

THE FORUM

A Revolution in International Relation Theory: Or, What If Mueller Is Right?

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Author's Note: War has been the primary focus of the scholarly study of international relations (IR) from its very beginning. E.H. Carr and his colleagues at Aberystwyth created the first IR department in 1919 in the wake of the Great War at least partially in the hope of preventing the next one. Their lack of success did not keep war and peace from becoming the primary issues of study for most students of international politics ever since. Conflict has been the direct or indirect topic of much of the work that IR scholars have produced during the last century and, indeed, has been one of the main reasons why many of them entered the field in the first place. If the fundamental nature of warfare were to change, therefore, one would expect repercussions in the field of IR.

The obsolescence-of-major-war argument, which found renewed energy with the publication of John Mueller's *Retreat from Doomsday*, seems to describe one such fundamental change. The suggestion that the great powers may have put war behind them has been debated at some length over the past 17 years, with its many skeptics pointing out that such optimistic ideas are not new. Prior articulations of "perpetual peace" have always been eventually proven wrong by war's depressing proclivity for resurrection. Supporters have not moved far beyond basic explanations of the argument, at least to this point, in large part because its nature seems to preclude definitive proof or falsification. It is, after all, a theory of the future as much as of the present. The development of the argument has stalled in the time since Mueller's book was published, with a number of key questions remaining unanswered. Would state behavior remain unchanged absent the realistic possibility of major war? How would the study of international politics need to be adjusted to describe accurately an age of great power peace? In other words, what if Mueller is right?

In some senses, therefore, this forum is an exercise in conjecture and speculation. It asks the reader to accept the argument—if just for a moment—that the great powers have put warfare behind them, at least in their interactions with one another. For some, this will require a near-impossible stretch of the imagination; for others, it will be a logical and overdue recognition of modern reality. If it is true that many nations no longer consider fighting such wars, then many of our central beliefs about state behavior will have to be rethought and adjusted to better describe twenty-first century realities.

This forum contains three parts. (1) The first explores the current state of the argument and its critics and speculates on its importance to a field traditionally focused upon the great powers, discussing the reasons to believe that the obsolescence of major war may eventually lead to the obsolescence of all war. (2) The second contains multiple parts, each of which proposes a central theoretical implication of the obsolescence-of-major-war argument and considers the ways in which some of the major theories and debates in the field would be affected if the great powers prove stubbornly insistent on conducting peaceful relations. A new conception of power itself may be in order; for instance, one that makes a distinction between the "potential" and "kinetic" power of a state. This argument also has implications for the relative vs. absolute

gains debate, power transitions, balances of power, security dilemmas, offense–defense theory, classical geopolitics, and behavioral approaches to war. (3) The third part begins to speculate on future directions of IR scholarship in a post-major-war world.

As scholars are not the only ones who have failed to recognize the evolution of the international system, this forum concludes with an exploration of the implications of the obsolescence-of-major-war argument for society at large by attempting to put the “war on terror,” from September 11 to Iraq, in greater perspective. While terrorism may have increased overall levels of personal insecurity in the West, it is helpful to realize that, in fact, far more people—both in terms of raw numbers and as proportions of the overall population—lead peaceful lives than ever before. Peace and stability are more widespread today than at any time in history, despite common widespread perceptions to the contrary.

In a recent edited volume exploring the debate over the future of war, Raimo Väyrynen (2006:22) wrote that “many theories of IR will simply cease to exist if the thesis about the decline of major-power wars can be sustained.” While this language may be slightly strong, at the very least this forum hopes to demonstrate that if a broad consensus were to emerge that major war has become obsolete, theories of international politics cannot remain unchanged. If current trends continue and more years pass without even the threat of major war, scholars of IR must prove flexible enough to adjust their theories accordingly. Continued belief in an orthodoxy that is no longer supported by evidence is theology, not science.

Great Power Peace: The Argument

The obsolescence-of-major-war argument is familiar enough to need little introduction (Mueller 1989, 1995, 2004; see also Rosecrance 1986, 1999; Ray 1989; Kaysen 1990; Van Evera 1990–1991; Kegley 1993; Jervis 2002; Mandelbaum 2002). In its most basic and common form, the thesis holds that a broad shift in attitudes toward warfare has occurred within the most powerful states of the international system, virtually removing the possibility for the kind of war that pits the strongest states against each other. Major wars, fought by the most powerful members of the international system, are, in Michael Mandelbaum’s (1998/1999:20) words, “somewhere between impossible and unlikely.”

The argument is founded upon a traditional liberal faith in the possibility of moral progress within the society of great powers, which has created for the first time “an almost universal sense that the deliberate launching of a war can no longer be justified” (Ray 1989:425; also Luard 1986, 1989). To use Francis Fukayama’s (1992) phrase, it is the “autonomous power of ideas” that has brought major war to an end. Whereas past leaders were at times compelled by the masses to use force in the defense of the national honor, today popular pressures urge peaceful resolutions to disputes between industrialized states. This normative shift has all but removed warfare from the set of options before policymakers, making it a highly unlikely outcome. Mueller (1989:11) has referred to the abolition of slavery and dueling as precedents. “Dueling, a form of violence famed and fabled for centuries, is avoided not merely because it has ceased to seem ‘necessary,’ but because it has sunk from thought as a viable, conscious possibility. You can’t fight a duel if the idea of doing so never occurs to you or your opponent.” By extension, states cannot fight wars if doing so does not occur to them or to their opponent. Major war has become, in Mueller’s words, “sub-rationally unthinkable.”

Obviously, the obsolescence-of-major-war argument is not without critics. First, and most basic, the literature is sometimes quite vague about what constitutes a “major war” and who exactly the “great powers” are. In *Retreat from Doomsday*, Mueller (1989) alternately describes his data set as consisting of “developed countries” (p. 4), the “first and second worlds” (p. 256), the “major and not-so-major countries” (p. 5), and the 44 wealthiest states (p. 252). Others refer to the great powers as those states with a certain minimum standard of living, especially those in Europe (Luard 1986:398); modern, “industrial societies” (Kaysen 1990); the “leading

global powers” (Väyrynen 2006:13); or merely “the most powerful members of the international system” (Mandelbaum 1998/1999:21). What constitutes a “major” war is also often left unclear. Some analyses use arbitrary quantitative values (for example, 1,000 battle deaths); others study only world wars, those fought by the most powerful members of the international system, drawing on all their resources, with the potential to lead to outcomes of “revolutionary geopolitical consequences including the birth and death of regimes, the redrawing of borders, and the re-ordering of the hierarchy of sovereign states” (Mandelbaum 1998/1999:20).

Definitions are often the last refuge of academic scoundrels—many IR theories deal with potentially contradictory information by simply refining or redefining the data under consideration. Perhaps the best way to avoid this pitfall is to err on the side of inclusion, expanding the analysis as broadly as possible. While the obsolescence-of-major-war argument clearly covers the kind of catastrophic wars that Mandelbaum analyzes, any big war between industrialized, powerful states would render the proposition false. At its essence, like pornography, one knows major war when one sees it. Major powers will likely occasionally deem it in their interest to strike the minor, and at times small, states, especially those led by nondemocratic, unenlightened leaders. But societal unease at the continuation of small wars—such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq or between poor, weak states like Ethiopia and Eritrea—should be ameliorated by the knowledge that, for the first time in history, world war is exceedingly unlikely.

Determining which states are great powers is slightly more complicated, but not by much. Two decades ago, Jack Levy (1983:10) noted that the importance of the concept of “great power” was not matched by anything approaching analytical precision in its use and the field has not progressed much since. Relevant states for this analysis are those with the potential to be great powers, whether that potential is realized or not. The choice not to devote a large portion of one’s national resources toward territorial defense was not available to most states in other, bygone eras. If today’s rich states can choose not to prepare for war without consequence, then the nature of the system may well have changed.

Broadly speaking, there is an indirect relationship between the relative level of development and the chances of being involved in a major war against a peer. In its most basic, inclusive, and falsifiable form, the obsolescence-of-major-war argument postulates that the most advanced countries—roughly speaking, those in the global north—are unlikely to fight one another ever again. Precise determination of which countries are in the “north” and which are not is less important than it may seem at first, since current versions of the argument do not restrict themselves to the great powers. As will be discussed below, if the logic behind the obsolescence-of-major-war argument is correct, a drastic diminution of all kinds of war everywhere may be on the horizon.

It is important to note that this argument does not suggest that competition is coming to a conclusion, only that the means to compete have changed. Rivalry will continue; envy, hubris, and lust for power will likely never disappear. Rogues and outlaws will probably always plague humanity, but very rarely as leaders of powerful states, especially in the northern democracies. The Mueller argument merely holds that war need not follow from any of this, especially major wars. States can compete in nonviolent ways, addressing the logic of war with the grammar of commerce, to paraphrase Edward Luttwak (1990:19). The conflicts of the future may be fought in boardrooms rather than battlefields, using diplomacy, sanctions, and the methods of commerce rather than brute force.

One of the obvious strengths of the obsolescence-of-major-war argument is that it carries clear routes to falsification. It can be proven incorrect by virtually any big war in Western Europe, in the Pacific Rim, or in North America. If Japan attacks Australia, if the United States moves north, or if Germany rises again and makes another thrust at Paris and Moscow, *Retreat from Doomsday* will join *The Great Illusion*

(Angell [1909] 1913) in the skeptical realist's list of utopian fantasies. Until that happens, however, scholars are left to explain one of the great anomalies in the history of the international system.

Most IR scholarship carries on as if such an anomaly simply does not exist. This is especially true of realists, whose theories typically leave little room for fundamental systemic change (Lebow 1994). "The game of politics does not change from age to age," argued a skeptical Colin Gray (1999:163), "let alone from decade to decade." Indeed, the most powerful counterargument to Mueller—and one that is ultimately unanswerable—is that this period of peace will be temporary and that someday these trends will be reversed. Neorealists traditionally contend that the anarchic structure of the system stacks the deck against long-term stability, which accounts for "war's dismal recurrence throughout the millennia," in the words of Kenneth Waltz (1989:44). Other scholars are skeptical about the explanatory power of ideas, at least as independent variables in models of state behavior (Mearsheimer 1994/1995; Brooks and Wohlforth 2000/2001; Copeland 2003).

However, one need not be convinced about the potential for ideas to transform international politics to believe that major war is extremely unlikely to recur. Mueller, Mandelbaum, Ray, and others may give primary credit for the end of major war to ideational evolution akin to that which made slavery and dueling obsolete, but others have interpreted the causal chain quite differently. Neoliberal institutionalists have long argued that complex economic interdependence can have a pacifying effect upon state behavior (Keohane and Nye 1977, 1987). Richard Rosecrance (1986, 1999) has contended that evolution in socio-economic organization has altered the shortest, most rational route to state prosperity in ways that make war unlikely. Finally, many others have argued that credit for great power peace can be given to the existence of nuclear weapons, which make aggression irrational (Jervis 1989; Kagan et al. 1999). With so many overlapping and mutually reinforcing explanations, at times the end of major war may seem to be overdetermined (Jervis 2002:8–9). For purposes of the present discussion, successful identification of the exact cause of this fundamental change in state behavior is probably not as important as belief in its existence. In other words, the outcome is far more important than the mechanism. The importance of Mueller's argument for the field of IR is ultimately not dependent upon why major war has become obsolete, only that it has.

Almost as significant, all these proposed explanations have one important point in common: they all imply that change will be permanent. Normative/ideational evolution is typically unidirectional—few would argue that it is likely, for instance, for slavery or dueling to return in this century. The complexity of economic interdependence is deepening as time goes on and going at a quicker pace. And, obviously, nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented and (at least at this point) no foolproof defense against their use seems to be on the horizon. The combination of forces that may have brought major war to an end seems to be unlikely to allow its return.

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented pace of evolution in all areas of human endeavor, from science and medicine to philosophy and religion. In such an atmosphere, it is not difficult to imagine that attitudes toward the venerable institution of war may also have experienced rapid evolution and that its obsolescence could become plausible, perhaps even probable, in spite of thousands of years of violent precedent. The burden of proof would seem to be on those who maintain that the "rules of the game" of international politics, including the rules of war, are the lone area of human interaction immune to fundamental evolution and that, due to these immutable and eternal rules, war will always be with us. Rather than ask how major war could have grown obsolete, perhaps scholars should ask why anyone should believe that it could not.

Importance of Great Power Peace

The importance of an argument positing the end of major war should be largely self-evident to anyone who values the continued existence of the species. The thesis also has the potential to revolutionize both the theory and practice of IR for at least three major reasons.

First, not only are wars between the most powerful actors in the system typically of the most destructive variety and, therefore, the ones that should most concern humanity, but the major powers have also historically been the most war-prone of states. As Mueller (1995:37) has pointed out, not just military capability but actual bellicosity have traditionally been central to the definition of great power status. Historically speaking, the most powerful states in the system are also the ones that experience the most conflict. "Great powers are distinguished from other states by their general behavior," Levy (1983:17) has written:

They defend their interests more aggressively and with a wider range of instrumentalities, including the frequent threat or use of military force. . . . the Great Powers account for a disproportionate number of alliances and wars in the international system (often fought against each other), particularly those designed to maintain the balance of power and prevent the dominance of any single state

The most intense war-making in world history was experienced by European great powers before 1945 (Levy 1983; Gochman and Maoz 1984). If the most powerful actors in the international system have truly abandoned the institution of war as a method of conflict resolution, then to borrow a phrase from Norman Angell ([1903]1913:262), the world will indeed have moved.

Second, the study of IR has traditionally focused on the great powers. As the fate of all states in a system are affected much more by the interactions between the more powerful members, Waltz (1979:72) has argued that "the theory of international politics is written in terms of the great powers" and that it would be "ridiculous" to "construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica." This statement does not necessarily imply a lack of concern with smaller powers, but rather a recognition that their fate will largely be shaped by the actions of the greater. The most powerful states "determine the structure, major processes, and general evolution of the system" as Levy (1983:8-9) has contended: "secondary states and other actors have an impact on the system largely to the extent that they affect the behavior of the Great Powers." The focus on major war between the great powers has the potential to be theoretically and practically significant precisely because it concerns IR's long-time favorite subjects.

Third, and most important, the end of major war is not good news for the citizens of the global north alone. If the strongest of powers have put war behind them, then the weakest may someday do so as well (Mueller 2004). As a result of something akin to a trickle-down effect for peace, the obsolescence-of-major-war argument predicts that conflict will decrease throughout the world as the post-Cold War era unfolds for a couple of reasons. In the first place, in a world undivided by ideology, potential combatants will be unable to find ready support for their cause. As Mueller (1995:11; see also Mandelbaum 1998/1999) explained,

Few wars since 1945 have been directly initiated by the major belligerents in the Cold War, but quite a few local wars were exacerbated by interfering Cold War contestants At times the big countries restrained—or tried to restrain—their smaller clients. But more often they jumped in. . . . With the demise of the Cold War, it is to be expected that such exacerbation will not take place.

Great powers at peace presumably have far less incentive to foment trouble in the periphery. They are more likely to interpret instability as a threat to their interests rather than as an opportunity to increase their power at the expense of their rivals.

Another reason why peace may trickle down is that over time, the behavioral patterns of the rich, powerful, prestigious states tend to be imitated by the weak. Waltz (1979:127) labeled the ability of a successful state to shape the international system by example as “sameness,” a process by which international competition produces a certain degree of uniformity in member behavior. According to Christopher Layne (1993:15), sameness extends “to include not only military strategies, tactics, weapons, and technology, but also administrative and organizational techniques.” In other words, a certain uniformity of motivation and behavior can be expected throughout the international system as states attempt to imitate success. Such uniformity is the essence of an international society, in which ideas regarding proper (or most efficient) behavior, outlooks, and strategies create common expectations among actors. After all, what is the imperative for self-help if not an idea learned from others in the system (Wendt 1992)? It is, therefore, surely not implausible to suggest that an idea, such as the notion that major war is simply not worth the cost, could spread rapidly throughout the industrialized world as states imitated the successful characteristics of their peers.

The initial empirical evidence strongly supports this trickle-down effect. A series of studies have confirmed what to some may seem to be a counter-intuitive proposition in this era of global terror: the incidence of all kinds of war—interstate, civil, ethnic, guerrilla—is steadily declining (Gurr 2000; Wallensteen and Sollenberg 2003; Ploughshares 2004; Gurr and Marshall 2005). This trend is precisely what Mueller and his successors expected to see and helps to explain why the benefits of the end of major war are not limited to the global north. Thus, the end of major war among great powers may well turn out to be the first step toward the eventual elimination of all war everywhere.

Two Worlds of IR

In 1963, Harold Sprout criticized IR theory for its obsessive search for what he called the “master variable” that would unlock the secrets of state behavior. Today, scholars still seem to be searching Einstein-like for a unifying theory of IR, one that is able to explain why states act as they do. Waltz (1979) has arguably come closest to articulating such a unifying theory, although others have made valiant efforts (Wendt 1999). Almost by definition, a unifying theory must assume a certain degree of consistency in state motivation and behavior across regions and relative levels of development. In general, IR theory does not allow much room for fundamental behavioral differences across the homogenous international system.

A widely cited, but in some senses not deeply influential, alternative conceptualization of the twenty-first century international system is the “two-worlds” framework first discussed by James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul (1992). They rejected the common assumption of uniformity, arguing instead that modern states are divided into two separate if interacting systems that operate under different sets of rules and norms. Among the “core” of powerful states, they argued, “economic interdependence, political democracy, and nuclear weapons lessen the security dilemma” (Goldgeier and McFaul 1992:469). In the “periphery,” which roughly overlaps with the global south, “pressures for expansion are still present, stemming from goals of wealth, population, and protection as well as from internal instabilities” (Goldgeier and McFaul 1992:469–470). To these scholars, the rules of structural realism no longer apply to the states of the core that operate according to more liberal guidelines.

Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky (1996) were among the very few to elaborate upon this idea. They made the division more formal, dividing the world into two

“zones”—one of which was marked by peace and stability and the other by turmoil and war. The benefits in parsimony made by continuing the fiction of a homogeneous system of states are outweighed, in their view, by the costs to theoretical accuracy. “There are useful things to say about the zones of peace,” argued Singer and Wildavsky (1996:3), “and there are useful things to say about the zones of turmoil; but if you try to talk about the world as a whole all you get is falsehoods or platitudes.” Their analysis went on to propose changes in the approach of policymakers, leaving scholarship that continues to speak in falsehoods and platitudes largely untouched.

Other scholars, equally unhappy with one-size-fits-all IR, have divided the world even further. A growing number have begun to shift their analytical gaze away from the state system altogether, arguing that modern international politics cannot be properly understood without acknowledging the assault upon sovereignty from above and below. The work of those scholars who have been proclaiming the retreat of the state in world politics further bolsters the argument that major war is obsolete (Strange 1996). Only powerful states can conduct major wars—the many thousands of actors in a “multicentric” world, like that imagined by James Rosenau (1990), cannot coalesce to bring about a third world war. If, indeed, the power of the state is waning, or giving way to a “turbulent” mixture of sub and supernational forces, then the likelihood of major war is presumably simultaneously decreasing.

While the various retreating-state arguments rely upon the evolution of currently inchoate trends, evidence supporting the obsolescence-of-major-war argument is already accumulating. The future it foresees has arrived. States in the current international system already belong to groups that behave according to different sets of rules that do not fit well with the common “unified,” or monolithic, theories of IR. Theories that apply to the states in one zone need not accurately describe the behavior of those in the other; in fact, as heretical as it may sound, states at different developmental levels often exhibit entirely different behavioral characteristics. Many scholars of IR assume away such distinctions and proceed as if all states in all regions act and react the same way. In a world free of major war, such assumptions would appear to be quite problematic. The field may soon be forced to re-examine its assumptions about universal applicability of its theories and concepts if it wants to understand the behavior of states. If major war has truly become obsolete, crucial concepts and theories will have to be adjusted if they are to remain accurate. Let us consider what some of those changes might look like; what follows contains in equal parts a critique of standing scholarship and suggestions for future research.

Potential and Kinetic Power

Just as scholars may soon have to admit that not all their theories apply equally to all regions, they may also need to adjust their thinking about one of the field’s core concepts. Many prominent theories of IR do not treat all forms of power equally. Realists, for instance, tend to assume that military force is the *ultima ratio* of international politics and that other measures of state power matter only to the extent they can be converted to coercive forms (Waltz 1979:113; Art 1996). To borrow the terminology of the physical sciences, many IR analysts treat economic prowess as if it were little more than *potential* military power that at any time could (and probably will) be transformed into the *kinetic* power of militaries in motion. Many theories of international behavior assume that the nonmilitary measures of state power—including a variety of economic, demographic, and political factors—are of little value beyond their function as potential military power. “A state’s potential power,” argues John Mearsheimer (2001:43), “is based on the size of its population and the level of its wealth.” “Potential power,” in his estimation, is clearly synonymous with military capability.

Such assessments made perfect sense in the nineteenth century, when the sagacious policymaker in London or Paris had to be very concerned with the growing prosperity of the newly unified Germany, whose economic power could easily be translated into military power when war came. Moreover, all knew that sooner or later war would come. If, however, the day has arrived when most observers know with some certainty that such war will not come, our theories of power should be adjusted accordingly. Today, the states in the zone of peace seem to recognize that potential power is not likely to be turned kinetic; the days where measures of power were important only to the extent that they could be translated into military strength may be over.

In the self-help, anarchical system of the neorealist imagination, states feel irresistible pressure to maximize their potential power. Those with unrealized great-power potential are “structural anomalies,” according to Waltz, exceptions rather than the rule. “For that reason, the choice is a difficult one to sustain. Sooner or later, usually sooner, the international status of countries has risen in step with their material resources” (Waltz 1993:59). However, since the Cold War, almost all potentially great powers have proven to be structural anomalies—none has spent anywhere near the maximum that their wealth would allow to improve their militaries, preferring instead to direct their resources toward other priorities. Military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) across the global north has remained relatively constant—and low—throughout the era. Germany and Japan are the most obvious examples of potential military power unrealized, but they are by no means the only ones (Maull 1990–1991; Katzenstein 1996, 1997; Berger 2003). Nearly every state in Western Europe could raise a much larger military than it currently possesses and presumably would if external threats warranted. Neither China nor any European country spends more than 3% of its GDP on its military; even Russia, which has devoted the highest share of its income toward the maintenance of its military of any major power in the last 15 years (which is, of course, as much a sign of its economic troubles as anything else), has not spent more than 4.5% (Fettweis 2004). As points of comparison, the Israelis have spent between 8% and 11% of their GDP on their military throughout the 1990s, Saudi Arabia around 11%, and North Korea as much as 35% (SIPRI 2005).

Today’s great powers do not attempt to reach their full military potential in large part because they know that, for the first time in history, their neighbors are unlikely to attack. One of the prime assumptions of Mearsheimer’s (2001:30–32) “offensive realism”—that states cannot ever be completely assured of the intentions of their neighbors—does not hold in a world free of major war, where the great powers can, at the very least, be reasonably assured that their neighbors are not planning to launch a surprise offensive. The most powerful states in today’s system simply do not act as if the dangers in the anarchic, self-help world are as dire as realists would make them out to be. New conceptions of power are needed for an era where potential military force does not threaten to turn kinetic.

Structural Explanations of War

If the realistic potential for war has been removed from some regions or zones, one would expect to find a concomitant decrease in the international phenomena and behavior driven by insecurity. For instance, states in a zone of peace have no need to be concerned with uneven rates of economic growth, even when significantly higher gains are made by their neighbors. Further, in such a zone, one would not expect to see much balancing behavior or strong effects of the security dilemma or the offense–defense balance. These concepts, so central to the study of IR over the past few decades and the subject of countless exercises in both traditional and formal theory, are all dependent upon the potential for war between states. Where that potential does not realistically exist, these concepts have little explanatory

power. The sections below, which will be kept brief to avoid excessive repetition, discuss a variety of such concepts at the center of the discipline that may no longer be useful for describing the relations among the great powers.

Relative versus Absolute Gains and the “Power Transition”

Nearly a half-century ago, Waltz (1959:198) wrote that “relative gain is more important than absolute gain” in the anarchic, zero-sum, self-help system where war is a constant possibility. Neoliberals typically counter by arguing that growing power can sometimes benefit all states in the system, for international economics is now a positive-sum game where rising tides raise, rather than threaten, all boats (Keohane and Nye 1977; Krugman 1994). This “relative versus absolute gains” debate, which has been a continual source of contention between neoliberal institutionalists and neorealists for decades (Powell 1991; Snidal 1991), would be all but settled in a world free of major war.

In general, the greater the chances a state has to transform its potential military power into kinetic power, the more its neighbors have to be concerned with relative gains. Prudence would insist that those in a zone of turmoil maintain a close eye on the gains made by their neighbors. However, in a zone of peace, where economic and political power would never be converted into military, uneven rates of growth need not be feared. The West has no need to fear a growing China or recovering Russia in a world free of major war, for example, because their potential military power would never become kinetic. If Mueller’s argument is correct, then relative levels of economic power—and, just as importantly, of growth—would be irrelevant to stability at the upper levels of the system. The neoliberals will have won the debate.

When a century ago, Halford Mackinder ([1919]1962:1) claimed that all the “great wars of history” were “the outcome, direct or indirect, of the unequal growth of nations,” he was articulating another closely related, major IR theory that also cannot remain unchanged if major war has become obsolete: power transition theory (Organski 1958; Houweling and Siccama 1988; Kim 1992; Tammen et al. 2000). In the introduction to one of the major works on the subject, A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler (1980:13) state:

If one nation gains significantly in power, its improved position relative to that of other nations frightens them and induces them to try to reverse this gain by war. Or, vice-versa, a nation gaining on an adversary will try to make its advantage permanent by reducing its opponent by force of arms. Either way, changes in power are considered *causae belli*.

Presumably, uneven growth in power will not increase the risk of war where the institution has grown obsolete, yet the proponents of this and many similar theories typically do not consider the possibility that fundamental cleavages now separate states into two worlds that differ markedly in their attitudes toward conflict. The wars that Organski and Kugler sought to explain are extremely unlikely in a zone of peace, irrespective of transitions in power.

A more recent work on the subject, one suggesting that the power transition is “unrivaled in scope and reach,” offers a way to incorporate the great power peace argument (Tammen et al. 2000:21). In order for power transitions to result in war, it claims, one or both sides of the shift in relative power must be “dissatisfied.” Therefore, if no great power is dissatisfied, war will not occur, and lasting great power peace may be possible. Measuring “satisfaction” is, of course, difficult and the suggestion that it is a necessary component of peace is tautological (without dissatisfied states, war never occurs); however, proponents of power transition

theory seem to have left room for the power of ideas to affect and shape state behavior.

More empirical support emerges every year to suggest that power transitions are not potential *casus belli* of war among the most powerful members of the modern system, although they may continue to be quite important in explaining such state behavior in the zone of turmoil and instability. Neither the debates over relative versus absolute gains nor power transition theory remain relevant to explaining state behavior in the global north if, indeed, Mueller is right and potential power is unlikely to turn kinetic.

Alliances and Balances of Power

The notion that unbalanced power on the Eurasian landmass could pose a major threat to the United States is repeated with regularity by scholars and policymakers alike. A Defense Department analysis leaked to the press in 1992 argued that preventing the rise of a Eurasian power should be on the short list of American vital national interests (Gellman 1992). Samuel Huntington (1991:12) has warned that “the political integration of the European Community, if that should occur, would also bring into existence an extraordinarily powerful entity which could not help but be perceived as a major threat to American interests.” The object of the game being played on Zbigniew Brzezinski’s (1997) “grand chessboard” is to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic, hostile coalition on Eurasia; he recommends that the United States, like Great Britain before it, support the weaker party in Eurasian disputes. Few seem to acknowledge the possibility that the intellectual foundation upon which such fears are based could be static, archaic, and essentially irrelevant to the international system of the twenty-first century.

Theories about the mechanisms driving and inhibiting alliance formation would have far less explanatory power in a world free of aggressive great-power war. The long history of investigations into balancing and bandwagoning behavior in the system rests on an assumption of a certain amount of homogeneity in state behavior (Waltz 1979; Walt 1987; Christensen and Snyder 1990; Glaser 1994/1995; Schweller 1994; Vasquez 1997). If major war is obsolete as a tool of conflict resolution for the most powerful states, then one would expect to see far less balancing in the upper levels of the system. Without the threat of major aggression from their neighbors, states have little to fear from unbalanced power (Walt 1987). In a system where even clashing national interests are not considered worthy of contestation by force, one would expect the impetus to balance to be greatly decreased.

In a zone of peace, threats would be, in effect, balanced a priori. In regions where uncertainty over the intentions of neighbors still exists—in zones of turmoil where war is still a realistic option—states will still have to take steps to bolster their security using strategies such as balancing and bandwagoning. Scholars studying balancing behavior would have to look to such regions to accumulate their data, for states in a zone of peace would behave far differently. The two worlds of IR would demand separate theories to describe the balancing, bandwagoning, and alliance formation of their member states as no uniform explanation of state behavior would remain accurate.

Just as this explanation would propose, balancing behavior has been nearly absent among the twenty-first century great powers, presumably because the threat of potential military power becoming kinetic in the zone of peace is next to zero. Trends since the Cold War have been fairly constant and convincing—states have tolerated unprecedented disparities in material power without much reaction at all (Ikenberry 2002; Wohlforth 2002; Fettweis 2004). Despite the overwhelming imbalance in military, economic, and political power in the world today, the great powers do not show any signs of what could be considered either internal or external balancing. The United States towers over the rest of the world in terms of

potential power, but no northern state acts as if it fears that power becoming kinetic in threatening ways. Attempts to explain this lack of balancing—such as through the invention of intellectually empty concepts like “soft balancing” (Pape 2005)—seem to be an easier task for some scholars than admitting the possibility that this historically low level of balancing is caused by a fundamental change in the nature of international politics. Väyrynen (2006:22) sagaciously has observed that both sides of the obsolescence-of-war debate are perhaps equally guilty of being unmoved by any amount of evidence and logic; however, the evidence that balancing behavior is not what it once was seems to be fairly overwhelming.

Consider a brief counterfactual. If Hitler had ever enjoyed the preponderance of power that the United States maintains today, is there any doubt that the actions of the other great powers would have been significantly different? Any collective action or cost impediments to balancing of the kind discussed by William Wohlforth (2002) would have been rapidly outweighed by the imminent threat of blitzkrieg, no matter how far advanced German capabilities might have seemed or how “prohibitively costly” an attempt to balance would have been. As it is hard to imagine that any state would allow such a threatening imbalance to exist without reaction, one is left to conclude that there must be something qualitatively different between the two cases. An age, perhaps, has ended.

Anarchy is not nearly as frightening in a world marked by great power peace. In such a world, the ultimate survival of the state is not in question; indeed, the violent destruction of states by outside powers, once common, has become quite rare. In a stable, postbellic zone of peace, the risks posed by anarchy—and the self-help imperative—are greatly diminished. Waltz (1979:126) felt that “only when survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, and power.” Today, as their survival is all but assured—at least from external threat—states will likely turn their attention to what were formerly secondary concerns, probably with equal vigor. Only when early humans were assured of their basic survival were they able to devote time to other, perhaps higher pursuits.

The Security Dilemma and the Offense–Defense Balance

Few works have had a greater impact on the field of IR than “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” in which Robert Jervis (1978) laid the foundation for two of the field’s most influential concepts: the security dilemma or “spiral model” and the related offense–defense balance. Charles Glaser (1997:172–173) noted that scholars have since used the logic of these two concepts to address many of the most important issues in the field, including:

the effectiveness of deterrence and reassurance, sources of moderation in Soviet policy, the severity of relative gains constraints, alliance behavior, military doctrine, imperial expansion, revolution and war, ethnic conflict, conventional arms control, US nuclear policy and arms control, nuclear proliferation, the escalatory dangers of conventional war, US grand strategy, and the prospects for peace in Europe and policies for preserving it.

In other words, the influence of the security dilemma and the offense–defense balance on the development of IR theory over the course of the past two decades can hardly be overestimated. However, their importance to the next few decades may be dramatically decreased, if the obsolescence-of-major-war argument continues to be supported by (non) events.

The security dilemma is a well-known cause of insecurity, misperception, arms races, and instability in a self-help international system (Herz 1950, 1985; Snyder 1984; Glaser 1997). Such a dilemma develops as “many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others” (Jervis

1978:169). Uncertainty about the intentions of neighbors causes a state to increase its military capabilities, which in turn creates insecurity in its neighbors, who react by increasing their own capabilities. This dynamic creates a “spiral” of mutual distrust that can lead to arms races, balancing, increasing tensions, and even perhaps war. This dilemma will always be a real threat anywhere that war remains a constant, realistic possibility. In the absence of such a possibility, states that increase their military capabilities do not automatically decrease the security of their neighbors. No cyclical spiral effect would drive the behavior of essentially secure states. As discussed above, in a zone of peace, the core realist assumption that states cannot know the intentions of others would no longer be accurate, as at the very least they could be fairly assured that their neighbors do not intend to launch a major, offensive war. The security dilemma would not haunt regions where states have put major war behind them.

One need not look far to find evidence suggesting that the dilemma is, indeed, absent in the proposed zone of peace. As arms races are quite obvious symptoms of the presence of a security dilemma—perhaps even a necessary symptom—and as no significant arms races have occurred in the global north since the end of the Cold War, it seems logical to suggest that the security dilemma may be a concept devoid of explanatory power in that zone. The absence of these arms races across the global north seems to support the argument that these states do not live in fear of the intentions of their neighbors, presumably because major war has moved closer to the point of subrational unthinkability.

The fundamental state security in a zone of peace would also drastically alter calculations of the importance of the balance between offense and defense. This well-known concept holds that war is more likely in situations where the offense is at an advantage compared with the defense (Quester 1977; Lynn-Jones 1995; Van Evera 1998). Steven Van Evera (1998:5–6) has cited ten reasons why this is so, from the rather obvious (the attacker has a better chance of success) to the not-so-obvious (offensive advantage affects state behavior at the negotiating table). The theory has been one of the most widely explored in the field in the last few decades, prompting two observers to remark that it had reached the level of a “growth industry” (Glaser and Kaufman 1998:45).

But that growth industry cannot continue to reflect reality if the great powers have put major war behind them. Once again, this theory remains interesting and important to explain state behavior only in regions where war may result from an offense–defense imbalance. The balance of weaponry would have precisely zero impact on the likelihood of war in regions where the institution had grown obsolete. Is war between any of the great powers more likely because of an offensive advantage possessed by either? For example, does the overwhelming offensive capability of the United States make war more likely with another member of the global north? Or, to approach the subject differently, would such a war be less likely if Washington focused its attention and resources on more defensive weaponry? Is the offense–defense balance of the militaries of Europe a factor in the likelihood of a war on that continent? Such a theory would remain important for places where the trickle-down has not yet occurred—the Middle East, for instance—but it would be anachronistic and misapplied to a zone of peace. If the great powers insist on peaceful conflict resolution, offense–defense balance, like so many of the major concepts of IR, would not contain much useful insight. The structural theories that purport to explain the outbreak of war would be rendered obsolete if and when war becomes a thing of the past.

Behavioral Approaches to the Study of War

Certain subfields of IR may have institutional interests in denying that major war could ever become obsolete. Scholars who approach the study of warfare from its

behavioral roots, such as those who work with the various databases housed at the University of Michigan and elsewhere, would at the very least have to adjust their conclusions if the “correlates of war” (COW) that they are attempting to identify no longer apply to relations between the strongest states (Singer 1963, 1979; Bremer 1992; Vasquez 2000; Bennett and Stam 2004). Only rarely do findings from quantitative studies of war suggest that explanatory factors in some regions, or in certain eras, are completely different from those in others. This literature as a whole tends to take state behavior as a constant in the attempt to identify the variables that lead to war. Perhaps its most basic assumption, to echo Gray, is that fundamental state behavior does not change from era to era. The COW database, upon which so much of this research is based, includes all wars from 1816 through the recent past, with the vast majority of the scholars who mine its riches assuming that the wars of the nineteenth century vary little in causation, motivation, limitation, or diffusion from those of the twenty-first century. All wars, it seems, are created equal, or at least equally created. It is an assumption rarely examined and even more rarely challenged.

Extra-terrestrial readers of behavioral outlets such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Interactions*, or the *Journal of Peace Research* are probably convinced that the earth is a place of logical, utility maximizing states in a system marked by the constant risk of warfare at all levels. They are led to think that all states behave in a uniform, predictable manner that has not, and indeed cannot, change. In other words, they are likely to come away with an image that may bear little relation to the actual international politics of the twenty-first century.

This research could be updated to describe more accurately international behavior regarding war in two ways. The first route is to make the findings time-specific, which is something the subfield has typically been reluctant to do. Research based upon COW and other major databases typically uses data that span the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the conclusions that arise from such studies often make sweeping generalizations suggesting results that are eternal constants without potential time limitations. For example, John Vasquez (2000:367) reports that “territorial disputes increase the probability of war” rather than what the data literally tell him, which is that, between 1816 and 1992, territorial disputes increased the probability of war. By not making their conclusions time-specific, behavioralists implicitly assume that the fundamental nature of warfare does not change from era to era, something that may well prove to be empirically and theoretically problematic. Reporting findings in a more accurate way would allow for comparison across historical periods and could keep a strain of COW research relevant to the coming century.

The work of Evan Luard (1986, 1989) provides a good example of a more useful approach to the empirical study of war, one from which behavioralists would benefit. In his *War in International Society*, Luard (1986) examined issues, motives, decisions, profitability, and beliefs about war through time, looking for commonalities within, not across, eras. He argues that the conventions regulating war have, indeed, changed dramatically over time. In other words, Luard presents a framework with which to understand war that does not necessitate constant state behavior across time and that can take into account at least the possibility for evolution in the international system.

The second alteration that could save quantitative studies of war from irrelevance in the twenty-first century involves having scholars drop the increasingly problematic cross-regional assumptions of uniformity in state behavior. What is needed is wide-spread recognition that there are significant and important differences among states in the zone of peace versus those in the zone of conflict. The factors that have increased the likelihood of war in the past—proximity, alliances, rivalries, territorial disputes, arms races, waxing and/or waning power, etc.—are having less effect on those dyads that lie in the zone of peace, while remaining central to the

behavior of those states unlucky enough to lie outside. If, indeed, there are some kinds of warfare that have become obsolete, then there will be correlates of war that apply to some states but do not apply to others.

For example, one of the most robust (if unsurprising) findings in the behavioral literature is that states in close proximity to each other are more likely to go to war than states chosen at random, or, as Vasquez (2000:337) puts it, “wars are much more likely to occur between neighbors” (see also Diehl 1992; Kocs 1995; Ben-Yehuda 2004). Such a sweeping statement is not accurate regarding today’s great powers, for whom war is equally unlikely among neighbors as among more far-flung rivals. In order to make this finding appropriate to a post-major-war era, one would need to report that while wars are much more likely to occur between neighbors in the zone of turmoil, proximity has no impact whatsoever on the likelihood of war in the zone of peace.

The current era may be free of major war between the great powers, but quantitative studies of war are built to proceed as if no fundamental changes can take place and as if all states across all eras were motivated by the same forces, making similar decisions regarding their basic security. Ironically, without adjustments for either time specificity or regional heterogeneity, the empirical approach to warfare may be at risk of losing touch with international empirical realities.

Classical Geopolitics or Geostrategy

Finally, and perhaps least significant, great power geopolitics of the classical tradition founded by Sir Halford Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan would be another casualty of the obsolescence of major war. Geopolitics is at its essence merely “the influence of geographical factors on political action” (Gottman 1942), but the term has generated an entire school of thought in IR with specific assumptions and biases, which is somewhat marginalized but alive today (Gray 1977, 1988; Østerud 1988; Ó Tuathail 1996; Brzezinski 1997, 2004; Art 1998; Parker 1998; Gray and Sloan 1999). Many of the conclusions reached based on this tradition would have no relevance in a world free of major war.

Mackinder ([1919]1962), who is sometimes called the “father of geopolitics,” founded a tradition perhaps more accurately thought of as geostrategy, for it envisions the entire world as a battlefield in the attempt to identify the most advantageous position for the inevitable and on-going struggle for global dominance. The writings of Mackinder ([1919]1962), and Spykman and Rollins (1939), along with their modern-day successors Gray (1977, 1988) and Brzezinski (1997, 2004), discuss geostrategy writ large, which deals with the interaction and the balance among the most powerful players in the international system. As usual, the smaller, weaker states on the periphery are of importance only to the extent that they influence the actions of the powerful members of the core.

Geostrategic analysis emerged at the end of the final era in which it could have been useful: the nineteenth century, when *realpolitik* was certainly the dominant principle guiding state behavior. Looking to the earth for clues about how to proceed in a struggle for control of the world made sense in an age of clashing empires, of near-constant warfare, and of zero-sum games. The policymaker wanted to know where the most strategic area on earth was, because it was a safe assumption that, as Spykman and Rollins (1939:394) have argued, “other things being equal, all states have a tendency to expand.” If that impulse to expand is truly absent in the upper levels of the system today, then policy advice from geopolitics is of little utility.

Geostrategy assumes that warfare is an essential feature of the international order and, indeed, considers states to be little more than geographical identities in perpetual conflict (Ó Tuathail 1997:36). The geopolitician/geostrategist typically defines the fault-lines that organize and define this conflict and goes on to advise his countrymen on how to proceed. The reader comes away with the impression of a

world defined by contrasting and conflictual imagery, whether it be of sea power versus land power, heartland versus rimland, or USSR versus USA. Where there is no conflict, or even the potential for conflict, geostrategic analysis is essentially useless.

Unlike some of the other subfields threatened by great power peace, geopolitics probably cannot be adjusted to survive the coming decades. Simply put, the geopolitical tradition needs conflict to survive. Without the threat of war, geopolitical reasoning, and more importantly the conclusions to which it leads, have little to say about how the most powerful, industrialized countries will behave in the twenty-first century. Political geography itself is, of course, not irrelevant, for it encompasses many different concepts in addition to geostrategy, but useful geopolitical analysis will need to involve studying interactions between the great powers and the smaller powers, or among the smaller powers, because at the upper levels of IR, geopolitical analysis is becoming obsolete alongside major war. There is not a heartland or rimland power threatening to take over the world nor any need to worry about the mystical, Mackinderian advantages that geography bestows across the most powerful strata of IR. Identifying the strategic territory on the global battlefield is not important when that battlefield is under a permanent ceasefire. The states in a zone of peace would have nothing to learn from geopolitics, even if those in a zone of turmoil still might.

The Road Ahead

Among some IR scholars, one can already sense something resembling nostalgia for the past. Although few would argue that the world was better off when balances of power, the security dilemma, and power transitions dictated the behavior of all states, it is probably broadly true that the international relations of the past were somewhat more interesting than those of today. If it is true that war inspires many to enter this field, then perpetual great power peace, while surely welcome, may seem rather dull. Cooperation and trust are somehow not as compelling as conflict and betrayal.

However, the study of IR will likely never follow major war into obsolescence. History will not end; there will always be topics to study, patterns to identify, and behavior to understand. In fact, a debellitized system may prove to be more complex, if significantly less dangerous, than those that preceded it. Those topics that were once relegated to the periphery of IR—"low politics," in Henry Kissinger's view—will likely become central to the field in the future. Rather than further micro-analyses of balances of power and the like, tasks for future IR scholars may cluster around the following kinds of categories.

- (a) *Redefinitions of Power*: How do states wield influence among one another? What kinds of tools does the "grammar of commerce" allow, and how effective are they? How will twenty-first century power be envisioned and measured, if it is never to turn kinetic?
- (b) *The Retreating State*: Will state sovereignty remain the central organizing concept throughout the twenty-first century? While nationalism shows little sign of disappearing, the various monopolies upon force, law, and justice that governments typically hold may be eroding. Many millions of words are being written by political scientists in analyses of the various challenges to the Westphalian state, from the UN to the European Union to the blogosphere.
- (c) *International Political Economy*: We are likely entering a golden age for low politics, when economic and environmental issues may dominate the agendas of great powers. The demand for experts in international political economy will likely more than offset any drop for those who take traditional approaches to security.

- (d) *Instability*: Violence may prove to be a permanent part of the human political condition, even if war is all but vanquished. Scholars whose expertise includes international war will probably do well to become familiar with such twenty-first century threats to peace and security as terrorism, warlordism, kleptocracy, and failing states.
- (e) *“Good Governance”*: The intranational problems of the twenty-first century may far outweigh the international. Mueller (2004) and others have suggested that good governance is the solution to most of the problems of the global south. What does “good governance” look like? Must it include democracy?

Overall, the field will likely evolve away from treating war as if it is a central part of the human condition, as inevitable as death and taxes. Eventually, in the absence of contemporary data, the field may well tire of sweeping conclusions drawn from nineteenth century great-power behavior. The new system, however, although far more peaceful and stable, may well cause more than a few IR scholars to long silently for the days when war was a constant, terrifying possibility.

Concluding Thoughts on the Proliferation of Peace

Scholars are not alone in their curious under appreciation of the implications of great-power peace. The message that major war has grown obsolete does not seem to have penetrated those societies that can be expected to experience, for the first time in history, sustained stability. Six in 10 Americans, for example, expect the Third World War to occur in their lifetimes (Lester 2005). This pervasive pessimism puzzled Singer and Wildavsky (1996:10) a decade ago. “Why,” they wondered, is there “no joy that for the first time there is no prospect of war among the leading powers of the world?”

Today terrorism, war, and references to Huntington’s (1996) clashing civilizations dominate the headlines. As Al Qaeda and related groups generate widespread and understandable unease about the future of international stability, it is important to note that the trends of great power cooperation have only strengthened since 9/11, the war in Iraq notwithstanding. For example, despite the fact that the French, Germans, Russians, and others protested the Bush Administration’s “pre-emptive strike” in Iraq, they have neither taken action to prevent it nor reacted since in ways that can realistically be interpreted as hostile. The spread of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism has only strengthened ties between states in the zone of peace and made war between them less likely. Accurately or not, many in the United States, Europe, Russia, and China see the struggles against Al Qaeda, Chechen rebels, Kashmiri separatists, and Uigur nationalists as different fronts of the same war. In June 2002, during his famous speech first announcing the doctrine of pre-emption, President Bush argued:

We have our best chance since the rise of the nation state in the 17th century to build a world where great powers compete in peace rather than prepare for war Competition between great nations is inevitable, but armed conflict in our world is not. More and more, civilized nations find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos.

(Daalder and Lindsay 2003:90)

Increased international recognition of the threat that Islamic fundamentalism poses to the vital national interests of every one of the great powers has brought post-September 11 cooperation to new, unprecedented levels. More than ever before, a common enemy has united the global north—an otherwise pessimistic analyst from London’s International Institute of Strategic Studies admitted that even if many countries “remain suspicious of the Bush administration and view a unipolar world as a threat to their interests,” still “the relations of Russia, China, and India with the

United States have improved greatly since September 11” (Blanche 2003). While the immediate post-September 11th cooperation may prove to be short lived, what seems to be part of a broader trend is the recognition that Al Qaeda and its allies represent a threat to the combined interests of the great powers. More and more, the zone of peace is presenting a united front, setting precedents for peaceful conflict resolution.

Global pessimism might be tempered by a bit of historical perspective: *Today a far greater percentage of the world's population lives in peace than at any time before in history.* As discussed above, the number and intensity of all types of warfare have dropped steadily since the early 1990s, which is especially significant when one considers the rapid increase in population over the same period. When World War Two began, the total global population was around 2.3 billion, the vast majority of whom lived in societies that were touched in some way by the war. Over four billion souls have been added to the world since, including almost a billion in the 1990s alone (US Bureau of the Census 2000). This unprecedented exponential population growth in big and small states has not led to Malthusian clashes for resources in most areas of the world, despite decades of predictions to the contrary (Homer-Dixon 1999; Kaplan 2000; Klare 2001). Although a few minor wars and terrorist attacks have occurred since 9/11, it seems as if more citizens of the twenty-first century will lead mundane, peaceful lives than in any that came before, bothered perhaps by quiet desperation but not by the violence of war.

This is a nontrivial statistic. War and conflict may grab the headlines, but conflict is not a daily fact of life for the vast majority of the people on this planet; indeed, the percentage of those for whom it remains a reality is steadily shrinking. This under-reported proliferation of peace is especially apparent for those fortunate citizens of the great powers, 100% of whom have been free of major war for a half-century. In addition, although this is more difficult to measure, the percentage of people living without even the threat of war, especially major war, seems to be higher today than at any time in the past. The populations of the great powers have been experiencing an unprecedented era of peace, despite the attempts of a small group of violent nonstate actors to disrupt their lives. Terrorists “win” only if Western society forgets the good news that the last 15 years have brought. This century is likely to be a significant improvement over its predecessor for the vast majority of the world's people.

In point of fact, ours should be an age of unprecedented optimism rather than one marked by the tension created by a tiny cabal of terrorist sociopaths. After all, although the bin Ladens of the world (and the Charles Taylors, Timothy McVeighs, Shoko Asaharas, etc.) have demonstrated that they can kill a large number of people in horrifyingly dramatic ways, they cannot overthrow a government, cause a state to collapse, or kill entire populations. And they most certainly cannot inject instability into the emerging zone of peace.

Mueller (1995:14) described the tendency of people to romanticize the past, elevating prior ages over the present, even if today for the first time there is no danger of major, cataclysmic war. Human beings have a

tendency to look backward with misty eyes, to see the past as much more benign, simple, and innocent than it really was. . . . That is, no matter how much better the present gets, the past gets better in reflection, and we are, accordingly, always notably worse off than we used to be. Golden ages, thus, do happen, but we are never actually in them: they are always back there somewhere (or, sometimes, in the ungraspable future).

“As big problems . . . become resolved,” Mueller (1995:8) argues, “we tend to elevate smaller ones, sometimes by redefinition or by raising standards, to take their place.” Today a golden age of peace may well be dawning, but human nature might make it impossible for both citizens and scholars to appreciate its benefits.

Widespread recognition of fundamental changes in state behavior often occurs slowly—after all, long-held beliefs take time to change. Too many analysts have made deep emotional and intellectual investments based upon assumptions of static and unchanging behavior across regions and eras for there to be much rapid evolution in IR theory. In this case, the international system may be demonstrating a potential to change greater than that of the scholars who spend their lives observing it. But one point seems incontrovertible: if, indeed, major war has become obsolete, then the field of IR cannot remain simultaneously unchanged and accurate. The implications of great power peace would be hard to overestimate.

In fact, only a few observers inside and outside the academy seem to have grasped the possibility that the world stands at the edge of such a golden age, terrorist incidents notwithstanding. “Here at the end of the 20th century,” the late historian Stephen Ambrose (1999) argued toward the end of his life, “we once again live in a time where it is possible to believe in progress, to believe that things will get better.” “Things” have gotten better for the vast majority of the world’s people, a higher percentage of whom live in peace than at any time in history. And most importantly, none are experiencing major war. For the first time in history, it is possible to believe they never will.

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