too much at stake to go to war.

For all these reasons, the contributors to a 1912 *Perspectives* symposium would have had strong grounds on which to forecast a continuation of the long peace. In fact, in many respects, the quantitative trends pointing in that direction were stronger than those emphasized by the "declinists" of 2012. There was a more sustained decline in great-power war and a longer period without a hegemonic war. The occurrence within two years of what George Kennan called the "*the* great seminal catastrophe" of the twentieth century,[33] resulting in more than eight million battle fatalities, serves as a cautionary tale about the limitations of forecasting.[34]

Notes

1 Gat 2006; Gleditsch 2008; Human Security Report Project 2011; Mueller 2011; Pinker 2011.
2 Six decades since the Korean War, if you count China as a major power in 1949. Either way, this is the longest period of great-power peace in the last five centuries of the modern interstate system.
3 Levy and Thompson 2011.
4 Human Security Report Project 2011, Chap. 3. Interstate wars are conventionally defined to involve violent conflicts between the military forces of two or more states and (following the Correlates of War Project) at least 1,000 battle-related deaths. Armed conflicts involve at least 25 battle-related deaths (Uppsala Conflict Data Program).
5 Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr 2012, 26.
6 Goldstein's kicking-in-after-1945 criterion is puzzling in light of the fact that civil wars did not begin to decline until the early 1990s. His narrative, however, is consistent with patterns of civil war behavior.
7 Fortna 2008.
8 For a unified theory of the decline of violence, see Pinker 2011. For a critique, see Levy and Thompson 2013.
9 The increasing severity of war is due not only to the growing destructiveness of weaponry but also to the increasing extractive and organizational power of the state, the growth of armies and the sophistication of military organizations, and changes in the underlying political economy, each of which has co-evolved with changing threat environments and war (Levy and Thompson 2011).
10 Territorial disputes are significantly more likely to escalate to war than are other types of disputes (Vasquez and Henehan 2011).
11 Rosecrance 1986.
12 Gaddis 1989.
13 Pinker 2011 traces these changes to the Enlightenment. Mueller 2011 emphasizes the transformational ideational change after World War I, and describes World War II as an anomaly that would not have occurred without Hitler.
14 Thomas Lindemann, *Les Doctrines Darwiniennes et la Guerre de 1914.* Paris: Institut de stratégie comparée.
15 Hironaka 2005; Zacher 2001.
16 Bundy, 1988; Gaddis 1989; Jervis 1989. Admittedly, validating this proposition empirically raises

some difficult issues of counterfactual analysis (Levy 2008a).
17 This includes power transition theorists. See Tammen et al. 2000. John Mueller (2011, Chap. 1) argues that the increasing destructiveness of conventional warfare would have been enough to deter major war, even in the absence of nuclear weapons.
18 George 1991.
19 Huddy, Sears, and Levy 2013.
20 Sagan and Waltz 2002.
21 On preemption and preventive war, see Levy 2008b.
22 Collier et al. 2003.
23 Desch 1996; Hironaka 2005.
24 Gartzke 2007; Russett and Oneal 2001.
25 Stathis Kalyvas and Laia Balcells (2010) distinguish types of civil wars. They demonstrate that Cold War conditions contributed to asymmetrical wars like insurgencies, while post–Cold War conditions favor symmetrical unconventional wars.
26 Thayer 2006.
27 Tammen et al. 2000; Thompson 1988; Wohlforth 1999. For an opposing view, see Montiero 2011/12.
28 A crude calculation based on the Correlates of War data (Sarkees and Wayman 2010, Chap. 3) reveals that the frequency of new interstate war outbreaks was .16/year in the multipolar Concert of Europe period (1815–52), compared to .40/year in the unipolar 1992–2011 period (excluding the Gulf War and including the Russo-Georgian War). Despite earlier theoretical debates on the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems, there have been few systematic empirical studies, leaving no conclusive historical evidence of a relationship between polarity and the overall frequency of war.
29 Goldstone 2010; Hudson and Den Boer 2005. Overall, however, the aging of most populations throughout the world should have stabilizing effects.
30 Miller 2012.
31 This expands on the treatment in Levy and Thompson 2013.
32 And also short wars between Italy and Turkey in the Middle East and between Spain and Morocco in Africa.
33 Kennan 1979, 3.
34 Compounding the failure to recognize the risks of war in 1912 was the failure to anticipate the nature of war. As Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (1999, 8–9) conclude in their study of military thinking in Germany and in the United States after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, military and political leaders were "blind . . . to the manifold forces that were transforming warfare into a protracted, comprehensive, and ruinous ordeal." They had "no realistic plans" to fight war, but instead engaged in a "titanic exercise in improvisation. The mobilization of armed forces, economies, and societies proceeded everywhere with no prior design, no precedent, and no clear goals." In Germany, the General Staff clung to a conception of war that was characterized by decisive battles, ended in a victor's peace, and rewarded offensive strategies. What they got was a long war of attrition that was dominated by the defense, exhausted participants, and precluded a clear-cut victory by either side.

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