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To cite this article: John Mueller (2020) “Pax Americana” Is a Myth: Aversion to War Drives Peace and Order, *The Washington Quarterly*, 43:3, 115-136, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813398](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813398)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813398>



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Published online: 15 Sep 2020.



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“Pax Americana” Is a Myth: Aversion to War Drives Peace and Order

On May 15, 1984, the countries in Europe had largely managed to remain at peace with each other for the longest continuous stretch of time since the days of the Roman Empire.¹ That rather amazing record has been further extended—by now, the continent may well be experiencing the longest period (75 years) free from substantial interstate war since Europe itself was invented as a concept some 2,500 years ago.² This peace is particularly impressive because Europe had once been the most warlike of continents: Thomas Jefferson, for example, proclaimed it to be “an arena of gladiators.”³ As Oxford University historian Evan Luard has noted, “given the scale and frequency of war during the preceding centuries in Europe,” this peace is “a change of spectacular proportions: perhaps the single most striking discontinuity that the history of warfare has anywhere provided.”⁴

Not only have developed countries, including the Cold War superpowers, managed to stay out of war with each other since 1945, but there have been remarkably few international wars of any sort, as conventionally defined, during that period, particularly in recent decades. Indeed, the only international wars

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The Washington Quarterly • 43:3 pp. 115–136

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813398>

in the present century are the two instituted after 9/11 by the United States that succeeded in pushing out offending regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although states may have largely abstained from conducting wars directly between themselves, the development has not necessarily led to the demise of war or of warlike behavior in total. Indeed, states may well feel freer to engage in behavior that might once have been taken to be a potential *casus belli* such as tinkering in other countries' civil wars, firing shots across bows, poaching fish from another's domestic waters, lobbing cyber balloons, exacting punishing economic sanctions, or seizing tiny bits of territory.⁵ And civil war continues, though perhaps declining somewhat in number since the 1980s.⁶

This article examines possible explanations for the decline of international war. Although the argument can only be sketched in the space available, it disputes those that attribute the decline to US security activities or to a US-led "world order." Rather, the rise of an aversion to international war is the most likely primary reason. Changes in ideas can often have substantial results. In this case, it will be argued that much of the positive development of the post-World War II era would likely mostly have happened even without much American security participation. And the establishment of norms and institutions, economic advance, and the progress of democratization are not so much the cause of international peace and aversion to international war as their consequence.

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

"Pax Americana" and the Rise of Aversion to War

Analysts have advanced a number of explanations to explain the remarkable decline of international war.⁷ Two, often but not always related, claim that the decline can be greatly attributed to the activities of the United States. The first holds that the United States has provided worldwide security and thus order, perhaps aided by the attention-arresting fear of nuclear weapons. This is often grandly labeled "the American Global Order" or "Pax Americana," and it relates to hegemonic stability theory in many of its forms. The second explanation contends that the United States was vital to construct international institutions, conventions, and norms; to advance economic development; and to expand democracy—and that these processes have ordered the world and crucially helped to establish and maintain international peace.

Along these lines, neoconservative writers Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol argue that “in many instances, all that stands between civility and genocide, order and mayhem, is American power,” while former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski contended that “if America falters,” the likely outcome would be “outright chaos” and “a dangerous slide into global turmoil.”⁸ Three prominent political scientists speculate that, absent the pacifying effect of the US presence, Europe might become incapable of securing itself from various threats materializing from somewhere or other, and that this could be destabilizing within the region and beyond while making Europeans potentially vulnerable to the influence of outside rising powers. They also worry that Israel, Egypt, and/or Saudi Arabia might do something dangerous in the Middle East, and that Japan and South Korea might obtain nuclear weapons.⁹ The United States, as Princeton’s John Ikenberry writes, is the “guarantor of the world order.”¹⁰

These two explanations essentially rest on a counterfactual that is rarely carefully assessed by its advocates: if the United States had withdrawn from the world after 1945, things would have turned out much differently and, most likely, far worse. Thus, Jake Sullivan, a foreign policy advisor in the Obama White House, simply declares that “the fact that the major powers have not returned to war with one another since 1945 is a remarkable achievement of American statecraft.”¹¹ And analyst Bradley Thayer contends that US leadership “reduced friction among many states that were historical antagonists—most notably France and West Germany,” while political scientists Bruce Russett and John Oneal conclude that it was a US-supported European security community that made armed conflict between France and Germany “unthinkable.”¹²

Others might look at the condition differently. The French and the Germans had once been extremely good at getting into wars with each other, but since 1945 there seems to have been no one in either country who has advocated resuming the venerable tradition. This difference reflects the fact that over the course of the 20th century, a significant shift in attitudes toward international war took place—a change that scarcely needed the United States to provide a militarized security environment built around nuclear fears or norms, institutions, economic exchange, and democracy. This change can perhaps be quantified in a rough sort of content analysis. Before World War I, it was common, even routine, for serious writers, analysts, and politicians in Europe and North America to exalt war between states as beautiful, honorable, holy, sublime, heroic, ennobling, natural, virtuous, glorious, cleansing, manly, necessary, and progressive. At the same time, they declared peace to be debasing, trivial, rotten, and characterized by crass materialism, artistic decline, repellant

Over the 20th century, a significant shift in attitudes toward international war took place

effeminacy, rampant selfishness, base immorality, petrifying stagnation, sordid frivolity, degrading cowardice, corrupting boredom, bovine content, and utter emptiness.¹³ After the war, in stark contrast, such claims and vivid contentions are almost never heard.

Historian Arnold Toynbee points out that World War I marked the end of a “span of five thousand years during which war had been one of mankind’s master institutions.” In his study of wars since 1400, Luard observes that “the First World War transformed traditional attitudes toward war. For the first time, there was an almost universal sense that the deliberate launching of a war could now no longer be justified.” And defense analyst Bernard Brodie agrees that “a basic historical change had taken place in the attitudes of the European (and American) peoples toward war.”¹⁴

It is not completely clear why World War I was such a turning point. There had been plenty of massively destructive wars before, many of them fought to the point of complete annihilation. And there were plenty that were futile, stupid, and disgusting—mud, leeches, and dysentery were not invented in 1914. It is true that international warfare had actually declined somewhat in Europe during the previous century (although European states had fought scores of colonial wars) and that there had been considerable economic growth there.¹⁵ However, even as they were enjoying the benefits of peace, Europeans continued to consider war,

WWI was the first war to have been preceded by substantial, organized antiwar agitation

as military historian Michael Howard puts it, to be “an acceptable, perhaps and inevitable, and for many people a desirable way of settling international differences.”¹⁶ One notable change, however, was that World War I was the first war in history to have been preceded by substantial, organized antiwar agitation.¹⁷ Although it was still very much a minority movement and largely drowned out by those who exalted war, its gadfly arguments were un-

avoidable, and this may have helped Europeans and North Americans look at the institution of war in a new way after the massive conflict of 1914–18.

At any rate, within half a decade, war opponents, once a derided minority, became a decided majority. There were, however, two countries that, in different ways, did not get the message. One was Japan—a distant, less developed but increasingly powerful state that had barely participated in World War I. Many people there could still enthuse over war in a manner that had largely vanished in Europe: it was, as German historian Alfred Vagts points out, the only country where old-style militarism survived the Great War.¹⁸ It took a cataclysmic war for the Japanese to learn the lessons almost all Europeans had garnered from World War I.

The second country was Germany. In contrast to Japan, however, it appears that only one person there was willing to embrace international war, but he proved to be crucial—he was a necessary, though not, of course, a sufficient, cause for the war. As political scientist Robert Jervis has noted, few scholars believe that World War II would have occurred in Europe “had Adolf Hitler not been bent on expansion and conquest,” while military historian John Keegan stresses that “only one European really wanted war: Adolf Hitler” and historian Gerhard Weinberg concludes that Hitler was “the one man able, willing, and even eager to lead Germany and drag the world into war.”¹⁹ Indeed, notes another historian, Harvard’s Ernest May, “understanding of Hitler’s aims and policies was clouded ... by a general unwillingness to believe that any national leader might actually *want* another Great War.”²⁰

World War I made large majorities in Europe and North America into unapologetic peace-mongers, at least with regard to international war. Whether one sees Hitler as a necessary cause or not, World War II reinforced that lesson in those places (probably quite unnecessarily), and it converted the previously militaristic Japanese in Asia.

The United States Was Not Essential for International Security

Given this growth of aversion to international war, it seems unlikely that the United States, with or without nuclear weapons, was necessary for the international security that emerged after World War II, particularly in the developed world.²¹

Dealing with the Losers

The central and immediate policy concern after World War II was to bring Germany and Japan into the responsible family of nations and, of course, to keep them from repeating what they had done in World War II. In the process, Germany and Japan moved from being violent and intensely destructive enemies into prosperous friends, allies, and peaceful competitors. This change may well be the most important historical development to take place in the second half of the 20th century. However, the United States hardly *forced* that to happen due to its hegemonic status. Of necessity, the Japanese and the Germans were the principal charters of their own destinies, and a facilitating feature of the situation was the disgust and contempt of the German and Japanese people with the militaristic regimes that had led them in the 1930s into the horrors of the just-ended catastrophe.²²

It seems unlikely that the US was necessary for international security after WWII

The Cold War: The Rise and Fall of Communism

The Cold War would likely have come out much the same no matter what policy the United States pursued. In particular, major conflict would likely have been avoided. It is conceivable that, without the US military presence, the Soviets would have been a bit more militarily assertive in Europe after World War II, particularly over the status of Berlin. But, given their wariness about getting into another war and their aversion to taking big risks, the Soviets were far more likely to rely on their ideologically preferred methods of subversion and of licit and illicit support for like-minded comrades in such places as Italy and France. They were often brutally dominant in the areas of Europe that were under the control of their military forces, but they couldn't even project this to such nominally friendly turf as Yugoslavia, which carved out a separate existence for itself after it successfully broke with Moscow at the end of the 1940s.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, a great amount of documentary evidence became available, and, as Jervis notes, "the Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first strike against the United States." And, after researching those archives, historian Vojtech Mastny concludes that "all Warsaw Pact scenarios presumed a war started by NATO" and that "the strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place."²³

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

Accordingly, it seems unlikely that the United States (or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) was required to avoid war with the Soviet Union. Indeed, the United States was often more the follower than the leader in the process of building the Western order during the Cold War. Concerned about what appeared to be a hostile military colossus to the east, western Europeans wanted the United States, at its own expense, to provide additional military protection. As Dartmouth professor Michael Mastanduno points out, "Western European states gained security protection by pulling an initially reluctant, but eventually willing, United States into the NATO alliance."²⁴

International Communism's real global threat was not in the prospect for direct Soviet military action, but in its application of subversion and in its support, with varying degrees of subtlety, of congenial forces throughout the world. It experienced substantial gain when, between 1975 and 1978, ten countries variously

toppled into the Communist camp—Cambodia, South Vietnam, Laos, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, South Yemen, Afghanistan, Grenada, and Nicaragua. Partly out of fear of repeating its disastrous experience in the Vietnam War, the United States went into a sort of containment funk and watched from the sidelines as the Soviets opportunistically gathered this set of countries into their imperial embrace. They were, at first, quite gleeful—the “correlation of forces,” as they called it, had decisively and most agreeably shifted in their direction.²⁵ However, almost all soon became economic and political basket cases, fraught with dissension, financial mismanagement, and civil warfare, most notably in Afghanistan.²⁶

In the end, although the United States did ardently seek to oppose the ideology and its appeals, Communism ultimately self-destructed. Its domestic problems derived from decades of mismanagement and mindless brutality as well as from fundamental misconceptions about basic economic and social realities. And its foreign policy failures stemmed from a fundamentally flawed, and often highly romanticized, conception of the imperatives of history and of the degree to which foreign peoples would find appeal in the Communist worldview. As analyst Stobe Talbott puts it, the Soviet system went “into meltdown because of inadequacies and defects at its core, not because of anything the outside world had done or threatened to do.”²⁷

Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union began to act like an old-fashioned, self-interested participant in the world community, rather than like a revolutionary, system-shattering one. And, in the process and most importantly, it abandoned its threateningly expansionary ideology and its devotion to impelling ideas about the class struggle.²⁸ About the only thing that did *not* change at the end of the Cold War was the military balance, and particularly the nuclear balance.²⁹ This suggests that the costly arms race was more nearly an indicator of international Cold War tensions than the cause of them.

After the Cold War: New World Order?

Settling conditions in central and eastern Europe became the first major task of the post-Cold War era. The United States certainly contributed to this remarkable process, but if it had instead simply been wistfully observing from across the Atlantic, it seems highly plausible that the change would have taken place anyway. The chief role model for those countries in their advance of democracy and capitalism was supplied by the open, productive, and prosperous countries in Western Europe, not by the United States.³⁰

Turning to other developments in the first post-Cold War decade, the United States made a few contributions. It very much took the lead in pushing Saddam Hussein’s invading (if inept and unmotivated) forces out of neighboring Kuwait

as authorized by the United Nations.³¹ However, serious negotiations might well have liberated Kuwait without the casualties inflicted in the war and in its aftermath: Saddam Hussein was fully susceptible to self-preserving deals when his back was to the wall.³²

Other post-Cold War ventures in the 1990s, however, scarcely suggest that a firm American hand was securing the world. These included a pacifying mission in Somalia that became a military fiasco and a subsequent genocide in Rwanda that was met simply with wary and anxious watchfulness. The United States did provide a forum for contesting sides in the Bosnian war to settle their differences, but only after the Serbs were routed and desperate to settle.³³ A more notable contribution, albeit from tens of thousands of feet, occurred at the end of the decade when NATO, with the United States in the lead, bombed Serbia to withdraw its forces from its Kosovo province.

In the new century, American military policy was impelled by a vast overreaction to the 9/11 terrorist attack. Rather than simply going after al-Qaeda essentially using policing methods as had been typical earlier, the United States applied military force not only to attack the group at its base in Afghanistan, but to take down the Taliban regime, which had been hosting the group (albeit with increasing dismay) but had had nothing to do with 9/11.³⁴ The militarized pursuit of another major goal, anti-proliferation, was carried out in a war against Iraq in 2003 to take out the feeble Saddam Hussein regime which, it was imagined, would obtain nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction and then use them to dominate the Middle East and perhaps turn them over to congenial terrorists. In both cases, the occupying American military soon found itself embroiled in massively destructive civil wars as various insurgent elements went into armed opposition to its occupation.³⁵ Subsequently, well over 200,000 have perished—more than died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. There were also two other ill-fated military ventures in the new century: interventions in Libya and Syria.

Thus, insofar as good things have happened since the end of World War II, American security policy has been more nearly helpful than necessary, and its specific achievements in the 21st century have been more in dispensing war and disorder than in establishing peace and order.

The US Was Not Essential for Institutions, Economic Development, or Democracy

The United States was certainly helpful after World War II in constructing international rules and institutions, promoting economic trade and development, and expanding democracy. But, as with security arrangements, it was scarcely necessary. The impelling, or facilitating, cause in the process was the aversion toward

international war. As scholar Richard Betts puts it for institutions of collective security: “peace is the premise of the system, not the product.”³⁶

International Institutions

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

For example, many of the institutions that have been fabricated in Europe are among the consequences of the remarkable international peace that has enveloped Western Europe since 1945, not its cause. It is difficult to see why the institutions should get the credit for the peace that has flourished for the last three-quarters of a century, but they do.³⁷

As part of the creation of world order more globally, a norm about territorial integrity was established that disallows territorial expansion by states. The League of Nations (which the United States never joined) had set up a system, or device, in which the world would be divided into various chunks whose representatives would agree not to change borders by force. Revived after World War II and after the failures with Germany, Japan, and Italy in the 1930s, the process has, for various reasons and for the most part, worked: reversing the experience and patterns of all recorded history, there have been remarkably few truly substantial alterations of international boundaries through force.³⁸

However, if international war has been abandoned as a method or technique, a norm against conquest is scarcely required—it is, in fact, redundant. Indeed, at the margins, the norm actually *has* been violated: there continue to be occasional border conflicts between states, and these have sometimes resulted in land seizures. For the most part, however, these have been over small pieces of territory with the conquerors working very hard to keep the conflict from escalating to war.³⁹

International Trade and Economic Development

There has also been a great expansion of international trade, interdependence, and communication, but this is more likely to be the consequence of peace than the cause of it. Moreover, any leadership in the process from the United States was substantially due to the huge size of its economy—all it had to do was allow access.⁴⁰

The US was certainly helpful but not necessary in facilitating institutions, development, and democracy

If Europeans hardly needed the United States to decide that war among them was a really terrible idea, they did not need it to instill in them the notion that economic development and the quest for its ensuing prosperity was a good one. In particular, Germany and Japan were fully ready for a return to the comparative liberalism of the 1920s. The United States may have facilitated economic growth, but it was not essential. Its efforts probably did improve business and investor confidence some in postwar Europe—an atmospheric contribution that is difficult to quantify—but European businesses would likely have generated that on their own as peace continued to reign. Historian Melvyn Leffler characterizes American help as “wise” and “prudent,” but “marginal.”⁴¹ And of course, Europeans and others were always quite pleased to accept bailout money like the Marshall Plan. Security-induced US subsidies likely did help Japanese economic growth in the 1960s, but as one analysis concludes, growth otherwise would still likely have been “solid.”⁴²

The quest for international peace specifically affected trade and economic development in two ways. The first derives from the fact that international tensions and the prospect of international war have a strong dampening effect on trade because each threatened nation has an incentive to cut itself off from the rest of the world economically in order to ensure that it can survive if international exchange is severed by military conflict.⁴³ Nevertheless, a culture of international peace, however facilitating, is not sufficient in itself for trade expansion to come about. It is necessary as well that free trade be accepted as a good thing. Over the decades, the idea, long supported by most economists, that international trade should be more free and open gradually became accepted, a process that was often halting and incoherent.⁴⁴ The United States was often, if not always, in support of the process, but it was a worldwide phenomenon, and American coaching and direction were scarcely crucial.

Second, the quest for peace has often led to the self-conscious development of economic arrangements as a device to promote peace even if the impact might not be particularly helpful economically. For example, it was the deep desire for international peace, not American machinations or simple economic considerations, that was the impelling force for the creation of the coal and steel community between France and Germany, an arrangement that eventually evolved into the European Union. As its chief author, Robert Schuman, put it in 1950, the aim was to make war “not only unthinkable, but materially impossible.”⁴⁵

The process was also seen in the construction of the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement to govern international monetary relations. This was impelled primarily by alarm over the mismanagement of currency exchange rates which, it was supposed, importantly helped cause World War II. According to its chief architect, the absence of such economic collaboration would “inevitably result in economic warfare that will be but the prelude and instigator of military warfare.”⁴⁶ Possessed

with by far the largest economy in the world at the time, the United States was instrumental in reaching the agreement and in carrying it out. But a repeat of World War II was scarcely in the cards in its aftermath no matter how currency exchange rates fluttered, and the world seems to have survived quite well even when the Americans abruptly and unilaterally abandoned the scheme in 1971.

The desire for international peace impelled American foreign economic policy as well. Thus, as Mastanduno notes, “For U.S. officials, economics and security were inextricably linked. Depression had led to war; enemies in the marketplace became enemies on the battlefield. Officials in the Truman administration believed that the restoration of economic prosperity would encourage peaceful relations among the world’s powers.”⁴⁷ That is, it has been the quest for international peace that made worldwide economic growth especially desirable, not the reverse.

Democracy

Peace may also furnish countries with the security and space in which to explore and develop democracy because democracy and democratic idea entrepreneurs are more likely to flourish when the trials, distortions, and disruptions of war—whether international or civil—are absent. When people are comfortably at peace, they may come to realize that they no longer require a strongman to provide order and can afford to embrace the benefits of democracy even if those might come with somewhat heightened uncertainty and disorderliness.⁴⁸ There have been important advancements for democracy in the aftermath of World War II, a development that was certainly encouraged by the United States, and American efforts may have been important in several cases.⁴⁹ But it seems more reasonable to suggest that US efforts struck a responsive chord rather than created one. For example, American armed interventions to install, or re-install, democracy in Grenada and Panama lasted, while similar ventures decades earlier had failed to do so after American troops left.

Policy Implications

Over the 20th century, particularly within the ever-enlarging developed world, something that might be called a culture of peace or an aversion to international war has been established for how countries relate to each other. The United States may not have been essential for this development, but a number of strategic and policy implications flow from it.

Order Can Survive the United States

Because the United States has not been crucial for establishing and maintaining world order, that order can survive, or work around to accommodate or undercut,

various challenges that might be thrown at it by the United States—as it has as by the administration of Donald J. Trump over the last years. However deflating this

Maintaining world order is based on a general aversion to international war and does not depend on the US

conclusion might be to American triumphalists, it is good news more generally: maintaining world order is based on a general aversion to international war and does not depend on the United States.

Fears about a Major War or a “New Cold War” are Unjustified

Second, the remarkable rise in aversion to international war suggests that a major war among developed countries, one like World

War II, is extremely unlikely to recur.⁵⁰ Contrary to many current fears, it is unlikely that this agreeable condition will be punctured either by the rise of China as a challenger country or by excessive assertiveness by Russia backed by its large nuclear arsenal.

After a remarkable period of economic growth, China has entered the developed world—it has come to rank second globally in gross domestic product (though around seventieth in per capita GDP).⁵¹ But there is a fear that China, as it becomes ever wealthier, will invest a considerable amount in military hardware and will consequently feel impelled to target the United States or carry out undesirable military adventures in its neighborhood or even in in America’s hegemonic hemisphere.⁵²

China, however, has become almost the quintessential trading state.⁵³ Its integration into the world economy and its increasing dependence for economic development and for the consequent acquiescence of the Chinese people are crucial. Armed conflict would be extremely—even overwhelmingly—costly to the

There is a danger of making a China threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy

country and, in particular, to the regime in charge. The best bet, surely, is that this condition will essentially hold. Indeed, there is a danger of making a China threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy by refusing to consider both the unlikelihood and the consequences of worst-case scenario fantasizing and by engaging in endless metaphysical talk about “balancing.”⁵⁴

China certainly feels it deserves to play a greater role on the world stage, but it does not seem to have territorial ambitions (beyond integrating Taiwan at some point), and it does not have the wherewithal or, it seems, the ambition, to “rule the world.”⁵⁵ Or as Fu Ying, Chairperson of the

Foreign Affairs Committee of China’s National People’s Congress, puts it more bluntly, “China views the U.S.-dominated world order as a mess and this is why it does not want to take over. Why should China repeat the mistakes which the U.S. did?”⁵⁶

In addition, analysts point to a large number of problems that are likely to arrest the attention of Chinese leaders in future years.⁵⁷ Among them are slowing growth, a rapidly aging population combined with a shrinking labor force, industrial overproduction, accumulating local debt, and a political system that is becoming increasingly oppressive in order to maintain the primacy of the antiquated Communist Party. There are issues as well with minority groups in the west and with a restive population in Hong Kong. There is also a monumental, endemic problem with corruption characterized by collusive economic looting and privilege-seeking by officials, businessmen, and gangsters.⁵⁸ To this dismal litany, one might add a brain drain to the West, a lack of secure property rights, and an inadequate legal system. Meanwhile, pollution kills a million and a half Chinese people per year.⁵⁹ Moreover, China’s grandiose and much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is increasingly showing signs of being a case of overreach that has failed to deliver either returns for investors (including state-run banks) or political returns for China.⁶⁰

Concerns about Russian assertiveness have escalated since 2014 when there was an extortionary annexation of Crimea, a large peninsular chunk of Ukraine, to Russia, and then a sporadic, and ultimately stalemated, civil war in Ukraine in which ethnic Russian secessionist groups in a portion of Ukraine’s east were supported by Moscow. The fear, in particular, is that Russia’s successful expansion—justified, it said, in part by the desire to protect persecuted ethnic Russians in a neighboring land—will cause, or tempt, it to expand elsewhere.

These developments were unsettling, of course. However, it is noteworthy that the United States and Western Europe never even came close to seriously considering the use of direct force to deal with the issue. Although the crisis created, as Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker notes, “just the kinds of tensions that in the past had led to great-power wars,” nothing like that took place.⁶¹ Indeed, President Barack Obama, who presided over the episode, was given to taunting his hawkish critics: “now, if there is somebody in this town that would claim that we would consider going to war with Russia over Crimea and eastern Ukraine, they should speak up and be very clear about it.”⁶²

The Ukraine episode of 2014 seems to be a one-off—a unique, opportunistic, and probably under-considered escapade that proved to be unexpectedly costly to the perpetrators. As UCLA’s Daniel Treisman has observed, “If Putin’s goal was to prevent Russia’s military encirclement, his aggression in Ukraine has been a tremendous failure, since it has produced the exact opposite.”⁶³ Massive extrapolation is unjustified and ill-advised.⁶⁴

Carnegie Moscow director Dmitri Trenin notes that “economically, Russia—with its estimated 1.5 percent of the global gross domestic product—is a dwarf.”⁶⁵ As Obama pointed out derisively in his final news conference as president, “their economy doesn’t produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms. They don’t innovate.”⁶⁶ And, like China, Russia is wallowing in crony capitalism where property rights are insecure, capital flight is common, corruption is rampant (in one year, 37 times more money went into bribery than into health, education, and agriculture combined), and economic stagnation is likely.⁶⁷ Cyber meddling is a weapon of the weak, and Russia did seek to undermine the election in 2016 in the United States (which has meddled in scores of foreign elections over the years).⁶⁸ In the end, however, the Russian caper was wildly counterproductive, generating bipartisan support for sanctions against Russia at a time when the two American parties can agree on little else.⁶⁹

Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping, like Hitler in the 1930s, are supported domestically for their success in maintaining a stable political and economic environment. However, unlike Hitler, both are running trading states and need a stable and essentially congenial international environment to flourish. Most importantly, neither seems to harbor Hitler-like dreams of extensive expansion by military means. Both are leading their countries in an illiberal direction that will hamper economic growth while maintaining a kleptocratic system. But this may be acceptable to populations enjoying historically high living standards and fearful of less stable alternatives. The two leaders (and their publics) do seem to want to overcome what they view as past humiliations—ones going back to China’s opium war of 1839 and to the collapse of the Soviet empire and then of the Soviet Union itself in 1989–91. That scarcely seems to present

A “new Cold War” would similarly be an expensive, substantially militarized, and hysterical campaign

or represent a threat.⁷⁰ The United States, after all, continually declares itself to be “the one indispensable nation”—suggesting that all others are, well, dispensable. If the United States is allowed to wallow in such self-important, childish, essentially meaningless, and decidedly fatuous proclamations, why should other nations be denied the opportunity to emit similar inconsequential rattlings?

Wariness about, and hostility toward, Russia and China is sometimes said to constitute “a new Cold War.” And, indeed, the current “Cold War” is, in an important respect, quite a bit like the old one—it is an expensive, substantially militarized, and often hysterical campaign to deal with threats that do not exist or are likely to self-destruct.

Maintaining a Large Military Force is Unnecessary

Third, the rise of an aversion to international war suggests that there is scarcely a need to maintain a large military force. In fact, the achievements of the US military since World War II, not to put too fine a point on it, have not been very impressive. Some continue to maintain that it was the existence of the US military that kept the Soviet Union or China from launching World War III. However, as suggested earlier, the Communist side never saw direct war against the West as being a remotely sensible tactic for advancing its revolutionary agenda; that is, there was nothing to deter. Moreover, for all the very considerable expense, the American military has won no wars during that period—especially if victory is defined as achieving an objective at an acceptable cost—except against enemy forces that scarcely existed: Grenada, Panama, Kosovo, and Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991.

More recently, there has been a successful war against the insurgent group the Islamic State, or ISIS. However, the principal American contribution has been air support; others have done the heavy lifting—and dying.⁷¹ The US military can take credit for keeping South Korea independent—no other country at the time would have been able to do that. But it went to war there in 1950 for other reasons, and it badly botched the effort and massively increased the costs by seeking to liberate North Korea as well. And in the 21st century, American military policy, especially in the Middle East, has been, for the most part, an abject failure. In particular, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives, Iraq and Afghanistan have undergone more travail and destruction than they would likely have undergone even under the contemptible regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban.

Maintaining a huge and expensive US military force-in-being might make sense, despite the abundant record of failure, if there existed coherent threats that required such a force. Although there are certainly problem areas and issues in the world, none of these seems to present a security threat to the United States large or urgent enough.⁷² It may make sense to hedge a bit, however, by judiciously maintaining small contingents of troops for rapid response and for policing functions, a capacity to provide air support for friendly ground troops in localized combat, a small number of nuclear weapons for the (wildly) unlikely event of the rise of another Hitler, something of an effort to deal with cyber, an adept intelligence capacity, and the development of a capacity to rebuild quickly should a sizable threat eventually materialize.

And there is a related issue: having a large force tempts leaders to use the military to solve problems for which it is inappropriate, inadequate, and often counterproductive. In the wake of the disastrous Vietnam War, Bernard Brodie wistfully reflected that “one way of keeping people out of trouble is to deny them the means for getting into it.”⁷³ More than forty years later, Brodie’s admonition continues to be relevant.

Anarchy May Well Be Tolerable or Even Desirable

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Albert Einstein, along with many others, fancied that he had managed to discover the single device that could solve the problem of world peace: “only the creation of a world government can prevent the impending self-destruction of mankind.” Philosopher Bertrand Russell was equally certain: “it is entirely clear,” he declared, “that there is *only one way* in which great wars can be permanently prevented and that is the establishment of an international government with a monopoly of serious armed force.” Einstein insisted that world government was both an “absolute” and an “immediate” necessity and suggested that it might emerge naturally out of the United Nations.⁷⁴ As it happens, peace between major countries has been maintained—there have been, to use Russell’s term, no “great wars.” However, the United Nations deserves little credit for this remarkable development, and world government none at all.

In fact, if the nearly 200 states that constitute the world order come to substantially abandon the idea that international war is a sensible method for solving problems among themselves, the notion that they live in a condition of “anarchy” becomes misleading. Technically, of course, the concept is accurate: there exists no international government that effectively polices the behavior of the nations of the world. The problem with the word lies in its inescapable connotations: it implies chaos, lawlessness, disorder, confusion, and both random and focused violence.⁷⁵ Thus, Kenneth Waltz argued that, under anarchy, states “must experience conflict and will occasionally fall into violence.”⁷⁶ Insofar as this perspective is a useful way to look at international politics, however, it holds only where the idea is generally accepted that violence is a suitable and useful method for doing business between states as was standard throughout almost all of history during what Yale

law professors Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro call “the Old World Order.”⁷⁷

If that idea is abandoned—that is, if states understand that international war is not the way we do things anymore—“anarchy” could become a tolerable, or even a desirable, condition. It would be equally accurate to characterize the international situation as “unregulated,” a word with connotations that are far different and perhaps far more helpful. What would emerge is what German scholar Hanns Maull

calls a “system of cooperation and conflict among highly interdependent partners.”⁷⁸

The constituent states may still harbor a great number of problems and disputes to work out. For example, they will need to settle such issues as fishing rights, territorial disputes, and the regulation of international trade. While the United States might contribute to these processes, it would not be necessary (and actually, the

If states understand the aversion to war, “anarchy” becomes tolerable or even desirable

United States has sometimes been more of a laggard than a leader in these processes—it has yet to embrace the Law of the Sea, for example). But to work to resolve such problems while avoiding international war, those states would scarcely require an effective world government—or the efforts of a “hegemonic” United States.

And in the meantime, sustaining a bloated military force and anachronistically pursuing self-fulfilling “great-power” rivalries comes at great cost and risks undermining efforts to address 21st century problems like pandemics and climate change that require international cooperation and scarcely have a military component.

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