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The Demise of Ares: The End of War as We Know It?

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In 1990, U.S. political scientist John Mearsheimer predicted that we would soon "miss the Cold War."[1] In the months and years that followed, the eruption of bloody conflicts in the Balkans and in Africa gave birth to fears of a new era of global chaos and anarchy. Authors such as Robert Kaplan and Benjamin Barber spread a pessimistic vision of the world in which new barbarians, liberated from the disciplines of the East–West conflict, would give a free rein to their ancestral hatreds and religious passions.[2] Journalists James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg chimed in that violence would reassert itself as the common condition of life.[3] Former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan warned that the planet was about to become a "pandemonium."[4]

These prophets of doom were wrong. What has actually happened over the past 20 years is exactly the reverse. Daily headlines since 1990 about conflicts in Iraq, the Balkans, Africa, or Afghanistan have masked the fact that war has been on a steady decline: interstate conflict has become an exception; civil wars are increasingly rare.

Are we witnessing a temporary era of peace before the return of war? Or is this the beginning of a long-term trend? This article argues the latter. Different political and social threads are associated with, and are probably causing, the decline in warfare. Predictions of coming Dark Ages—and of "civilization," "resource," or "environmental" wars—are overrated. There is no single causal factor at work, but all point in one direction: we are nearing a point of history where it will be possible to say that war as we know it, long thought to be an inevitable part of the human condition, has disappeared.

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The Demise of War: A Long-Term Trend

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a constant decline in the number of ongoing conflicts. Various methodologies are used to define "conflict," but all give the same result: the total number of wars is less than half what it was in 1990. One of the most widely utilized databases is that of the Uppsala Data Conflict Project (UDCP), used in particular by the yearbooks published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). According to UDCP, the number of major armed conflicts in 1990 was 37, and in 2010 was 15 (latest available data in June 2012).[5] Year-to-year comparisons are difficult to make because UDCP changed its methodology twice in the past 20 years, but a reconstruction of the data series shows a clear trend.

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Note: (1) methodology 1: used until 1999. (2) methodology 2: used from 1999 to 2007. (3) methodology 3: used since 2007. Data from UCDP (SIPRI yearbooks 1990–2011). Yearly interval.

According to another dataset, run by the Center for Systemic Peace (CSP), in 1992 almost 30 percent of all countries experienced one form of major political violence or another (1992 was the peak year). In 2010, that percentage had fallen to just over 13 percent.[6]

These evolutions stem from the rapid diminution in the number of civil wars or internal conflicts. Some would argue that we are witnessing the closing of a parenthesis, or a return to normalcy. From the 1815 Vienna Congress to the end of World War II, the number of ongoing civil wars was between zero and nine per year; then it rapidly increased after 1945.[7] Cold War conflicts lasted for years

and often for decades, meaning that data from 1945–1990 show an ever higher number of ongoing wars.[8]

However, this is not the only perceptible trend. The number of international conflicts (both "interstate," or classic international wars, and "extrastate," or interventions against a foreign non-state actor) has declined, too. In the first decade of the 21st century, interstate conflicts represented less than 7 percent (two out of 29) of the total number of conflicts; in 2010, for the seventh year in a row, there was no ongoing interstate war.[9] Classic international conflict has practically *disappeared* from the modern world. This is all the more remarkable since the number of states has tripled since the end of World War II. (There may actually be a causal link here—more on this later.)

Classic international conflict has practically *disappeared* from the modern world.

No major power war has erupted since 1939. This is unique in modern history—that is, in the post-Westphalia world. There were one or two dozen such conflicts (depending on the definition) in the 70 years that followed the signing of the 1648 treaties, and five during the same amount of time following the Vienna peace.[10] We are living in the longest era of major power peace of the past five centuries, perhaps unrivaled since the Roman Empire.[11]

As documented by Professor Steven Pinker in his magisterial book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, we are living on the tail-end of a slow-motion process that began four centuries ago.[12] The diminution in the number of major power wars has been gradual. Since the Westphalia peace, their frequency has been one-third of what it had been in the 150 years that preceded the peace.[13] One counts nine to 11 such wars between 1700 and 1815, two to six between 1815 and 1930, and two or three since 1930.[14]

This exceptionality of war is a new phenomenon in human history. It is estimated that in prehistoric times, two-thirds of human groups were constantly in a state of conflict, and that nearly 90 percent of them underwent large-scale violence every year.[15] Fast forward to the modern era: according to one author, the total number of wars in the world has never been so low for at least six centuries.[16] International war within the "central system" of states, which had been common since the late 15th century, declined fast after 1945, and reached unprecedented lows after 1990.[17]

Would this be an effect of shorter but deadlier conflicts? Actually, war has become more intense, but also *less* deadly. To be sure, relative mortality due to war in the period 1914–1945 reached, in Europe, a peak not even rivaled by the

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Thirty Years War (1618–1648).[18] But the global and long-term trend is positive. The 8th century An Lushan rebellion led to the disappearance of perhaps two-thirds of the population of the Chinese empire.[19] Until the mid-17th century, it was not exceptional for a society to lose a third of its population during a conflict.[20] In the two world wars, very few countries (Serbia, Poland) lost more than 15 percent of their population. The trend has accelerated since then: the average number of battle-related deaths per conflict has dramatically receded.[21] An oft-quoted affirmation that civilians are now the main victims of conflict has been thoroughly debunked.[22] In fact, total mortality due to war since 1945 has diminished (likewise, in the past three decades, for the number of indirect deaths in wartime).[23]

While war has become more intense, it is also *less* deadly.

What Has Gone Right? Multiple Explanations

War is a complex, multi-causal, and multi-faceted phenomenon, and many different factors have played a role in its decline. The absence of major power conflict since 1945 has been a focus of study for political scientists for some time already. Authors such as John Lewis Gaddis have emphasized the structure of the international system, the geographical distance between the main contenders, and most importantly the role of nuclear deterrence.[24] The latter also decreased the chances of war between non-major powers.[25] Yet all major schools of international relations—realism, liberalism, idealism, constructivism—may have to be called upon to explain the overall decline of warfare.

Since 1945, an international society based on norms and institutions has steadily developed. Mediations, courts and tribunals, international and regional organizations, peacekeeping, and interventions have multiplied. Peacekeeping, for instance, reduces the chances of a relapse of a civil war by 80 percent.[26] "Conciliation rituals," which emphasize peace over justice, do the same thing and go a long way toward terminating long internal conflicts.[27]

Wars of conquest have been delegitimized: a UN member has never been wiped off the map by force. (South Vietnam, absorbed by force by the North in 1975, had only observer status at the UN.) Notwithstanding the complex history of Tibet, or controversies about Kashmir, Palestine, and Western Sahara, or the stalemate in Cyprus, there is today no such thing as an occupied country—that is, a state recognized as independent by the international community having fully lost its sovereignty to an occupant since 1945. As Professor John Mueller

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puts it, "the prohibition against territorial aggression has been astoundingly successful."[28] When Iraq annexed Kuwait, it triggered the formation of the biggest international coalition ever formed, and the coalition won.

Additionally, there is, since the 1970s, the growing relative importance of trade in national economies, which not only increases the opportunity cost of conflict, but also enhances mutual relations and understanding, which in turn facilitates negotiation and reduces strategic errors. Once derided, the idea of "gentle commerce" has been rejuvenated.[29] The higher the volume of bilateral trade between two countries, the lower the risk of armed conflict between them.[30] Mueller has called this the "Hollandization" of international society.[31] Authors have also pointed to the phenomenon of "war fatigue" following the 1914–1945 orgy of destruction. The proportion of international disputes (whether or not they lead to armed conflict) to the total number of states has been slowly declining since World War II, returning to a mid-19th century level.[32]

More than a century ago, Polish writer Jean de Bloch claimed that war would become obsolete because of its increasing destructiveness. A few years later, British author Norman Angell suggested that wars of conquest would no longer pay because of their costs. They have been mocked for decades—but they may end up having the last laugh.[33]

The decolonization process and the end of the Cold War also contributed to the decline of several forms of conflict. The diminution of extrastate conflicts can be explained by the end of the decolonization process, a painful and bloody one, which was by and large completed by 1980. The steady decrease in the number of civil wars since 1989 has many causes, but about one-fifth of this decline is due to the end of the East–West conflict, which fueled—financially and ideologically—many regional and low-level wars.[34] Also, the decolonization process often left ungoverned vast territories which became, temporarily, ripe for predation. Since 1990, many "national questions" have been solved through the creation of new states—by independence (Namibia), breakup (Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Indonesia, Serbia, Sudan), or unification (Germany, Yemen). This has reduced the number of civil wars but also of international conflicts: there is a reverse correlation between the number of states and the risk of international war.[35]

The Bigger Picture: A New Human Society?

Even with all these reasons for the decline of war, deeper forces may be at work. The development of trade, norms, and institutions accompanies—causality may work

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both ways—what might be a profound change in collective human culture, in which organized collective violence is becoming less frequent and less intense. Political, economic, and societal trends converge: at the global level, most of the world has now entered modernity, and the "Liberal Peace" is turning from a dream to a reality. Call it the three D's: democracy, development, and demography.

Democracy, development, and demography may be the deeper forces at work.

The world is becoming more democratic. Both Freedom House and the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) at the University of Maryland report the same trend, in terms of numbers, of the proportion of democracies in relation to the number of countries in the world, and of the share of the global population living in a liberal regime. Freedom House counts 87 "free" countries, 45 percent of the total number of states.[36] CIDCM estimates that 91 democracies account for "more than half" of the world's states, a doubling since 1990 with a corresponding decline in the number of autocracies.[37] The number of coups has diminished. Between 1960 and 1990, there was on average six coups per year; today, half less. The number of regimes instituted by such means has also been cut in half in the past two decades. And two-thirds of governments that seize power through a coup organize contested elections within five years, as compared with one-fifth before 1990.[38]

This has an impact on international security. One of the few solid political science laws is that mature democracies do not wage war on each other. Counter-examples are not convincing: they involve countries such as Pakistan, Lebanon, or Yugoslavia, which hardly qualified as mature democracies when they experienced international war. So, the more democracies in the world, the less the chances of interstate wars (as well as militarized disputes).[39]

But democracy also has an impact on civil wars. Transitions to democracy can be messy, and transitional-state countries are more war-prone than autocracies. But once established, democracy becomes a recipe for peace.[40] Former World Bank economist Paul Collier has demonstrated that beyond a certain threshold—around an income of $2,700 per capita a year—democracy makes societies more peaceful.[41] Thus, as the world is becoming richer, democratization makes it more peaceful. (It has also considerably reduced global mortality due to genocide.)[42]

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Development is also in itself a factor reducing the likelihood of civil war, which is strongly correlated with GDP per capita, itself a predictor of state capacity.[43] Note that in the distant past, famines (and the predation of women) were one of the main drivers of conflict; today, most existing famines are actually caused or fueled by war.

Also at work is the progress in social equality. Although individual cases such as China may have grabbed headlines, the proportion of countries that discriminate against ethnic minorities has been reduced by about a third since 1950, no doubt reducing minority exclusion as an incentive for political violence.[44] The upward trend in the role of women in the modern world is another positive—societies with greater gender equality are less likely to go to war or experience civil conflict.[45]

A third related trend is demography. Demography correlates with propensity to war in several ways, one of the most important being the connection between age structure and collective violence. Initially, there is the well-known "youth bulge" phenomenon: as infant mortality decreases, societies embark on a demographic transition marked by a high proportion of young adults in the overall population. There is a clear correlation between the ratio of individuals aged 15–24 to the total adult population in a given country and its propensity for collective violence, especially in a domestic context. Each additional percentage point increases the likelihood of conflict by more than four percent.[46]

Most youth bulges will be absorbed in the coming three decades. In the developing world, the proportion of young adults with regard to the overall population, which was close to 35 percent in 1980, will be 25 percent in 2030 and 20 percent in 2050.[47] Also by 2050, its importance with regard to the total *adult* population—the best predictor of collective violence—will be below 15 percent.[48]

The strong relationship between demographic and warfare data allows for some crude projection for the years 2010–2050. The figure below shows UN data and estimates for two indicators in the developing world (where most wars take place): the total population increase and the share of young population versus total population. The next one shows the number of wars (UDCP) and the total intensity of warfare (CSP). The similarity between the two is clear, though of course imperfect: demography is not destiny, and efforts at state-building or peacekeeping have acted as dampeners. But it confirms that youth bulges are a strong predictor of warfare. The second chart thus predicts a continuation in the downward trend of conflict.

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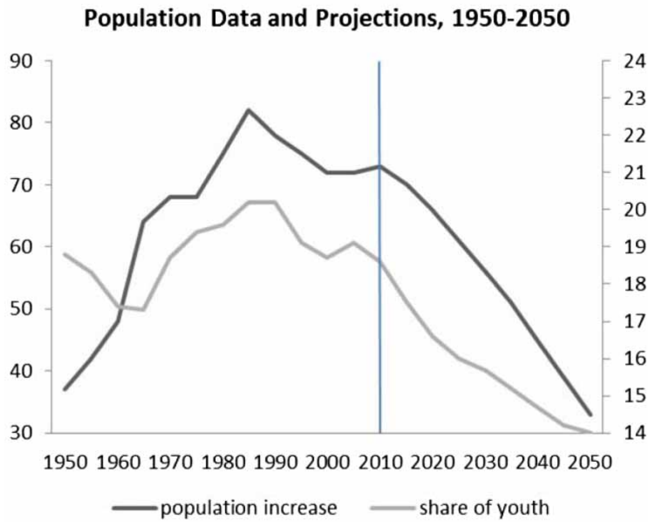
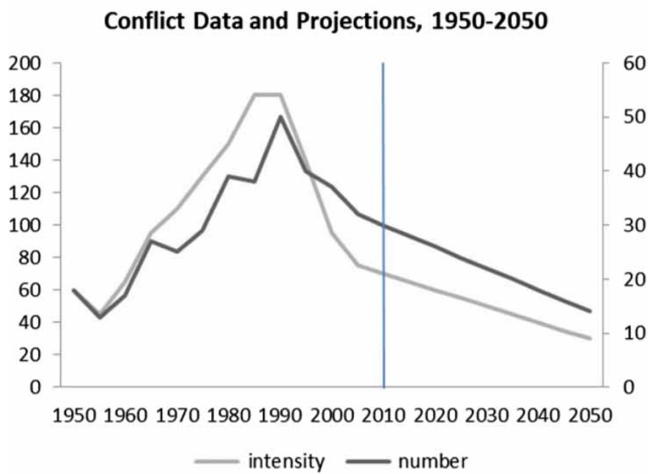


(1) population increase: annual population increment, less developed regions (in millions, left-hand scale). (2) share of youth: share of population aged 15-24, less developed regions (in percentage, right-hand scale). Data and projections from UN Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision, medium variant. Five-year interval.



(1) intensity: summed war magnitudes scores; data up to 2010 from Center for Systemic Peace (left-hand scale). (2) number: total number of conflicts; data up to 2010 from UDCP Armed Conflict Data Set (right-hand scale). Five-year interval.

In-depth studies based on demographic and socio-economic factors confirm these trends. One predicts a more than 50 percent decline in the number of countries experiencing internal conflict, from 15 percent in 2009 to 7 percent in 2050. Conflict would be most likely in Africa.[49] However, even there—where in

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most places the proportion of young adults to the total adult population will still be above 25 percent—the conflict risk will have been reduced by 40 percent as compared to what it was four decades before.[50]

Overall, demographers tell us that most societies will continue to age. (The United States is an exception, having a rather youthful population for a highly industrialized country.) As countries do so, they become less inclined to embark in civil conflict; they also become more reluctant to embark on large-scale military adventures except in the case of self-defense. Moreover, social expenditures will increasingly compete with defense budgets.[51] It is thus a positive trend that most countries have completed, or will soon complete, their demographic transitions.

All these trends reinforce each other in a virtuous circle. For instance, aging also increases the chances of a country becoming a democracy.[52] Hence the prospects for what could be called a Demographic Peace.

This goes along with a deeper cultural trend. For most of the world's population, war is no longer associated with personal achievement or heroism. This has been called "war fatigue" (Mueller) or "debellicization" (Michael Mandelbaum).[53] And nowadays, sports competition (soccer in particular) can provide an outlet for the expression of collective identity-based passions. These post-1945 evolutions come on top of a multi-secular one, which can be traced to what German sociologist Norbert Elias called the "civilizing process."[54] This was accentuated by the construction of sovereign states and, beginning in the mid-1700s, by what Pinker terms the "humanitarian revolution." As he notes, "Each component of the war-friendly mindset—nationalism, territorial ambition, an international culture of honor, and indifference to its human costs—went out of fashion in developed countries in the second half of the 20th century."[55] Pinker also hypothesizes that, at the core, the progress of intelligence and reason over the centuries lies behind the overall decline of global violence.[56]

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The Unconvincing Case for "New Wars"

Is the demise of war reversible? In recent years, the metaphor of a new "Dark Age" or "Middle Ages" has flourished.[57] The rise of political Islam, Western policies in the Middle East, the fast development of emerging countries, population growth, and climate change have led to fears of "civilization," "resource," and "environmental" wars. We have heard the New Middle Age theme before. In 1973, Italian writer Roberto Vacca famously suggested that mankind was about to enter an era of famine, nuclear war, and civilizational collapse. U.S. economist Robert Heilbroner made the same suggestion one year later. And in 1977, the great Australian political scientist Hedley Bull also

heralded such an age.[58] But the case for "new wars" remains as flimsy as it was in the 1970s.

Admittedly, there is a stronger role of religion in civil conflicts. The proportion of internal wars with a religious dimension was about 25 percent between 1940 and 1960, but 43 percent in the first years of the 21st century.[59] This may be an effect of the demise of traditional territorial conflict, but as seen above, this has not increased the number or frequency of wars at the global level. Over the past decade, neither Western governments nor Arab/Muslim countries have fallen into the trap of the clash of civilizations into which Osama bin Laden wanted to plunge them. And "ancestral hatreds" are a reductionist and unsatisfactory approach to explaining collective violence. Professor Yahya Sadowski concluded his analysis of post-Cold War crises and wars, *The Myth of Global Chaos*, by stating, "most of the conflicts around the world are not rooted in thousands of years of history—they are new and can be concluded as quickly as they started."[60]

The invasion of Kuwait may go down in history as being the last great resource war.

Future resource wars are unlikely. There are fewer and fewer conquest wars. Between the Westphalia peace and the end of World War II, nearly half of conflicts were fought over territory. Since the end of the Cold War, it has been less than 30 percent.[61] The invasion of Kuwait—a nationwide bank robbery—may go down in history as being the last great resource war. The U.S.-led intervention of 1991 was partly driven by the need to maintain the free flow of oil, but not by the temptation to capture it. (Nor was the 2003 war against Iraq motivated by oil.) As for the current tensions between the two Sudans over oil, they are the remnants of a civil war and an offshoot of a botched secession process, not a desire to control new resources.

China's and India's energy needs are sometimes seen with apprehension: in light of growing oil and gas scarcity, is there not a risk of military clashes over the control of such resources? This seemingly consensual idea rests on two fallacies. One is that there is such a thing as oil and gas scarcity, a notion challenged by many energy experts.[62] As prices rise, previously untapped reserves and non-conventional hydrocarbons become economically attractive. The other is that spilling blood is a rational way to access resources. As shown by the work of historians and political scientists such as Quincy Wright, the economic rationale for war has always been overstated. And because of globalization, it has become cheaper to buy than to steal. We no longer live in the world of 1941, when fear of lacking oil and raw materials was a key motivation for Japan's decision to go to

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war. In an era of liberalizing trade, many natural resources are fungible goods. (Here, Beijing behaves as any other actor: 90 percent of the oil its companies produce outside of China goes to the global market, not to the domestic one.)[63] There may be clashes or conflicts in regions in maritime resource-rich areas such as the South China and East China seas or the Mediterranean, but they will be driven by nationalist passions, not the desperate hunger for hydrocarbons.

Only in civil wars does the question of resources such as oil, diamonds, minerals, and the like play a significant role; this was especially true as Cold War superpowers stopped their financial patronage of local actors.[64] Indeed, as Mueller puts it in his appropriately titled *The Remnants of War*, "Many [existing wars] have been labeled 'new war,' 'ethnic conflict,' or, most grandly 'clashes of civilization.' But in fact, most...are more nearly opportunistic predation by packs, often remarkably small ones, of criminals, bandits, and thugs."[65] It is the *abundance* of resources, not their scarcity, which fuels such conflicts. The risk is particularly high when the export of natural resources represents at least a third of the country's GDP.[66]

What about fighting for arable land, in light of population growth in Africa and Asia? Even in situations of high population densities, the correlation between the lack of arable lands and propensity to collective violence remains weak.[67] Neo-Malthusians such as Jared Diamond believe that the Rwanda tragedy was driven by such scarcity.[68] But there was no famine in Rwanda at the time. And the events of 1994 were not a revolt of the poor: Hutu landowners were amongst the most active perpetrators of genocide. There was, however, a significant youth bulge: the 15–24 age group represented 38 percent of the adult population.[69] Land scarcity played a role, but at best as a factor explaining the intensity of the violence in some areas.[70]

As per "climate" or "environmental" wars, this author has demonstrated in a previous article in this journal that such notions are not solidly grounded.[71] Suffice it to say there is no evidence that global warming will lead to an increase in the number of conflicts. And if history is any guide, a warmer world may be, all things equal, a more peaceful one.

The End of War: Is It Different This Time?

It would be imprudent to predict the disappearance of war. As historian Donald Kagan famously wrote, "Over the past two centuries, the only thing more common than predictions about the end of war has been war itself."[72] At the dedication of the Peace Palace in The Hague, Andrew Carnegie predicted that the end of war was "as certain to come, and come soon, as day follows night."[73] The year was 1913. What *can* be predicted is that sometime in the coming decades, war will have become a marginal phenomenon.

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> War will not disappear, but at some point in the coming decades, it will become a marginal phenomenon.

There is no fatalism in large-scale collective violence. The Ecuadorian Huaorani tribe was one of the most violent societies ever identified—physical violence was the cause of more than 60 percent of adult deaths—until contact with civilization led them to change their way to resolve conflict and exercise justice.[74] Biologists and anthropologists disagree on the origins of violence and warfare, but agree that it is not inevitable.[75] If one accepts that development, democratization, and demographic transitions are long-term structural trends that will continue—and there is no reason why they should not, absent a global catastrophe—then the hypothesis of a terminal decline of war gains credence, and the world is likely to become ever more peaceful.

Of course, there will still be cyber-attacks, revolts, drone strikes, and large-scale human suffering. The democratic and demographic transitions of the coming decades will be painful, especially since aging developed countries might be less and less inclined to embark on massive and risky peacekeeping or stabilization operations. And the danger of major war in Asia or in the Middle East remains.

But massive, organized conflict is now an exceptional feature of human society, and is on the verge of becoming a historical relic. It may very well have disappeared by the end of the century. In his 2009 Nobel Lecture, President Obama stated, "We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes."[76] Probably not indeed. But perhaps in those of our grandchildren.

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