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WAR'S DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE AS A POLICY TOOL IN THE CONTEMPORARY AGE

By Justin Logan

Do wars succeed in achieving their stated objectives? What is the changing face of war in the modern world? What are the respective roles of material interests and ideologies in driving wars? Justin Logan is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He writes in journals of foreign affairs such as *Foreign Policy*, the *Foreign Service Journal*, *Orbis*, and the *Harvard International Review* and regularly appears on broadcast media to discuss and explain international relations.

"[I]f you look back to the Korean War, there are very few instances where we have been militarily engaged in a major conflict where we have come out with what we saw as a victory, as clear cut as in World War II or in the first Gulf War in 1991." —Robert Gates¹¹⁷

The modern world was shaped by war. Nation-states, the global economy, and the structure of the international system all owe part of their heritage to war.¹¹⁸ As important a factor as war has been, it has also been in precipitous decline for centuries, as highlighted by Steven Pinker, James Payne, John Mueller, and other scholars.

Less well-appreciated is the fact that in wars in the modern era, initiators of conflict have rarely achieved their stated objectives. This essay discusses the types of wars fought during the period ending in 1945 and suggests reasons for their decline. Next, it describes the wars of the post-World War II period and explains why the initiators of those wars have rarely succeeded in achieving their goals. It concludes with lessons for policymakers and citizens.

The Rise and Fall of Major Power Wars

For millennia, tribes, city-states, kingdoms, empires, and nation-states fought one another in pursuit of additional territory and the opportunity to obtain valuable resources and increase their relative power.¹¹⁹ In Charles Tilly's famous aphorism, "War made the state and the state made war."¹²⁰

From the beginning of the modern era at the turn of the sixteenth century the frequency and lethality of war waxed and waned as states developed new organizations and technologies for violence, along with organizations and technologies for countering violence.¹²¹

Major powers fought wars of conquest with other major powers in efforts to seize resources, including mines, grazing lands, slaves, ports, gold and silver, and taxable subjects, as well as to convert populations to the religions or identities favored by the rulers.

Such wars have declined precipitously since the middle of the twentieth century. Some scholars have suggested that war has become less common because mankind as a species grew to think of war as a grotesque and uncivilized activity to a point where no one even thinks about the desirability of war anymore. It has become, in the words of John Mueller, "subrationally unthinkable."¹²²

Norms evolve over time, but they are rarely completely independent of other, material factors. Changes in material developments spurred, or at least supported, that change in mindset. The sorts of wars great powers fought in the past are no longer so appealing, even to the most risk-prone leaders. Military technologies such as nuclear weaponry have made conquest a suicidal proposition in most cases. Non-military developments, such as nationalism and other forms of identity politics, have made conquered populations harder to control and assimilate. Economic developments, such

as the horizontal integration of supply chains and the increase in cross-border trade, have made the prospective economic gains from war much lower.¹²³

Among minor powers, of course, attempts at conquest have not ceased entirely. For example, Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 to gain control of the Kuwaiti oil fields and to void the financial debt the Iraqi state owed to the Kuwaitis. But the ease with which the US-led coalition dislodged Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait made clear that cross-border aggression is a risky proposition.

Contemporary Wars

While wars between major powers have declined dramatically, wars are still started. Three types of war persist, but they frequently fail to achieve their objectives.

Counterproliferation / Preventive War

Major powers, particularly the United States, regularly express grave concern about the acquisition of nuclear weapons technology and capability by other states. The 2003 Iraq War was justified primarily on the grounds of counterproliferation, despite the fact that the administration did not seek out and to some extent disregarded evidence that Iraq had no nuclear weapons program at all.

Though the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is widely accepted among major powers, those major powers oppose proliferation for a number of reasons. They fear the prospect of unintended nuclear war; they fear "proliferation cascades" or a nuclear "domino effect"; they fear the prospect of nuclear terrorism; and finally, they prefer to retain freedom of action against third parties. As Kenneth Waltz notes, "a big reason for America's resistance to the spread of nuclear weapons is that if weak countries have some they will cramp our style."¹²⁴

Wars to counter the proliferation of nuclear weaponry, however, face a number of problems, the first of which was amply demonstrated in Iraq. The sort of intelligence needed for a successful counterproliferation war is difficult to obtain and frequently unreliable. Iraq provides an extreme case; Baghdad did not have a nuclear weapons program at all in 2003. Even in cases where nuclear

programs are reliably known to exist, the comprehensive knowledge that would be required to hit enough key nodes of a developed nuclear infrastructure is terribly difficult to obtain.¹²⁵ The alternative would be regular strikes to set back efforts to rebuild the program, bombing the country every few years until it either relented in its pursuit of nuclear technology or there was "regime change" satisfactory to the attacker. Not only does it become difficult to think of a successful counterproliferation war, but threatening war to counter proliferation can even convince hostile states of the need for nuclear weapons to deter the potential attacker.

Counter-Domino / Wars for Influence and Credibility

Another goal of wars undertaken in recent decades has been the struggle for "influence" over weaker states by major powers. Major powers have frequently initiated or continued wars out of fear that a particular state may fall under the influence of another state, to the detriment of the intervener's security. The "domino theory" posits that either changes in the domestic politics of a given state or that state's coming into the sphere of influence of another state could cause a domino effect, with one domino knocking down the next and sending an unspecified number of other states into a rival state's embrace.

At this writing, Russian forces have invaded Ukraine. The Russian government claims the military units are not Russian, but rather Ukrainian self-defense forces, and that those forces are fighting political instability in Ukraine. The claim the forces are not Russian is risible and has not been credited by anyone outside Moscow's influence. The claim that they are fighting political instability rather than for continued naval access to the Black Sea via Crimea similarly does not withstand scrutiny.

While the Russian incursion shows military power is still relevant in international politics, the purpose of this essay is not to argue military power is irrelevant. Russian forces illegally invaded Ukraine, but there has been no war, partly because of Kyiv's correct judgment that there was little hope of resistance producing a favorable political resolution, and partly because of pro-Moscow sympathies among many residents of Crimea. The sorts of massive

wars leaders undertook in the seventeenth or twentieth centuries belong in a different category than Russia's 2014 Crimean expedition. Stronger states bully weaker states when they feel it is easy and the stakes are high enough.

Such wars sometimes have catastrophic consequences for the intervener. Although it was already weakened by decades of economic mismanagement and overextended militarily, the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan helped to destroy the Soviet state. The logic for intervening in Afghanistan—not a country rich in resources—is elusive, but evidence indicates that Soviet leaders feared that Afghanistan would turn away from Moscow and toward the West, and that this development would have underspecified but terrible consequences for the USSR's strategic position. As the war turned from bad to worse, Soviet leaders also began to fear that "the 'loss' of Afghanistan would be an unacceptable setback and a blow to Soviet prestige."¹²⁶

Such logical chains of inference regarding influence and credibility frequently dominate the thoughts of interveners but rarely work in the way they fear. As Daryl Press has documented, credibility is not transferable in the way leaders believe it is. Statesmen tend not to evaluate present crises based on past behavior of adversaries. Rather, they evaluate their adversaries' material interests and military power in particular cases.¹²⁷ Similarly, influence itself tends to be contingent and ephemeral. States have rarely stayed loyal to a patron out of something other than their own perceived interest.

Humanitarian Interventions

Finally, states have intervened purporting to act on behalf of vulnerable or threatened third parties. It is sometimes difficult to identify such cases of humanitarian intervention clearly, because in order to sustain domestic support for interventions that are strategically irrelevant, governments frequently have insisted that the interventions were not, in fact, altruistic, but rather self-interested.

Notwithstanding the ostensible national-security justifications for the war, the 2011 US-led campaign in Libya is one recent example. Although US government officials continue to insist that intervention in the civil war there stopped a slaughter of perhaps

100,000 Libyan civilians in Benghazi by the Libyan regime, and counterfactuals are nearly impossible to prove, the claim is not plausible. The conduct of regime forces in Misrata, where fighting took place immediately before the targeting of Benghazi, did not indicate a policy of indiscriminate killing. Moreover, Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi threatened rebels with menacing language, but stated to civilians in Benghazi in a public address:

Whoever hands over his weapons, stays at home without any weapons, whatever he did previously, he will be pardoned, protected. We will pardon anyone in the streets . . . Anyone who throws away his weapon and stays at home peacefully will be pardoned no matter what he did in the past. He is protected.¹²⁸

His goal was to stay in power, not simply to punish his subjects. The fact that Qaddafi was a brutal dictator incited liberal sentiment in the West. Thus, anyone pointing out that claims that he had threatened to slaughter civilians were untrue risked looking like an apologist for tyranny. In addition, Western governments insisted that the future of Arab liberalization—the “Arab Spring”—hinged on preventing Qaddafi from winning the civil war.¹²⁹ Western officials went so far as to deny that their motive was regime change, despite a military campaign that made that objective obvious.¹³⁰ In any event, the war ended as have so many humanitarian interventions: regime change followed by a faltering economy and unresolved political divisions that endure beyond the limits of the attention spans of Western publics and policy makers.¹³¹

Conclusion

If wars rarely achieve the goals of the war makers, why do they continue to be launched? There is no single answer to that question, but a number of factors contribute to war-making.

States built institutions and supported the development of entire industries whose sole purpose was to prepare for war or to produce the infrastructure and the implements of war. The most famous comment on that phenomenon is President Dwight D.

Eisenhower's warning in his farewell address about the "military-industrial complex." Eisenhower, who had previously been a five-star general, warned that while scientific progress and a large defense industry were essential to military power and national defense, there was a risk that "public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite." In other words, the military-industrial complex could "capture" US defense policy, causing at least orientations, if not policies, that would benefit arms manufacturers and defense contractors but were not optimal from a national-interest perspective.¹³²

In the United States, the luxury of a reserve currency, geographic isolation from most severe threats, and a massive, resilient economy have amplified those dangers. US policymakers can waste resources subsidizing the military-industrial complex without obvious disadvantages to safety or wealth. States living closer to the margin of security and well-being face more demanding tradeoffs, and tend to start fewer frivolous wars. Because of America's security and wealth, many of the costs of foolish foreign policies are widely dispersed, and lead to fewer negative consequences for the leaders who pursue them.¹³³

Finally, ideology plays an important role in enabling states to militarize society and wage war.¹³⁴ The bloody clashes of the twentieth century were fueled by the ideologies of nationalism, communism, fascism, and national socialism. Most ideologies give privileged place to the decisions made by one's own political leaders. From the French "mission civilisatrice," to the English belief in "the white man's burden," to the present day's "American exceptionalism," citizens believe that the superiority of their country grants it a special license to remake the world to its liking. Political leaders may even use religious rhetoric in speaking of the nation and its mission, thus infusing the national interest with the authority of God.¹³⁵

Both material interests and ideologies, then, help to perpetuate wars. Wars can be made less frequent if both of those factors—material interests of military-industrial complexes and political elites, and ideologies of war and conflict—are countered. Those are worthy challenges for the rising generations of peace activists.