Embracing Threatlessness:
Reassessing US Military Spending and Exploring the Costa Rica Option

John Mueller
Ohio State University and Cato Institute
March 8, 2016

Prepared for presentation at the
National Convention of the International Studies Association
Atlanta, Georgia, March 19, 2016

John Mueller
Woody Hayes Senior Research Scientist, Mershon Center for International Security Studies
Adjunct Professor, Department of Political Science
Ohio State University, 1501 Neil Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43201 USA
Senior Fellow, Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001 USA
politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller
+1 614 247-6007 bbbb@osu.edu

ABSTRACT: The United States is substantially free from threats that require a great deal of military preparedness. There would be risk in extensively reducing the military, but experiences in Vietnam and Iraq suggest that there is risk as well in maintaining large forces-in-being that can be deployed with little notice and in an under-reflective, and often counter-productive, manner.

To begin with, it really seems time to consider the consequences of the fact that a conflict like World War II is extremely unlikely to recur. Spending a lot of money for an eventuality—or fantasy—of ever-receding likelihood is highly questionable. Some envision threat in China's rapidly-increasing prosperity. But, although its oft-stated desire to incorporate (or re-incorporate) Taiwan into its territory should be watched, armed conflict would be extremely—even overwhelmingly—costly to the country. And Chinese leaders, already rattled by internal difficulties, seem to realize this. Russia's recent assertiveness bears watching, but it does not suggest that the game has been crucially changed. It might make sense to maintain a containment and deterrent capacity against rogue states in formal or informal coalition with other concerned countries. However, the military requirements for the task are limited. Humanitarian intervention with military force is unlikely due to a low tolerance for casualties in such ventures, an increasing aversion to the costs of nation-building, and the lack of political gain from successful ventures. Concern about nuclear proliferation is overwrought: long experience suggests that when countries obtain the weapons, they "use" them only to stoke their national ego and to deter real or imagined threats. Europe seems to face no notable threats of a military nature, the Taiwan/China issue remains a fairly remote concern, and Israel's primary problems derive from the actions of sub-state groups. The military relevance of the terrorism "threat" has been substantially exaggerated, and it mainly calls for policing and intelligence work and perhaps for occasional focused strikes by small units.

It may be prudent to maintain some rapid-response forces and a small number of nuclear weapons as well as something of a capacity to rebuild quickly in the unlikely event that a sizable threat eventually materializes.

>Madeleine Albright, our American ambassador to the U.N., asked me in frustration, "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if you can't use it?" I thought I would have an aneurysm. America's GI's were not toy soldiers to be moved around on some sort of global game board.—Colin Powell[1]

>One way of keeping people out of trouble is to deny them the means for getting into it.—Bernard Brodie[2]

It is often said, even by many of his admirers, that at any one time Newt Gingrich will have 100 ideas of which five are pretty good. Falling into the latter category was his remark when running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 that "defense budgets shouldn't be a matter of politics. They shouldn't be a matter of playing games. They should be directly related to the amount of threat we have."[3]

After examining an important U.S. Defense Department policy document, Benjamin Friedman observes that rather than estimating the varying likelihood of potential national security threats and then coming up with recommendations on that basis following the Gingrich approach, it "contends simply that 'managing risk' compels the United States to prepare for all of them" while concluding that we should "retain the weapons and forces we have, with a few tweaks."[4]

Applying Gingrich's sensible test, this paper is, in contrast, determinedly "bottom-up." Instead of starting with things as they are and looking for places to trim, it assesses the threat environment—problems that lurk in current conditions and on the horizon.[5] Then, keeping both the risks and opportunities in mind, it considers which of these threats, if any, justify funding.

In *Overblown*, a book published in 2006, I argued that, with the benefit of hindsight, it certainly appears that "every foreign policy threat in the last several decades that has come to be accepted as significant has then eventually been unwisely exaggerated."[6] That is, alarmism, usually based on a worst case approach, has dominated thinking about security, a process that certainly seems to be continuing.

Greg Jaffe, Pentagon correspondent for the *Washington Post*, mused in 2012 that the alarmist narrative prevails: "no one is rushing to discuss the implications of a world that has

---

[1] Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 576

[2] Bernard Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Spring 1978), p. 81.

[3] PBS NewsHour, January 26, 2012.

[4] Benjamin H. Friedman, "The Terrible 'Ifs'," *Regulation*, Winter 2008, p. 35. As one former planner at the Pentagon puts it, the job "was to look for all the bad stuff. Scanning for threats is what we get paid to do." Greg Jaffe, "The world is safer. But no one in Washington can talk about it," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2012. On the dynamics of balancing threat, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). On evaluating threat, see A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer (eds.), *Threat Inflation: The Theory, Politics, and Psychology of Fear Mongering in the United States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

[5] On his 95% side, however, Gingrich does imagine many dire threats and dangers. John Mueller, "Newt Gingrich and the EMP Threat," nationalinterest.org, December 13, 2011.

[6] John Mueller, *Overblown* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 10.

grown safer."[7] And that condition has not changed. Gregory Daddis, a military historian at West Point, has looked over the 2015 National Security Strategy and notes that the document stresses the "risks of an insecure world" and the "persistent risk of attacks" suggesting that "we live in a dangerous world…one in which only vigilant nations—led, naturally, by the United States—preemptively rooting out evil can survive."[8] While this paper may not start the rush that Jaffe calls for, it may help to provide a useful first step.

Alarmists continue to exaggerate dangers that may still lurk, and there is a great deal of spending to confront security threats that, on more careful examination, seem to be of only very limited significance. Although there are clearly problem areas in the world, particularly the Middle East, it certainly appears that the United States and other countries in the developed world are, not unlike Costa Rica, substantially free from security threats that require a great deal of military preparedness.

There is risk, it must be acknowledged, in extensively reducing the American military as will be proposed below. However, this must be balanced against the risk attendant on maintaining large forces-in-being that can be impelled into action with little notice and in an under-reflective, and very often counter-productive, manner.[9]

Although the proposal here does concede that some small military and nuclear capacity should be retained to hedge against unlikely contingencies and that a capacity to rebuild should be retained, these would not necessarily be enough to deal with the very sudden emergence of another major threat—a Hitler on steroids. But it really seems that it is up to the alarmists to explain how such a sudden emergence could happen (it would have to be sudden because otherwise the United States would have time to rearm) and where it would come from. As Robert Jervis points out, "Hitlers are very rare."[10]

And, most importantly, this concern must be balanced against the fact that, if it had a very substantially reduced military, the United States would not be able to get into enormously costly military fiascos. Hans J. Morgenthau argues that arms are not the cause of war: "men do not fight because they have arms," but rather "they have arms because they deem it necessary to fight."[11] However, the opportunity a large and expensive military force provides decision-makers is suggested by the complaint registered to General Colin Powell by Madeleine Albright when she was the American ambassador to the UN as quoted at the top of this paper.

In this connection, one might compare the tumultuous and self-destructive overreaction to 9/11 with that to the worst terrorist event in the developed world before then, the downing of an Air India airliner departing a non-arrogant nation, Canada, in 1985. The crash killed 329 people, 280 of them Canadian citizens, and journalist Gwynne Dyer points out that, proportionate to population, the losses were almost exactly the same in the two cases. But continues Dyer, "here's what Canada didn't do: it didn't send troops into India to 'stamp out the roots of the terrorism'

---

[7] Jaffe, "The world is safer. But no one in Washington can talk about it."

[8] Gregory A. Daddis, "Afraid of Peace," *National Interest*, July/August 2015, p. 48. See also Micah Zenko and Michael A. Cohen, "Clear and Present Safety: The United States Is More Secure Than Washington Thinks," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2012.

[9] See also Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 11, ch. 4.

[10] Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 156.

[11] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 327.

and it didn't declare a 'global war on terror.' Partly because it lacked the resources for that sort of adventure, of course, but also because it would have been stupid."[12]

If the United States, like Canada in 1985, had not had the soldiers to move around on the global game board after 9/11, it might have employed responsive measures that were less likely to be self-destructive and more likely to have been more effective at far lower cost. And, of course, if it had had no military in 2003, it would never have initiated the Iraq War, and its treasury would now be trillions of dollars greater while several thousand Americans and over a hundred thousand Iraqis would still be alive.

Looking forward, if Japan and China do manage somehow to get into an armed conflict over who owns which tiny uninhabited island in the sea that separates them, a substantially unarmed America will have a good excuse for not getting involved.[13]

And looking back, had the country had no military in 1965, it could not have gone into Vietnam and the lives of 55,000 young Americans would not have been taken from them. Of course, the Communists might have taken over, but that seems to have happened anyway, and the losers and winners have since become quite chummy.

This consideration should be kept in mind as potential threats are assessed and evaluated in this paper.

The unimpressive achievements of the US military since 1945

Before evaluating the threats, real or potential, that may or may not lurk out there, and before tallying the funds necessary to confront the ones that do, it may be useful first to assess what the United States has been getting for the half-trillion dollars it expends on its military each year.

Its achievements since World War II, not to put too fine a point on it, have not been very impressive. For all its expense, the American military has won no ground wars in that period except ones in which the enemy substantially didn't exist. The enemy in Grenada (1983) was equipped with three vehicles, one of which was rented; Panama (1989) was run by easily-terrified thugs; and the Iraq army in the 1991 Gulf War had, as will also be discussed later, no strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, or morale, and was far smaller in size than prewar estimates.[14]

Much of this holds as well for what initially seemed to be military victory in Afghanistan and in Iraq (where it was exultantly, if briefly, labelled "mission accomplished"). Virtually no one seems to have been willing to fight for the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 perhaps because of its years of stifling and incompetent misrule and perhaps because of its successful efforts to eradicate the lucrative drug trade in the year previous. And Iraq's army in 2003 was in even worse shape than in 1991 and collapsed with even greater alacrity.[15] In both cases, however, the

---

[12] Gwynne Dyer, "The International Terrorist Conspiracy," gwynnedyer.com, June 2, 2006.

[13] See also Doug Bandow, "The Ultimate Irony: Is China the 'America' of Asia?" nationalinterest.org, May 27, 2015.

[14] On Grenada, see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Free Press, 1989; reprinted and updated edition, edupublisher.com, 2009), p. 195. On Panama, see John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 121. On the Gulf War, see John Mueller, "The Perfect Enemy: Assessing the Gulf War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn 1995), pp. 77-117.

[15] Mueller, *Remnants of War*, p. 138. On the monumental inadequacy and incompetence of the Iraq military

"mission accomplished" interregnum was brief because enemy forces subsequently regrouped (albeit in different ways), and violent chaos again descended on both countries.

Helped enormously by the alienation between jihadist marauders and Iraqi tribes, the US military was able for a while to bring civil warfare under some degree of control in Iraq—at a cost of over 1000 American lives.[16] But this soon fell apart, due in considerable measure to foolish, even vicious, decisions by the Iraqi government the US had created and left behind. In 2014, a militant group calling itself the Islamic State, or ISIL, but more generally known as ISIS, attacked Mosul, Iraq's second largest city with a small force that was planning to hold part of the city for a while in an effort, it seems, to free some prisoners. However, the defending Iraqi army, "trained" by the American military at enormous cost to US taxpayers, simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders even though it greatly outnumbered them—even taking into account the fact that many soldiers had purchased the right to avoid showing up for duty by paying half their salary to their commanders.[17]

Essentially the same thing happened in Afghanistan where in 2016 top American commanders were noting that, after a decade and a half of training by the US at enormous cost, the Afghan army was not ready, in part because it still "lacked effective leaders." To set things right would require the US to keep working at it for, variously, several more years, decades, or generations.[18]

In fact, during the current century American military policy, in its most dynamic aspects, has been an abject, and highly destructive, failure. Two misguided and failed wars of aggression and occupation have been launched in which trillions of dollars have been squandered and well over a hundred thousand people have perished, including more than twice as many Americans as were killed on 9/11. And there has also been a third war—the spillover one in Pakistan, which the United States has avidly promoted. Even though Pakistan receives $2-3 billion in American aid each year, large majorities of Pakistanis—74 percent in the most recent tally—have come to view the United States as an enemy.[19] As negative achievements go, that foreign policy development is a strong gold medal contender.

The closest to success was the 2011 intervention in Libya which involved bombing in support of a local rebellion.[20] However, after some initial gains, that, too, has proved to be a

---

and its leadership during the 2003 war, see George C. Wilson, "Why Didn't Saddam Defend His Country?" *National Journal*, April 19, 2003; David Zucchino, "Iraq's Swift Defeat Blamed on Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 2003; Thom Shanker, "Regime Thought War Unlikely Iraqis Tell U.S. *New York Times*, February 12, 2004; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006).

[16] Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

[17] Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman. "How Mosul Fell." Special Report, Reuters, 2014. graphics.thomsonreuters.com/14/10/MIDEAST-CRISIS:GHARAWI.pdf

[18] Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "The U.S. was supposed to leave Afghanistan by 2017. Now it might take decades," *Washington Post*, January 26, 2016.

[19] Pew Research Center, Pakistani Public Opinion Ever More Critical of U.S.: 74% Call America an Enemy, PewResearch Global Attitudes Study, June 27, 2012, available at http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/27/pakistani-public-opinion-ever-more-critical-of-u-s/.

[20] See Karl P. Mueller (ed.), *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

debacle for Libya's putative liberators. Moreover, the venture involved essentially turning on Muammar Gaddafi, a rouge who had come in from the cold in the preceding decade and had become something of a supporter.[21] This foolish move that likely will make it more difficult to remove tyrants in the future.[22]

Assessing the threats

It is important, then, to examine the array of threats that the failure-plagued US military is designed to deal with. If, in Gingrich's words, defense budgets "should be directly related to the amount of threat we have," what, and how dire, is the threat?

Major war

A sensible place to begin an evaluation of the security threat environment is with an examination of the prospects for a major war among developed countries, one like World War II.

As Christopher Fettweis has argued, it really seems time to consider the consequences of the fact that leading or developed countries, reversing the course of several millennia, no longer envision major war as a sensible method for resolving their disputes.[23] Although there is no physical reason why such a war cannot recur, it has become fairly commonplace to regard such wars as obsolescent, if not completely obsolete.[24]

Europe, once the most warlike of continents, has taken the lead in this. By May 15, 1984, European countries had substantially managed to remain at peace with each other for the longest continuous stretch of time since the days of the Roman Empire.[25] That rather amazing record has now been further extended, and today one has to go back more than two millennia to find a longer period in which the Rhine remained uncrossed by armies with hostile intent.[26]

"All historians agree," observed Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace* in 1869, "that states express their conflicts in wars" and "that as a direct result of greater or lesser success in war the

---

[21] Ray Takeyh, "The Rogue Who Came in From the Cold," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2001, pp. 62-72.

[22] On this issue, see, in particular, Paul R. Pillar, "The Terrorist Consequences of the Libyan Intervention," nationalinterest.org, March 23, 2011.

[23] Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

[24] For an early examination of this proposition, see Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*. See also Ray, James Lee Ray, "The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War," *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 405-39.

[25] Paul Schroeder, "Does Murphy's Law Apply to History?" *Wilson Quarterly*, New Years 1985, p. 88. The previous record, he noted, was chalked up during the period from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the effective beginning of the Crimean War in 1854. The period between the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914—marred, however, by a major war in Asia between Russia and Japan in 1904—was an even longer era of peace among major European countries. That record was broken on November 8, 1988. See also Evan Luard, *War in International Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 395-99; James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?: The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011), pp. 249-51.

[26] Bradford de Long, **"**Let Us Give Thanks (Wacht am Rhein Department)," November 12, 2004 www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable_type/2004-2_archives/000536.html

political strength of states and nations increases or decreases."[27] Whatever historians may currently think, this notion, it certainly appears, has become substantially passé. Prestige now comes not from prowess in armed conflict, but from economic progress, maintaining a stable and productive society, and, for many, putting on a good Olympics or sending a rocket to the moon.

The Cold War did supply a set of crises and peripheral wars that engaged leading countries from time to time, and it was commonly envisioned that disaster would inevitably emerge from the rivalry. For example, historian John Lewis Gaddis observes that *no one* at the summit of foreign policy in 1950 anticipated most of the major international developments that were to take place in the next half-century. Among these: "that there would be no World War" and that the United States and the Soviet Union, "soon to have tens of thousands of thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another, would agree tacitly never to use any of them."[28] However, the potential absence of a further world war, whether nuclear or not, was compatible with the fairly obvious observation that those running world affairs after World War II were the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who had tried desperately to prevent that cataclysm. It was entirely plausible that such people, despite their huge differences on many issues, might well manage to keep themselves from plunging into a self-destructive repeat performance.[29] Although this perspective was not, of course, the only possible one, there was no definitive way to dismiss it, and it should accordingly have been on the table. But it seems not to have been.

And that sort of alarmist and monochromatic perspective continued throughout the Cold War. Thus, political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau declared in 1979: "In my opinion the world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable to survive for long."[30] At about the same time, John Hackett penned the distinctly non-prescient *The Third World War: August 1985*.[31]

---

[27] New York: Norton, 1966, p. 1145.

[28] John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 403. For the unpleasant suggestion that, if *no one* anticipated this distinct possibility in 1950, the U.S. might have been better served if those running foreign policy had been replaced by coin-flipping chimpanzees who would at least occasionally get it right from time to time out of sheer luck, see John Mueller, "History and Nuclear Rationality," nationalinterest.org, November 19, 2012.

[29] On this issue, see John Mueller, "The Bomb's Pretense as Peacemaker," *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 1985; John Mueller, The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World. *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 1988), pp. 55-79; Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*; John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), ch. 5; John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 3.

[30] Quoted admiringly, Francis Anthony Boyle, *World Politics and International Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), p. 73. See also Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 25.

[31] New York: Macmillan, 1979. On such predictions, see Dan Gardner, *Future Babble: Why Expert Predictions Fail—and Why We Believe Them Anyway* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

Such alarmist anxieties obviously proved to be over-wrought, but during their run they inspired an extended exercise in what Robert Johnson has called "nuclear metaphysics."[32] In this it was assumed that the Soviet Union needed to deterred from launching a major war. However, it seems clear that, although the USSR and other Communist states did subscribe to an aggressive agenda that involved support for class warfare and revolutionary civil war around the world, it was extremely wary of any experience that might lead to anything like the Second World War. The ideology never envisioned direct Hitler-style warfare, whether nuclear or not, as a sensible method for pursuing the process of world revolution, and, insofar as it embraced violence, it focused on class warfare, revolutionary upheaval, and subversion. As Robert 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."[33] And Vojtech Mastny concludes 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."[34] That is, the extravagant alarmism that inspired the Cold War arms race was essentially based on nonsense. In the process, however, the United States spent somewhere between 5.5 and 10 trillion dollars on nuclear weapons and delivery systems—enough to purchase everything (or about half of everything) in the country except for the land.[35] All this, primarily to confront, to deter, and to make glowering and menacing faces at, a perceived threat of direct military aggression that, essentially, didn't exist.

Two decades after the cold war, the outlays continue to be laid out even though it is even less clear what relevant dangers remain out there that could possibly justify such expenditures. Even if one still thinks that such thinking during the Cold War was correctly focused on a potential cause of major war, that specific impetus no longer exists.

Reflecting on the phenomenon, military and diplomatic historian Michael Howard mused in 1991 that it had become "quite possible that war in the sense of major, organised armed conflict between highly developed societies may not recur, and that a stable framework for international order will become firmly established." Two years later, the military historian and analyst, John Keegan, concluded that the kind of war he was principally considering could well be in terminal demise: "War, it seems to me, after a lifetime of reading about the subject, mingling with men of war, visiting the sites of war and observing its effects, may well be ceasing to commend itself to human beings as a desirable or productive, let alone rational, means of reconciling their discontents." By the end of the century, Mary Kaldor was suggesting that "The barbarity of war between states may have become a thing of the past," and by the beginning of the new one, Jervis had concluded that war among the leading states "will not occur in the

---

[32] Robert Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

[33] Robert Jervis, "Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?" *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 2001), p. 59.

[34] Vojtech Mastny, "Introduction," in Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtsmark, and Andreas Wenger (eds.), *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3. See also Stephen E. Ambrose, "Secrets of the Cold War," *New York Times*, December 27, 1990. For a full discussion, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, ch. 3.

[35] Richard Rhodes, *Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 306.

future," or, in the words of Jeffrey Record, may have "disappeared altogether." In 2005, John Lewis Gaddis labeled war among major states an "anachronism."[36]

World War III, then, continues to be the greatest nonevent in human history.[37] Or, as Jervis puts it, "the turning off" of the fear of, and the preparation for, war among leading countries "is the greatest change in international politics that we have ever seen."[38]

And that condition seems very likely to persist. There have been wars throughout history, of course, but the remarkable absence of the species' worst expression for nearly three-quarters of a century (and counting) strongly suggests that realities may have changed, and perhaps permanently. Indeed, in the last decades, as Figure 1 documents, international war even outside the developed world has become quite a rarity: there has been only one war since 1989 that fits cleanly into the classic model in which two states have it out over some issue of mutual dispute, in this case territory: the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.[39] (The Ukrainian conflict of 2014 is discussed later.)

Accordingly it may be time to consider that spending a lot of money preparing for an eventuality—or fantasy—that is of ever-receding likelihood is a highly questionable undertaking.

The rise of China

The remarkable absence of major war, some suggest, may be punctured some day by the rise of a challenger country, particularly China, a country that has now, by most estimates,

---

[36] Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 176. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 59. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), p. 5. Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (March 2002), p. 1. Jeffrey Record, "Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War," *Parameters*, Summer 2002, p. 6. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 262. See also Luard, *War in International Society*; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Andrew Mack, *Human Security Report 2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 523; Nils Petter Gleditsch, "The Liberal Moment Fifteen Years On," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 691–712; Fettweis, *Dangerous Times?*; John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), ch. 3; Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature*; Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Dutton, 2011); John Horgan, *The End of War* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012); Azar Gat, "Is war declining—and why?" *Journal of Peace Research* 50(2) 2012, pp. 149-157; Zenko and Cohen, "Clear and Present Safety," p. 83; Graham Allison, "2014: Good Year for a Great War?" nationalintererest.org, January 1, 2014. For a contrary view, see Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

[37] Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 3.

[38] Robert Jervis, "Force in Our Times," *International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 412.

[39] Notes Jervis, "War among developing countries is not likely to become unthinkable, but it may nevertheless be quite rare. "Force in Our Times," p. 412. By the definitions used by the data compilers for Figure 1, the fighting in Afghanistan is considered a civil war, and conflicts involving Israel are between a government and sub-state groups, not between two governments. Initially the compilers registered the conflict in Iraq as an international one, but they have now coded only the war in 2003 as being international in character with the armed conflict in the ensuing years considered to be a civil one.

entered the developed world. In a globalized economy, it is of course better for just about everyone if China (or Japan or Brazil or India or Russia or any other country) becomes more prosperous—for one thing, they can now buy more stuff overseas (including debt). However, eschewing such economic logic, there has been a notable tendency to envision threat in China's rapidly-increasing wealth on the grounds that it will likely invest a considerable amount in military hardware and will come to feel impelled to target the United States or to carry out undesirable military adventures somewhere.[40]

This line of thought has something of a recent precedent. Japan's impressive economic rise in the late 1980s led to a somewhat similar alarmism, culminating in another decidedly non-prescient book, *The Coming War With Japan*, published in 1991.[41] Applying something like the same thought processes to China, the alarmed effectively seem to suggest that it is better for developed countries if China, and presumably the rest of the world, were to continue to wallow in poverty.

China's oft-stated desire to incorporate (or re-incorporate) Taiwan into its territory and its apparent design on other offshore areas do create problems—though the intensity of the Taiwan issue seems to have faded some in recent years.[42] World leaders elsewhere should sensibly keep their eyes on this because it could conceivably lead to armed conflict for which American military forces might appear relevant. But it is also conceivable, and far more likely, that the whole problem will be worked out over the course of time without armed conflict. The Chinese strongly stress that their perspective on this issue is very long-term, that they have a historic sense of patience, and that they have reached agreement with Russia on their northern border, giving up some territory on which they had historical claims. In time, if China becomes a true democracy, Taiwan might even join up voluntarily and, failing that, some sort of legalistic face-saving agreement might eventually be worked out.

Above all, China has become a trading state, in Richard Rosecrance's phrase.[43] Its integration into the world economy and its increasing dependence on it for economic development and for the consequent acquiescence of the Chinese people are likely to keep the country reasonable. Armed conflict would be extremely—even overwhelmingly—costly to the country, and, in particular, to the regime in charge. And Chinese leaders, already rattled by internal difficulties, seem to realize this. The best bet, surely, is that this condition will essentially hold.

Aaron Friedberg is quite concerned about "balancing" against China. He warns rather extravagantly (and inspecifically) that "if we permit an illiberal China to displace us as the preponderant player in this most vital region, we will face grave dangers to our interests and our values throughout the world" and that "if Beijing comes to believe that it can destroy U.S. forces and bases in the Western Pacific in a first strike, using only conventional weapons," there is "a chance" that it might "someday try to do so." However, even he concludes that China is

---

[40] For example: John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *National Interest*, Jan/Feb 2011, p. 33. Stephen M. Walt, "Explaining Obama's Asia Policy," foreignpolicy.com, November 18, 2011.

[41] George Friedman and Meredith LeBard, *The Coming War with Japan* (New York: St Martin's, 1991). On this issue, see also Mueller, *Overblown*, pp. 109-111.

[42] Scott L. Kastner, "Is the Taiwan Strait Still a Flash Point? Rethinking the Prospects for Armed Conflict between China and Taiwan," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Winter 2015/16), pp. 54-92.

[43] Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Conquest and Commerce in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

"unlikely to engage in outright military conquest," and he notes that "it is important to remember that both China's political elites and its military establishment would approach the prospect of war with the United States with even more than the usual burden of doubt and uncertainty," that "the present generation of party leaders has no experience of war, revolution, or military service," and that the Chinese army "has no recent history of actual combat." Moreover, "even if it could somehow reduce its reliance on imported resources, the vitality of the Chinese economy will continue to depend on its ability to import and export manufactured products by sea"—something, obviously, that an armed conflict (or even the nearness of one) would greatly disrupt.[44]

In addition, many analysts point to a great many domestic problems that are likely to arrest the attention of the Chinese leaders in future years. Among them: slackening economic growth, endemic corruption, a brain drain to west, major environmental degradation, an inadequate legal system, and the widespread nature of domestic opposition with particular concerns about Muslim rebellion in the western part of the country.

There is also a danger of making the issue into a threat by treating it as such, by refusing to consider the unlikelihood as well as the consequences of worst case scenario fantasizing, and by engaging in endless metaphysical talk about "balancing." In this respect, special consideration should be given to the observation that, as one scholar puts it, "although China looks like a powerhouse from the outside, to its leaders it looks fragile, poor, and overwhelmed by internal problems." Provocative "balancing" talk, especially if military showmanship accompanies it, has the potential to be wildly counterproductive. In this respect, special heed should be paid to the warning that "historically, rising powers cause war not necessarily because they are innately belligerent, but because the reigning powers mishandle those who challenge the status quo."[45] Moreover, China's efforts at geopolitical assertiveness with its neighbors in recent years have often been counterproductive, and Chinese leaders seem to realize this.[46]

John Mearsheimer criticizes what he calls "the U.S. commitment to global dominance since the Cold War" which, he concludes, "has had huge costs and brought few benefits." He also worries that the country could be transforming itself into a "national-security state." Nonetheless, he deems it important that the US remain "the most powerful country on the planet" by "making sure a rising China does not dominate Asia in the same way the United States dominates the Western hemisphere." This he considers to be one of a very few "core strategic interests" for which the country should "use force."[47]

Actually, it is not clear in what way the US "dominates" the Western hemisphere—except perhaps economically. The country's neighbors do not seem to quake in fear of America's

---

[44] Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011), pp. 7-8, 275, 279.

[45] Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 255, 261. See also Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Why the U.S. Military Budget is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," *Orbis*, Spring 2012, pp. 181-82; Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino, "Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory**,"** *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 389-410.

[46] Robert S. Ross, "Chinese Nationalism and Its Discontents," *National Interest*, November-December 2011. See also Shirk, *China*, p. 190; Alastair Ian Johnson, "How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Spring 2013), pp. 7-48,

[47] John J. Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," *National Interest*, January/February 2014, pp. 12, 26, 30.

nuclear weapons or of the prowess of its Marines (whose record in Latin America during the last century was less than stunning). But their attention can be arrested if the US credibly threatens to stop buying their sugar, coffee, oil, bananas, or beer. It is in that sense that China may someday come to "dominate" Asia. But the clear implication of Mearsheimer's perspective is that American military power should be applied to keep that from coming to be. A mimimally-armed US wouldn't be so tempted.

From time to time, China may be emboldened to throw its weight around in its presumed "area of influence." But it does not seem to harbor Hitler-style ambitions about extensive conquest as even Friedman acknowledges. Such weight-throwing (much of it rather childish in character) is unpleasant to watch, as well as counter-productive to China's economic goals.[48] But it seems unlikely that the maintenance of a huge and costly military force by the distant United States will be a credible deterrent to such behavior because there is likely to be little enthusiasm for sending large numbers of combatant troops abroad to directly confront limited effronteries.

Nor could a large force in being halt Hitlerian conquest in its neighborhood by China in the wildly unlikely event that the country decides to carry out such an economically self-destructive act. In that event, a substantially disarmed United States would, as it did with Japan in the early 1940s, have years to rearm in the even more unlikely event that it decides to wage World War III to turn back the expansion. More likely would be a campaign of military and economic harassment and of supporting local resistance (for example in Vietnam) to Chinese rule, something that does not require having huge forces in place and at the ready to respond when the conquest takes place.[49]

Russian assertiveness

The notion that a major war among developed countries is wildly unlikely is also challenged by the experience of the armed dispute between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2014. It resulted in the peaceful, if extortionary, transfer of Crimea from Ukraine to Russia and then in a sporadic civil war in Ukraine in which secessionist groups in the east were supported by Russia.

Obviously, this is an unsettling development. However, unlike Hitler's acquisition of the Sudetenland in 1938, it does not seem to be a prologue to major war. It is impressive that United States and Western Europe never even come close to seriously considering the use of direct force to deal with the issue—that is, they would have behaved much the same way even if they did not

---

[48] See also Bandow, "Ulitimate Irony." To A. A. Milne, the Fashoda affair of 1898 was an incident in which the British and the French almost got into a war over "a mosquito-ridden swamp" in Africa. When someone soberly countered that "at stake was whether France should be allowed to draw a barrier of French influence across the English area of influence," Milne was catapulted into peak form: "A war about it, costing a million lives, would have seemed quite in order to the two Governments; a defensive war, of course, a struggle for existence, with God fighting on both sides in that encouraging way He has. A pity it didn't come off, when it had been celebrated already in immortal verse. *Tweedledum and Tweedledee/Agreed to have a battle,/For Tweedledum said Tweedledee/Had spoilt his nice new rattle.* 'Only it isn't really a rattle,' said Tweedledum importantly, 'it's an Area of Influence! There's glory for you!' 'I don't think I know what an Area of Influence is,' said Alice doubtfully. 'Silly,' said Tweedledee, 'it's a thing you have a battle about, of course.' 'Like a rattle,' explained Tweedledum." *Peace With Honour* (New York: Dutton, 1935), pp. 222-23.

[49] That such a strategy might have been used against the Japanese after Pearl Harbor, see Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm*, ch. 7.

possess their great and expensive military capacity. And, counter to early alarmist concerns, Russia's Vladimir Putin has not been inspired by the Ukrainian development to push further on his periphery, at least militarily. Parallels with the situation in Europe in the 1930s were repeatedly drawn during the 2014 crisis. However, one key missing element in the comparison was Adolf Hitler without whom the war in Europe would likely never have taken place.[50]

Russia's recent experience in the Ukraine conflict and crisis suggests an additional consideration. Countries cannot engage in such enterprises without paying a substantial economic price (a lesson not likely to be lost on the Chinese). Because of its antics, Russia has suffered a substantial decline in the value of its currency, a decline in its stock market, a decline in foreign investment, and, perhaps most importantly, a very substantial drop in confidence by investors, buyers, and sellers throughout the world, a condition that is likely to last for years, even decades.[51] As part of this, its behavior has set off a determined effort by Europeans to reduce their dependence on Russian energy supplies—a change that could be permanent.

Other economic costs, like sanctions, have been visited intentionally by other states, or, like the drop in oil prices, have mainly occurred for other reasons. And the costs of the conflict itself, and of making its new dependencies something other than a long-term economic drain have been visited by Russia on itself.

But it is important to note that a substantial portion of the punishment Russia has received for its venture has, like the nuclear doomsday machine, been visited automatically—in this case, by the international market. Russia may be willing to bear that cost, but its awareness of the longer term costs of—and perhaps its disillusion with—its new conquests is likely to increase with time. Thus far at least, the Ukrainian venture, contrary to much initial speculation, does not seem to be a game-changer.[52]

More recently, Russia has become militarily involved in the disastrous civil war in Syria. However, this scarcely is an exercise in threatening expansion. For the most part, Russia is working with the United States to bring about a lasting cease fire in the war and to seek to stabilize the situation—although many policy differences remain about how to get there.[53]

Rogue states

Over the course of the last several decades, alarmists have often focused on potential dangers presented by "rogue states," as they came to be called in the 1990s. These were led by such devils du jour as Nasser, Sukarno, Castro, Gaddafi, Khomeini, Kim Il-Sung, Saddam Hussein, and Ahmadinijad, all of whom have since faded into history's dustbin.[54]

---

[50] On this issue, see Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, ch. 4; Mueller, *Remnants of War*, pp. 54-65.

[51] See, for example, Richard Galpin, "Russians count the cost a year after Crimea annexation," BBC News, March 20, 2015; Anna Nemtsova, "How Crimea Crashed the Russian Economy," thedailybeast.com, December 17, 2014; Anna Nemtsova, "Can Putin Afford to Keep East Ukraine?" thedailybeast.com, July 25, 2015.

[52] See also Doug Bandow, "Why on Earth Would Russia Attack the Baltics?" nationalinterest.org, February 7, 2016; Stephen Kinzer, "The Inestimable Importance of Strategic Depth," *Boston Globe*, March 5, 2016.

[53] On this situation, see Stephen Kinzer, "On Syria: Thank you, Russia! *Boston Globe*, February 13, 2016.

[54] Mueller, *Overblown*, pp. 100-11. On the much overwrought anxieties in the early 1960s that envisioned China as the ultimate rogue, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 95-97; Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

Today the alarm has been directed at Iran and also at North Korea, the most pathetic state on the planet. Except in what Bernard Brodie once labeled "worst-case fantasies" however, neither country really threatens to commit major direct military aggression—Iran, in fact, has eschewed the practice for several centuries.[55]

Nonetheless, it might make some sense to maintain a capacity to institute containment and deterrence efforts carried out in formal or informal coalition with concerned neighboring countries—and there are quite a few of these in each case. However, the military requirements for effective containment by their neighbors, by the United States, and by the broader world community are far from monumental and do not necessarily require the United States to maintain large forces in being for the remote eventuality.

This is suggested by the experience with the Gulf War of 1991 when military force was successfully applied to deal with a rogue venture—the conquest by Saddam Hussein's Iraq of neighboring Kuwait. It certainly appears, to begin with, that Iraq's pathetic forces—lacking strategy, tactics, defenses, leadership, and morale—needed the large force thrown at them in 1991 to decide to withdraw.[56] In addition, in a case like that, countries do not need to have a large force-in-being because there would be plenty of time to build one up should other measures, such as economic sanctions and diplomatic forays, fail to persuade the attacker to withdraw.

It should also be pointed out that Iraq's invasion was rare to the point of being unique: it was the only case since World War II in which one United Nations country has invaded another with the intention of incorporating it into its own territory.[57]

Proliferation

For decades there has been almost wall-to-wall alarm about the dangers supposedly inherent in nuclear proliferation.

However, the proliferation of nuclear weapons has been far slower than has been commonly predicted over the decades primarily because the weapons do not generally convey much advantage to their possessor.

And, more importantly, the effect of the proliferation that has taken place has been substantially benign: those who have acquired the weapons have "used" them simply to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats.[58] The holds even for the proliferation of the weapons to large, important countries run by unchallenged monsters who at the time they acquired the bombs were certifiably deranged: Josef Stalin who in 1949 was planning to change the climate of the Soviet Union by planting a lot of trees, and Mao Zedong who in 1964 had just

---

[55] Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," p. 68.

[56] On this issue, see Mueller, "The Perfect Enemy." As noted there (p. 78), the intelligence failure in the Gulf War is suggested in General Norman Schwarzkopf's postwar observation, "We certainly did not expect it to go this way." In contrast: John Mearsheimer, "Liberation in Less Than a Week," *New York Times*, February 8, 1991.

[57] On this issue more generally, see Mark Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 215-50.

[58] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chs. 7-11; John Mueller "'At All Costs': The Destructive Consequences of Antiproliferation Policy," in Henry Sokolski (ed.), *Stopping the Bomb's Further Spread: Should We Bother?* forthcoming. See also Jacques E. C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

carried out a bizarre social experiment that had resulted in artificial famine in which tens of millions of Chinese perished.[59]

Despite this experience, an aversion to nuclear proliferation continues to impel alarmed concern, and it was a chief motivator of the Iraq War which essentially was a militarized antiproliferation effort. The war proved to be a necessary cause of the deaths of more people than were inflicted at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.[60]

The subsequent and consequent Iraq syndrome strongly suggests there will be little incentive to apply military force to prevent, or to deal with, further putative proliferation. Thus, despite nearly continuous concern—even at times hysteria—about nuclear developments in North Korea and Iran, proposals to use military force (particularly boots on the ground) to deal with these developments have been persistently undercut. Particularly after the experience of the anti-proliferation Iraq war (which did, despite the attendant disasters, prevent Iraq from going nuclear), it scarcely seems likely that huge forces-in-being are going to be necessary to deal with the proliferation problem even though almost everybody considers it to be a major security concern. What seems to be required in these cases, as generally with the devils du jour of the Cold War era, is judicious, watchful, and wary patience.

Terrorism

Any threat presented by international terrorism has been massively inflated in the retelling.[61]

---

[59] On Stalin's mental condition, see Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, p. 123. On Mao: Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker & Co, 2010).

[60] However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous thirteen years, that country had suffered under economic sanctions visited upon it by both Democratic and Republican administrations that were designed to force Saddam from office (and, effectively, from life since he had no viable sanctuary elsewhere) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones. Multiple, although disputed, studies have concluded that the sanctions were the necessary cause of hundreds of thousands of deaths in the country, most of them children under the age of five—the most innocent of civilians. Richard Garfield, *Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 to 1998*, South Bend, IN: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, 1999. John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "The Methodology of Mass Destruction: Assessing Threats in the New World Order," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2000), pp. 163-187. Matt Welch, "The Politics of Dead Children, *Reason*, March 2002, pp. 53-58. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 138-39. Mohamed M. Ali, John Blacker, and Gareth Jones, "Annual mortality rates and excess deaths of children under five in Iraq, 1991-1998," *Population Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2003, pp. 217-226. Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), Ch. 5. However, for the argument, based on later intelligence, that high estimates of a half-million or more child deaths are likely exaggerated due in particular to regime manipulation of the numbers, see Michael Spagat, "Truth and death in Iraq under sanctions," *Significance*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 2010, pp. 116-20.

[61] On this issue, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), especially chs. 1, 3, and 4. On raising the seeming importance and deadliness of terrorism by conflating it with insurgency, see John Mueller and Mark Stewart, "Conflating Terrorism and Insurgency," lawfare.com, February 28, 2016.

Al-Qaeda. The chief demon group, al-Qaeda, consists of perhaps a hundred or two people who, judging from information obtained in Osama bin Laden's lair when he was murdered in May 2011, are primarily occupied by dodging drone missile attacks, complaining about the lack of funds, and watching a lot of pornography.[62]

It seems increasingly likely that the reaction to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, was greatly disproportionate to the real threat al-Qaeda has ever actually presented. On 9/11, a miserable, ridiculous, tiny group of men—a fringe group of a fringe group—with grandiose visions of its own importance managed, heavily because of luck, to pull off by far the most destructive terrorist act in history. There has been a general reluctance to maintain that such a monumental event could have been pulled off by a trivial group, and there has consequently been a massive tendency to inflate the group's importance and effectiveness.[63] At the preposterous extreme, the remnants of the tiny group have even been held to present a threat that is "existential." Yet, even though some 300 million foreigners enter the United States legally every year, virtually no foreign al-Qaeda operative has been able to infiltrate.[64]

Affiliated groups. Terrorist groups variously connected to al-Qaeda may be able to do intermittent mischief in war zones in the Middle East and in Africa, but likely nothing that is sustained or focused enough to inspire the application of military force by the United States in the wake of it experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Overall, until the rise of ISIS, extremist Islamist terrorism claimed some 200-400 lives yearly worldwide outside of war zones, about the same as bathtub drownings in the United States.[65]

Moreover, the groups seem, for now at least, to be overwhelmingly focused on local issues, not on international projection.[66]

Unaffiliated groups: ISIS. One of the most remarkable phenomena of the last few years is the way ISIS, the vicious insurgent group in Iraq and Syria, has captured and exercised the imagination of the public in Western countries.

---

[62] Greg Miller, "Bin Laden Documents Reveal Strain, Struggle in al-Qaida," *Washington Post*, July 1, 2011. Scott Shane, "Pornography Is Found in Bin Laden Compound Files, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, May 13, 2011. See also John Mueller, "The Truth about Al-Qaeda: Bin Laden's Files Revealed the Terrorists in Dramatic Decline," foreignaffairs.com, August 2, 2011; David Ignatius, "The Bin Laden Plot to Kill President Obama," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2012; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*; Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[63] For rare, perhaps unique, questionings of the tendency in the early years after 9/11, see John Mueller, "Harbinger or Aberration?" *National Interest*, Fall 2002, pp. 45-50; Russell Seitz, "Weaker Than We Think," *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004. See also Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[64] John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 81-110. See also Mueller, *Overblown*, ch. 8; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 4.

[65] For an extended discussion, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 2; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*.

[66] Peter Bergen, "Hyping the terror threat," cnn.com, December 3, 2013.

Americans had remained substantially unmoved by even worse human catastrophes in the past such as genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and in Rwanda in 1994, as well as sustained criminal predation in eastern Congo in the years after 1997. But, triggered by a set of web-cast beheadings of Americans in the late summer and fall of 2014, some 60 or 70 percent of the American public came to deems ISIS to present a major security threat to the United States.

A similar phenomenon has taken place in Europe. In the Czech Republic, for example, the public has come to view Islamist terrorism to be the country's top security threat even though it has never experienced a single such episode.

Outrage at the tactics of ISIS is certainly justified. But fears that it presents a worldwide security threat are not. Its numbers are small, and it has differentiated itself from al-Qaeda in that it does not seek primarily to target the "far enemy," preferring instead to carve out a state in the Middle East for itself, mostly killing fellow Muslims who stand in its way. In the process, it has alienated virtually all outside support and, by holding territory, presents an obvious and clear target to military opponents.[67]

One major fear has been that foreign militants who had gone to fight with ISIS would be trained and then sent back to do damage in their own countries. However, there has been virtually none of that in the United States. In part, this is because, as Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro detail, report, foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions), often become disillusioned especially by in-fighting in the ranks, and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home.[68] It might also be added that ISIS videos exultantly show foreign fighters burning their passports to demonstrate their terminal commitment to the cause—hardly a good idea if they want to return.

More recently, the focus of alarm shifted from potential returnees to potential homegrown terrorists who might be inspired by ISIS' propaganda or example. However, ISIS does not even have to exist to be inspirational. And, as terrorism specialist Max Abrams notes, "lone wolves have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist incidents over the last four decades."[69]

There has also been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media. However, as Byman and Shapiro and others have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill out their aspirations and their often-childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.[70]

---

[67] Ramzy Mardini, "The Islamic State Threat Is Overstated," washingtonpost.com, September 12, 2014.

[68] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Policy Paper 34, November 2014. See also Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists* (New York: Crown, 2016), pp. 258-61.

[69] Max Abrahms, "Fear of 'Lone Wolf' Misplaced," *Baltimore Sun*, January 5, 2011.

[70] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro. "We Shouldn't Stop Terrorists from Tweeting," washingtonpost.com, October 9, 2014; Byman and Shapiro, "Be Afraid;" Risa A. Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat?" *International Security,* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Fall 2011), pp. 7–47; David C. Benson, "Why the Internet Is Not Increasing Terrorism," *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2014), pp. 293-328; Ronald Bailey, "The Internet Does Not Increase Terrorism: Most terrorism takes place in Internet-free zones," reason.com, November 28, 2014; Gerges, *Rise and Fall*, p. 192.

The atomic terrorist. There has also been perpetual alarm about nuclear terrorism. President Barack Obama, in agreement with many, urged in a speech on April 11, 2010, that "The single biggest threat to U.S. security, short term, medium term and long term, would be the possibility of a terrorist organization obtaining a nuclear weapon." Given the decidedly limited capabilities of terrorists, this concern seems to be substantially overwrought.[71] However, even if this is taken to be a major threat, maintaining a large military force-in-being scarcely is the remedy.

Responding to terrorism. In general, it seems that Jervis has it right when he observes that "the common placement of terrorism at the top of the list of threats" stems in part "from a security environment that is remarkably benign."[72]

To the degree that terrorism requires a response, it is one that calls not for large military operations, but for policing and intelligence work and perhaps for occasional focused strikes conducted by small units. The main military efforts to deal with terrorism have been the ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both of these were much disproportionate to the supposed danger presented, and they have been, in their own terms, and in the long run, very considerable failures. In result, that kind of military approach to terrorism has been substantially discredited.[73]

In addition, efforts to deal with the dangers of atomic terrorism mainly require policing and intelligence, international cooperation on locking up and cataloging fissile material, and sting operations to disrupt illicit nuclear markets.

Policing wars

One possible use of American military forces in the future would be to deploy them to police destructive civil wars or to depose regimes that, either out of incompetence of viciousness, are harming their own people in a major way.

The record. Most international law authorities agree that, if such actions are mandated by the Security Council of the United Nations, they are legal and acceptable.[74] And, indeed, more than twenty military interventions or policing wars have been carried out (with or without UN approval) by individual countries or by coalitions of them since the end of the Cold War. Table 1 provides a summary accounting.

For the most part, however, civil warfare and vicious regimes have not actually inspired a great deal of alarm in the developed world except when they seem to present a direct threat—as in the cases of some rogue states and in the cases of al-Qaeda and ISIS. To a degree, the wars in

---

[71] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chs. 12-15. See also Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Why States Won't Give Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists," *International* Security, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Summer 2013), pp. 80-104. For a different perspective, see Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004).
[72] Jervis, "Force in Our Times," p. 411.
[73] Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 3.
[74] Christine Gray, "From Unity to Polarization: International Law and the Use of Force against Iraq," *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 3-7. See also Mueller, *Remnants of War*, ch. 7.

Yugoslavia of the 1990s might also be included: alarmists were given, incorrectly, to envisioning the widespread expansion of such "ethnic" armed conflicts.[75]

All of these interventions in Table 1 were successful in the short term. Moreover, most were successful in the longer term in that they ended civil conflicts and/or deposed contemptible regimes at low cost after which the intervening forces withdrew in short, or fairly short, order, turning the countries over to governments that were very substantial improvements over what had been there before and ones that continued to govern comparatively well. In several cases, however, the venture failed in the longer term in that the country soon devolved into costly civil armed conflict (Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya) or in that the new governments established proved to be scarcely better than the ones that had been deposed (Haiti and probably Kosovo).

The interventions were successful in that they were conducted by disciplined military forces against ones that usually were substantially criminal or criminalized.[76] A viable policy might be to continue to conduct such ventures but, should they devolve into chaos and civil warfare, to work assiduously to bring the conflicts to an end even if this means shifting sides and working with despicable elements. As the experience in Syria suggests, unless the regime is devotedly genocidal, warfare, particularly civil warfare, is about the worst thing there is: almost any kind of peace is preferable.

The aversion. Policing wars are likely to be unusual because there is, overall, little stomach for such operations due to at least three key problems.

To begin with, there is little or no political gain from success in such ventures. If George H. W. Bush failed to receive a lasting boost from the American public for the way he applied the U.S. military at remarkably low cost to drive Saddam Hussein's Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine an operation that could do so.[77]

In addition, there is a low tolerance for casualties in such applications of military force: a loss of a couple of dozen soldiers in chaotic fire-fights in Somalia in 1993 led the mighty United States to withdraw.

Moreover, the experience with policing wars has been accompanied by an increasing aversion to the costs and difficulties of what is often called nation-building. This aversion was already high in 2000 after messy experiences in the 1990s, particularly the one in Somalia. It was in that year that the notion that the military should play a notable role in such ventures was subject to concentrated derision by Condolezza Rice:

> The military is a special instrument. It is lethal, and is meant to be. It is not a civilian police force. It is not a political referee. And it is most certainly not designed to build a civilian society....Using the American armed forces as the world's "911" will degrade capabilities, bog soldiers down in peacekeeping roles, and fuel concern among other great powers that

---

[75] For a discussion, see Mueller, *Remnants of War*, ch. 6. For an assessment stressing that interventions tend to be carried more for national interest reasons than for humanitarian ones, see Robert C. DiPrizio, *Armed Humanitarians* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[76] On this distinction, see Mueller, *The Remnants of War*, ch. 1.

[77] For an analysis of this phenomenon, see John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), ch. 6. See also John Mueller, "Will Obama's Libya 'Victory' Aid Re-Election Bid?" nationalinterest.org, December 1, 2011.

the United States has decided to enforce notions of "limited sovereignty" worldwide in the name of humanitarianism.[78]

In the aftermath of 9/11, the administration Rice joined was soon to impel the military into nation-building missions in Afghanistan and Iraq that were far more ambitious than anything attempted in the 1990s. But the lesson learned there, it certainly appears, is that she got it right the first time. Any aversion to casualties and to the costs and responsibilities of nation-building have been immeasurably heightened by these exceedingly messy and costly wars.

Some people in the American military envision these kinds of missions to be the future face of war, and counter-insurgency, willfully forgotten after the Vietnam War disaster, has re-entered the military classroom. However, absent an extreme provocation probably even worse than 9/11, it is much more likely that such ventures will not be undertaken. Indeed, in its defense priority statement of January 2012, the Defense Department firmly emphasized (that is, rendered in italics) that "*U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.*" Or, as David Sanger puts it, America is "out of the occupation business."[79] Although there has been some backward creep since 2014 in response to the ISIS menace, this basic policy perspective does not seem to have been changed.

Thus, particularly with the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq behind them, calls to have a large number of troops at the ready to wage such interventions are unlikely to find a very receptive audience.

World War II inspired a World War syndrome, and none has taken place since. The Korean War inspired a Korea syndrome (on both sides), and none has taken place since. Vietnam famously inspired a Vietnam syndrome, and none took place for the United States during the remainder of the Cold War (though the USSR stumbled into its own version in Afghanistan). The experience in Somalia inspired a Somalia syndrome, and any subsequent intervention by the United States in local conflicts in the remainder of the 20th century was kept highly limited—to assistance and maybe to some bombing from high altitudes or, in the case of genocide in Rwanda in 1994, simply to distant handwringing. The 9/11-impelled disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan were much more highly supported at first than earlier interventions because they seemed to be a response to a direct attack. But, in the end, the experiences are highly likely to lead to an effective Iraq/Afghan syndrome built on a clear and overwhelming dictum, "let's not do that again."[80]

A new isolationism? A new militarism? One popular explanation for the American public's palpable unwillingness to countenance military involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2013 is that the country had slumped into a deep isolationist mood as a result of Iraq/Afghan

---

[78] Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000.

[79] www.defense.gob/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown, 2012), p. 419. My thanks to Christopher Preble for pointing me to these references.

[80] John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2005, pp. 44-54; John Mueller, "Vietnam and Iraq: Strategy, Exit, and Syndrome," in John Dumbrell and David Ryan (eds.), *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 179-92; John Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. 209-10, 217-19; John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome Revisited: U.S. Intervention, From Kosovo to Libya," foreignaffairs.com, March 28, 2011. John Mueller, "Iraq Syndrome Redux: Behind the Tough Talk," foreignaffairs.com, June 18, 2014.

syndrome. But the reaction scarcely represents a "new isolationism"[81] or a "growing isolationism"[82] or a "new non-interventionist fad."[83] Rather, there has always been a deep reluctance to lose American lives or to put them at risk overseas for humanitarian purposes.

In Bosnia, for example, the United States held off intervention on the ground until hostilities had ceased, and, even then, the public was anything but enthusiastic when American peace-keeping soldiers were sent in.[84] Bombs, not boots, were sent to Kosovo and, in Somalia, the United States abruptly withdrew, as noted, when 19 of its troops were killed. The United States, like other developed nations, has mostly stood aloof in many other humanitarian disasters such as those in Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan. The country did get involved in Libya, but the operation was strained and hesitant, and there was little subsequent enthusiasm to do much of anything about the conflict in neighboring Mali that was spawned by the Libyan venture.

The palpable reluctance of the developed world to get militarily involved in Liberia and Darfur in 2003 is also indicative of the process. So is the impressive unwillingness to use military force in the various risings of the Arab Spring in 2011 when military efforts were restricted to delicate tinkering around the edges and to the lobbing of munitions from a safe distance—and then only in one instance, that of Libya.[85] The reluctance is most evident currently, of course, in the supportive, but distant, response to rebels in the calamitous Syrian civil war that began in 2011.[86]

---

[81] Bill Keller, "Our New Isolationism," *New York Times*, September 8, 2013.

[82] Roger Cohen, "An Anchorless World," *New York Times*, September 12, 2013.

[83] Jennifer Rubin, "Rubio and others run from internationalism when it matters," washingtonpost.com, September 8, 2013.

[84] For data, see John Mueller, "Public Support for Military Ventures Abroad: Evidence from the Polls," in Robert T. Turner (ed.), *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), p. 213.

[85] For a provocative critique of the Libya operation, see Alan J. Kuperman, "A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign, *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Summer 2013), pp. 105-36. Also Alan J. Kuperman, "Obama's Libya Debacle: How a Well-Meaning Intervention Ended in Failure," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015.

[86] See also Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," pp. 29-30. Mearsheimer argues that the public "has become less enthusiastic about acting as the world's policeman." However, it does not seem that it has ever been very enthusiastic. The public response to intervention in Syria in 2013 suggests in addition that people, contrary to a large literature, are not readily manipulable by "opinion elites" (or by the media). The Obama administration dramatically proposed military action in response to chemical weapons use in Syria, and leaders of both parties in Congress rather quickly fell into line. Moreover, these bipartisan "leadership cues" were accompanied by disturbing photographs of the corpses of Syrian children apparently killed in the attack. Nonetheless, the American public was decidedly unwilling even to support the punitive bombing of Syria—a venture likely to risk few if any American lives—out of concern that it would lead to further involvement in the conflict there. "Public Opinion Runs Against Syrian Airstrikes," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, September 3, 2013. And it has remained suspect of, and therefore immune to, repeated assurances from U.S. President Barack Obama that he has categorically ruled out putting "boots on the ground" in Syria. Leaders may propose, but that doesn't mean public opinion will move in concert—that people will necessarily buy the message. And on the occasions when they do, it is probably best to conclude that the message has struck a responsive chord, rather than that the public has been manipulated. On these issues, see John Mueller, "Public Opinion, the Media, and War," in Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs (eds.), *Oxford Handbook on American Public Opinion and the Media*

The perspective is seen most clearly, perhaps, when Americans were asked in 1993 whether they agreed that "Nothing the US could accomplish in Somalia is worth the death of even one more US soldier." Fully 60 percent expressed agreement.[87] This is not such an unusual position for humanitarian ventures. If Red Cross or other workers are killed while carrying out humanitarian missions, their organizations frequently threaten to withdraw no matter how much good they may be doing. Essentially what they are saying is that the saving of lives is not worth the deaths of even a few of their service personnel.

In contrast, some commentators, including such unlikely soulmates as Andrew Bacevich, Robert Kagan, John Mearsheimer, Rachel Maddow, Gregory Daddis, and Vladimir Putin have variously maintained that we have seen the rise of a new American militarism in the last decades or that Americans congenitally hail from Mars.[88] But that perspective extrapolates far too much from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.[89] In these cases, opinion was impelled not by a propensity toward militarism, but, as with entry into World War II, by the reaction to a direct attack on the United States. These ventures—the 9/11 wars—have proved to be aberrations from usual patterns, not portents of the future. Although they demonstrate that Americans remain willing to strike back hard if attacked, they do not indicate a change in the public's reticence about becoming militarily involved in other kinds of missions, particularly humanitarian ones.[90]

An examination of the trends on three poll questions designed to tap "isolationism" does not suggest a surge either of isolationism or of militarism (see Figure 2). Instead, it documents something of a rise in wariness about military intervention after the Vietnam War and then, thereafter, a fair amount of steadiness punctured by spike-like ups and downs in response to events including 9/11 and its ensuing wars. In the wake of the disastrous military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has gone back to where it was in the aftermath of Vietnam—or perhaps a bit higher.

However, this is likely to be more nearly an expression of wariness about costly and frustrating military entanglements than a serious yearning for full withdrawal. There is, for example, no real indication that Americans want to erect steely trade barriers. And polls, including ones on Syria, continually show that the public is far more likely to approve foreign ventures if they are approved and supported by allies and international organizations. Real isolationism should be made of sterner stuff.[91]

(Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 675-89. Despite strenuous efforts, the administration of George H. W. Bush was unable to boost public support for going to war against Iraq in Kuwait in the runup to the 1991 Gulf War and that of his son was unable to do so for its war against Iraq in 2003. Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. 194-96

[87] Mueller, *War and Ideas*, p. 177.

[88] Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe and the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003). Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design." Rachel Maddow, *Drift: the unmooring of American military power* (New York : Crown, 2012). Daddis, "Afraid of Peace." Vladimir V. Putin, "A Plea for Caution From Russia," *New York Times*, September 11, 2013.

[89] Mueller, *War and Ideas*, p. 218.

[90] For the argument that the Iraq War would likely not have happened without 9/11, see George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 305-06.

[91] See also Mearsheimer, "America Unhinged," p. 11; Justin Logan and Christopher A. Preble, "For U.S. Interventionists, 'Isolationism' Is Just a Dirty Word," cato.org, June 22, 2011.

   The size of policing forces. Finally, even if there is some stomach for putting American troops into humanitarian policing ventures, this would not require a large number of troops. Most of the successful ventures in Table 1 were accomplished by inserting a few hundred to a few thousand disciplined troops. History suggests that, should the situation deteriorate, the calls would be for removing the troop as in Somalia, not sending in more.[92]

   Actually, the problems policing wars were designed to deal with may be resolving themselves. In the last couple of decades there has been a marked decline in the number of venal tyrannies and, as Figure 1 suggests, in civil wars.[93] There has, however, been something of an increase in the number and particularly the destructiveness (mainly due to Syria) of civil war in the last couple of years. Whether this represents a lasting shift remains to be seen.[94]

Protecting allies

   Some argue that a substantial force-in-being is required to protect allies and friends. However, the most important allies, those in Europe, not only seem to face little threat of a military nature, but are likely to be capable of dealing with any that should emerge.[95] Maintaining NATO is likely to be a good idea, although mostly for non-military reasons. As Paul Schroeder has pointed out, military alliances have generally been designed at least in part to

---

[92] Indeed, insofar as policing military forces might be useful, the most promising possibility seems to be in the construction of a viable international force through the United Nations. As suggested, for example, two decades ago in Brian Urquhart, "For a UN Volunteer Military Force," *New York Review of Books*, June 10, 1993, pp. 3-4; see also Mueller, *Remnants of War*, pp. 152-53. Among the advantages is that participants would be international civil servants, not constituents of a specific country, whose deaths in action would stir only indirect concern in their home countries. Among the key questions, however, are whether developed countries will be willing to pay for such an enterprise, whether the international organization can put together a truly capable military force, and whether the Security Council can be counted on to manage and deploy it effectively.

[93] There seems to have been considerable success in peace-keeping (as opposed to peace-making) and this may have contributed to the remarkable decline in civil warfare in the 1990s as documented in Figure 1. Thus people in Africa and elsewhere seem to have become fed up with the civil warfare they have suffered in recent decades in which small numbers of thugs, often drunken or drugged, have been able to pulverize effective society through their predatory criminal antics, sometimes sustaining them for decades. In consequence of this disgust, there has been a strong willingness to accept and make effective use of outside aid and to establish effective (if hardly perfect) governments, a process that Virginia Page Fortna has interestingly explored: *Does Peacekeeping Work? Shaping Belligerents' Choices After Civil Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Goldstein, *Winning the War on War*; Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); James D. Fearon, "Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States" *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Spring 2004), pp. 5-43; Mack, *Human Security Report 2005*. See also Scott Straus, "Wars Do End! Changing Patterns of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Affairs,* Vol. 111, Issue No. 443 (April 2012), pp. 179-201.

[94] For a discussion, see Joshua S. Goldstein, "World Backsliding on Peace," huffingtonpost.com, August 3, 2015.

[95] See also Friedman and Logan, "Why the U.S. Military Budget is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," pp. 180-81, 187; Preble, *Power Problem*, pp. 94-96.

control the allies.[96] This valuable characteristic is likely to be pertinent to the current situation: together with the European Union, NATO played a major role in stabilizing Europe after the Cold War not so much by its specific military prowess, but by providing an attractive club for newly-independent states in the area to join.

The threat environment for some other friends and allies, in particular Taiwan and Israel, is more problematic. However, whatever the conditions of military spending, it would be foolish for either to assume, particularly in an era when the Iraq syndrome holds sway, that the United States will come riding to its rescue should it come under severe military pressure, though it can probably count on moral and financial support in a pinch. Meanwhile, the Taiwan/China issue remains only a fairly remote concern as suggested earlier. And Israel's primary problems with violent opposition derive from the actions of sub-state groups, not from the potential for international warfare, and it seems quite capable of handling these on its own.

International crime

In 2011 a White House report proclaimed that transnational organized crime "poses a significant and growing threat to national and international security, with dire implications for public safety, public health, democratic institutions, and economic stability." And before becoming Secretary of State, John Kerry was urging that America "must lead an international crusade" against the growing threat of global crime.[97]

However, as Peter Andreas points out in a study of the issue, it is not at all clear that international crime is increasing as an overall percentage of global commerce. In fact, trade liberalization "has sharply reduced incentives to engage in smuggling practices designed to evade taxes and tariffs, which were historically a driving force of illicit commerce." More importantly, he continues, "the image of an octopus-like network of crime syndicates that runs the underworld through its expansive tentacles is a fiction invented by sensationalistic journalists, opportunistic politicians, and Hollywood scriptwriters." In contrast, international crime tends to be defined "more by fragmentation and loose informal networks rather than concentration and hierarchical organization."[98]

Thus, like a parasite, international crime works best when it keeps a low profile and best of all when no one even notices it is there. Thus, *by its very nature* it does not want to take over the international system or threaten national security. It has no incentive to kill or dominate its host.

Policing the "global commons"

In an age of globalization and expanding world trade, many, particularly in the Navy, argue that a strong military force is needed to police what is portentously labeled the "global commons." However, there seems to be no credible consequential threat in that arena.

---

[96] Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815-1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1976), pp. 227-262. For a proposal that, following Schroeder's logic, Mikhail Gorbachev's USSR might have been brought into NATO, see John Mueller, "A New Concert of Europe," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1989-90, pp. 3-16.

[97] Peter Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 330.

[98] Andreas, *Smuggler Nation*, p. 334.

There have been attacks by pirates off Somalia, exacting costs in the hundreds of millions of dollars a year to a multi-billion dollar shipping industry which, surely, has the capacity to defend itself from such nuisances—perhaps by the application on decks of broken glass, a severe complication for barefoot predators.

There are, of course, routes around most choke points should they become clogged. And Any armed cloggers are likely to be as punished and inconvenienced as the clogged. Huge forces-in-being are scarcely required because, should the problem become sustained, newly formulated forces designed for the purpose could be developed.[99]

Other issues

In addition to these considerations, various other potential problems have been variously proposed. But these, singly or in groups, scarcely justify massive expenditures to maintain a large military force in being.

One of these is the ever-reliable concept of "complexity" and its constant companions, "instability" and "uncertainty." These concepts, if that is what they are, get routinely trotted out as if they had some tangible meaning, as if it they had only recently been discovered, and as if they somehow necessitate more military spending.[100] Whatever their meaning, however, they can be used as much to justify decreases in military expenditures in favor of diplomatic or soft power ones as the opposite.

There is also great concern about an impending invasion by cybergeeks. For the most part, however, such ventures are essentially forms of crime or vandalism, and do not require military preparations. Any military disruptions are likely to be more nearly instrumental or tactical than existential, and they call far more for a small army of counter-cybergeeks than for a large standing military force.[101]

The developed world's dependence on oil imports from the Middle East has been an issue for the better part of a half-century now. However, unless the country plans to invade other

---

[99] Friedman and Logan, "Why the U.S. Military Budget is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," pp. 183-84.

[100] See, for example, the Defense Department's *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2010, p. 5. On this issue, see also Micah Zenko, "Most. Dangerous. World. Ever. The ridiculous hyperbole about government budget cuts," foreignpolicy.com, February 26, 2013; Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 1. For a discussion about alarmed applications of the terms in the wake of the Cold War (Robert Gates, 1993: "The events of the last two years have led to a far more unstable, turbulent, unpredictable, and violent world"), see Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm*, pp. 13-24.

[101] Defense Secretary Leon Panetta proclaimed "cyber" to be "without question, the battlefield for the future." However, Micah Zenko pointedly observes that the Pentagon is spending less than one percent of its budget on cybersecurity. "Most. Dangerous. World. Ever." On these issues, see also Thomas Rid, "Think Again: Cyberwar," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2012; Erik Gartzke, "The Myth of Cyberwar: Bringing War in Cyberspace Back Down to Earth," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Fall 2013), pp. 41-73. For a set of such sources, see John Mueller and Benjamin Friedman, The Cyberskeptics, www.cato.org/research/cyberskeptics. For the argument that the damage to be expected in cyber attacks, even under worst case scenarios, is likely to be of limited scope, see Martin Libicki, "Dealing with Cyberattacks," in Christopher Preble and John Mueller (eds.), *A Dangerous World?* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2014); and Spencer Ackerman, "NSA goes on 60 Minutes: the definitive facts behind CBS's flawed report," theguardian.com, December 16, 2013. See also Jon R. Lindsay, "Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare," *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (2013), pp. 365-404.

countries to seize their oil, the need for a military force in being to deal with this problem is far from obvious.[102] Any oil disruptions are likely to be handled by the market: if supply diminishes, prices will increase, and people will buy less. Not much fun, but much more likely, especially after Iraq, than imperial invasion. Moreover, the problem seems to be in remission as, aided in part by a major technological breakthrough, fracking, domestic supplies grow and oil prices plummet worldwide—a phenomenon likely to last for a considerable amount of time.

The Palestine/Israel dispute may or may not be resolved by the end the millennium, but the value of maintaining large American military forces seems to be irrelevant to that resolution. Americans might eventually be part of a force to help police a peace settlement, but, if so, they can be recruited at the time if the need ever becomes evident.

The potential for, and the consequences of, global warming are of great concern to many, and some have envisioned security issues. Thus, in 2013, Admiral Samuel J. Locklear, the chief of American forces in the Pacific, declared that global warming, and specifically rising sea levels, had the greatest potential to—as he put it rather opaquely—"cripple the security environment."[103] Interestingly, the Admiral clearly was not speaking out of institutional self-interest because the larger the oceans become, the more important the Navy—though the service would presumably have to bear the costs of adding links to its anchor chains.[104]

The need to maintain a military force to deal with climate change is scarcely evident, however. And, of course, the shutting down or mothballing of military vehicles on land, in the air, and on the sea might reduce warming vapors somewhat. Overall, any damage to national security that might be expected to come from climate change is likely to require defense spending adjustments that are far from significant.[105]

The country (and the world) certainly face major problems of an economic nature, but the military is of little importance here either. Actually, large cuts in military budgets would temper the budget problem some.

There are many other issues that are frequently, if questionably, promoted as national security threats—AIDS in Africa, for example. The value of maintaining large military forces in being scarcely seems relevant to problems like these.

Hedging

On the chance that there is some occasional misjudgment in the arguments arrayed above, it may be sensible to hedge a bit by judiciously keeping some limited military capacities on line and viable to cover remote contingencies.

First, it appears that the maintenance of some small rapid-response or commando forces of the kind that captured and killed Osama bin Laden might make some sense. Actually,

---

[102] On this issue, see Rosecrance, *Rise of the Trading State,* pp. 9-16. See also Friedman and Logan, "Why the U.S. Military Budget is 'Foolish and Sustainable'," p. 184.

[103] Bryan Bender, "Chief of US Pacific forces calls climate biggest worry," *Boston Globe*, March 9, 2013.

[104] It should be kept in mind that the Navy has a long and impressive record of exaggerating threat. In the 1880s, for example, Naval leaders espied a threat coming from the Chilean navy: "Of all the nations most likely to plunder the American coast," notes one historian, "Chile, possessed of three [British-built] ironclads, was the most frequently cited." John A. Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1992), p. 24.

[105] Mark G. Stewart, "Climate Change and National Security," in Preble and Mueller (eds.), *Dangerous World?*

although there may have been something of a psychological charge when the chief instigator of 9/11 was abruptly and brutally removed from the scene, and from life, it is not at all clear that there was all that much benefit from the venture in the never-ending "war" on terror: bin Laden had become something of an irrelevance by the time he was dispatched.[106] However, it certainly seems plausible that maintaining that capacity to do that sort of thing would be worthwhile. But it would not require the maintenance of large military force.

Second, there may be instances in which it would be useful to be able to send troops to maintain peace where a civil war has subsided or to help maintain order in places where a despot has been removed. As discussed earlier, these ventures do not require large numbers of troops—a few thousand would surely do—and they are likely to be deployed only when the atmosphere on the ground is "permissive" or substantially so. If either of those conditions changes and substantial violence once again erupts, the troops are likely to be removed as happened in Lebanon after 1983 and Somalia after 1993.

Third, it would likely be prudent to maintain a small number of nuclear weapons. It certainly seems, as argued earlier, that nuclear weapons have been essentially irrelevant to world history since 1945. However, there are still imaginable, if highly unlikely, contingencies—such as the rise of another Hitler—in which they might be useful.[107]

Fourth, while it certainly appears that standing military forces can safely be substantially reduced, maintaining an adept intelligence capacity probably remains a priority. However, studies should be made to determine whether, on balance, the benefit of a massive intelligence apparatus justifies its very considerable cost.[108]

And fifth, it seems sensible to maintain something of a capacity to rebuild quickly should a sizable threat eventually materialize. The United States was very good at that in the early 1940s when global threats emerged.[109] And something similar, on a substantial, but less massive, scale happened when the Korean War broke out suddenly in 1950. In most (but not all) cases, there is likely to be time to rebuild in the unlikely event that substantial threats actually materialize, though there is inevitably waste in crash programs.

Concluding reflections

It certainly seems that, given the essential absence of any substantial security threats to the United States (and to most of the developed world), to spend huge sums on the military to cover unlikely threats (or fantasies) borders, indeed, considerably o'ersteps, the profligacy line. It is often pointed out that defense spending, even in the United States, constitutes only a fairly small percentage of government spending and a quite small percentage of the country's gross national product.[110] Nevertheless, the saving of several hundreds of billions of dollars each year soon adds up even in that comparison. In total, expenditures on defense since the end of the Cold War have been something like $17 trillion—about the size of the entire national debt.

---

[106] Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 4.

[107] Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm*, p. 75.

[108] For some efforts to do so in the costly quest to counter terrorism, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*.

[109] On America's (rather amazing) rebuilding capacities, see Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm*, pp. 67-68, 87-94.

[110] For example, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 17-19.

Pacifism, isolationism

The conclusion of this examination both of security issues that have stoked great alarm and of ones that have not done so is that, although there are certainly problem areas in the world, none of these seems to present a security threat to the United States large enough to justify the maintenance of large numbers of military forces-in-being.

This perspective does not arise from pacifism, nor is it isolationist. The argument is not that large military forces are inherently evil or that there are no conditions under which they should be instituted or deployed. Indeed, as noted, some armed interventions have been quite successful. Rather, it simply seems that, applying Gingrich's wise and sensible test to present military spending, large military forces-in-being fail to be required in the current and likely threat environment.

And there is no suggestion in this that the United States or any other developed country should withdraw from being a constructive world citizen. The generally desirable processes of increasing economic inter-connectivity and of globalization make that essentially impossible anyway. The policy conclusion from the exercise reflects the one Eric Nordlinger once proposed: "minimally effortful national strategy in the security realm; moderately activist policies to advance our liberal ideas among and within states; and a fully activist economic diplomacy on behalf of free trade."[111]

The "American pacifier"?

In all this, Bernard Brodie's admonition from 1978 should be kept in mind:

All sorts of notions and propositions are churned out, and often presented for consideration with the prefatory works: "It is conceivable that..." Such words establish their own truth, for the fact that someone has conceived of whatever proposition follows is enough to establish that it is conceivable. Whether it is worth a second thought, however, is another matter. It should undergo a good deal of thought before one begins to spend much money on it.[112]

In that spirit, contemporary conceivablists worry that a minimally armed United States would suffer a hugely damaging decline in "influence" and would become less able to order the world—to be the "American Pacifier" with "leverage to restrain partners from taking provocative action." They speculate that 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 the Europeans potentially "vulnerable to the influence of outside rising powers." They also worry that Israel, Egypt, and/or Saudi Arabia might do something nutty in the Middle East and that Japan and South Korea might get nuclear weapons.[113]

---

[111] Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 4. See also Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[112] Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," p. 83.

[113] Brooks et al., "Don't Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment," pp. 34-35. Although he says he is "cautious enough not to want to run the experiment," Jervis considers it "very unlikely that pulling off the American security blanket would lead to thoughts of war." "Force in Our Times," p. 415.

The United States can certainly take credit for being an important influence in establishing a Western order in which the losers of the Second World War came to view the world in much the same way as those who had bombed Dresden and Hiroshima, emerging as key contributors to that order in the process. This was one of the most impressive instances of enlightened self-interest in history. However, the United States hardly *forced* that to happen due to its hegemonic (or limited hegemonic) status. It may have nudged, persuaded, and encouraged the process to move along, but it had a highly responsive audience in devastated peoples who were most ready to embrace the message and to get back on the road to prosperity. It seems entirely possible that much the same thing would have happened if the United States had never existed or if it had retreated into truculent isolationism.

Over the course of the decades, the U.S. has provided added value to the international order at various points. But, as Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow forcefully point out, it has also routinely embraced error and engaged in fiasco. For example, it "grossly exaggerated" the threat presented by the Soviet Union; promulgated and then wallowed mindlessly and parochially in messianism and in such self-infatuated characterizations as "exceptionalism" and "indispensability"; bullied other countries self-defeatingly; reneged on its own liberal trading rules; and has often been "unable to impose solutions consistent with hegemony."[114]

Reich and Lebow also point out that American efforts to manage the Middle East, as with Vietnam in the 1960s, have been "a primary source of disorder," noting particularly that "since 9/11, the United States is arguably in the grip of the same kind of paranoia as in the early years of the Cold War."[115] The tragedy here is that, although France tried hard in the 2003 runup to the disastrous Iraq War, America's allies were unable to pacify the Pacifier (or chief primate).

Retiring spooky concepts

As the discussion above may suggest, such concepts as hegemony and primacy, no matter how enthusiastically enshrined in the international relations literature, seem at best unhelpful and at worst spooky, vapid, distracting, and misdirecting.

"Hegemony" has always been a useless and damagingly misdirecting international relations concept. Sorting through various definitions, Reich and Lebow array several that seem to capture the essence of hegemony: controlling leadership, domination, or the ability to shape international rules according to the hegemon's own interests. "Hegemony," then, is an extreme word suggesting supremacy, mastery, preponderant influence, and full control. Hegemons force others to bend to their will whether they like it or not.[116]

Moreover, insofar as they carry meaning, the militarized application of American "primacy" and "hegemony" to "order" the world has often been a fiasco.[117] Indeed, it is

---

[114] Simon F. Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* by (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 2, 134, 168, 23.

[115] Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!* pp. xi, 103.

[116] Reich and Lebow do include a designation by John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan about how a hegemon has the ability "to establish a set of norms that others willingly embrace." *Good-Bye Hegemony!* p. 2. But this really seems to constitute an extreme watering-down of the word and suggests opinion leadership or entrepreneurship and success at persuasion, not hegemony.

[117] See also Stephen M. Walt, "What to read on U.S. grand strategy," foreignaffairs.com, January 12, 2013; Micah Zenko, "The Myth of the Indispensable Nation: The world doesn't need the United States nearly as much as we like to think it does," foreignpolicy.com, November 6, 2014.

impressive that the "hegemon," endowed by definition by what Reich and Lebow aptly call a "grossly disproportionate" military capacity, has, as noted earlier, such a miserable record of achievement since 1945.[118] In the Gulf War of 1991, American hegemonic mastery consisted mainly of begging the international community, which already agreed that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was unacceptable, to please, please, please let it launch a war to repel the invaders taking all the casualties itself. That the bemused observers allowed themselves to be persuaded scarcely constitutes a supreme exercise in domination. In the meantime, it might be added, it remained studiously distant from genocide in Cambodia in 1975-79 and Rwanda in 1994 and from catastrophic civil war in Congo after 1997.[119]

In the wake of foreign policy debacle in the Middle East, there are signs suggesting the hegemonic delusion may have been played out. Although fully two-thirds of Americans continue to favor greater US involvement in the global economy in 2013, only 46 percent deem it "very desirable" for the United States to exert strong leadership in world affairs—the lowest level ever registered by the poll question. (In the same poll, only 11 percent of Europeans said they felt that way: the "dominated," it would appear, do not seem to have gotten the message.)[120]

The American people do not want to be disconnected, but they are fully able to contain their enthusiasm for being drawn into costly foreign disasters by a foreign policy establishment deluded with visions of hegemony and determined to look like it is exerting strong leadership in world affairs while remaining blissfully incapable of frankly examining the full scope of the disasters it has already perpetrated. In a speech at West Point in 2014, President Barack Obama contended that the question we face "is not whether America will lead but how we will lead."[121] Perhaps the American (and European) people can be forgiven for worrying about the results.

Reich and Lebow argue that "it is incumbent on IR scholars to cut themselves loose" from the concept of hegomony.[122] It seems even more important for the foreign policy establishment to do so. After that, maybe we can happily abandon other scholarly concepts that are often vacuous, usually misdirecting, and singularly unhelpful. These would include not only concepts like "hegemony" and "primacy," but also "polarity," "system," "power transition," and, eventually perhaps, "power" itself.

The demise of arrogance?

With this background, the somewhat prosaic wisdom of the pre-9/11 George W. Bush is looking very attractive:

If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us. If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us....I just don't think it's the role of the United States to walk into a country and say, we do it this way, so should you. I think we can help....I think the United States must be

---

[118] Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!* p. 16.

[119] On Cambodia, see William C. Adams and Michael Joblove, "The Unnewsworthy Holocaust: TV News and Terror in Cambodia," in William C. Adams, ed., *Television Coverage of International Affairs*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982, 217–25.

[120] The German Marshall Fund of the United States (2013) Transatlantic Trends Topline Data 2013, available at http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2013/09/TT-TOPLINE-DATA.pdf.

[121] www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony.

[122] Reich and Lebow, *Good-Bye Hegemony!* p. 183.

humble and must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course.[123]

Under the impetus of 9/11 a year later, Bush was to exhibit exactly the kind of arrogance that he had denounced—going to far as to grandly proclaim that "Our responsibility to history is already clear—to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."[124]

The arrogance of the strong about which the Bush of 2000 warned is suggested in an oft-quoted declaration of the mighty Athenians (who later went down to ignominious defeat) as reported by Thucydides: "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[125] A fatuous modern-day update has been supplied by American Secretary of State Madeline Albright in 1998: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future."[126] That self-obsessed phraseology has been routinely echoed, even expanded, by Barack Obama during his presidency. As he said in his West Point speech, "The United States is and will remain the one indispensable nation," suggesting that all other nations are, well, dispensable. The United States, quips Doug Bandow "views herself as the globe's dominatrix into whose hands every dispute is properly remitted."[127]

Although, as suggested by the pre-9/11 Bush, influence often springs from humility, military strength is not commonly accompanied by that admirable quality, and its ability to generate "influence" and desirable outcomes seems to have been greatly exaggerated.[128]

And to repeat Bernard Brodie's wistful reflection in the wake of the Vietnam War, "One way of keeping people out of trouble is to deny them the means for getting into it."[129] A third of a century later, that sage admonition continues to resonate.

---

[123] Presidential debate of October 11, 2000.

[124] Speech at the National Cathedral, September 14, 2001. This rather remarkable goal was blandly accepted by press and public alike, although the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* did modestly suggest that "perhaps the President over-promised." Mueller, *Overblown*, p. 216n.

[125] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 5.89.

[126] Madeleine K. Albright, *The Today Show* (NBC), February 19, 1998. Compare Zenko, "The Myth of the Indispensable Nation."

[127] Bandow, "Ultimate Irony."

[128] See, for example, Daniel W. Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay (Nearly As Much As You Think), *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Summer 2013), pp. 52-79.

[129] Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," p. 81. See also Stephen M. Walt, "Is America Addicted to War? The top 5 reasons we keep getting into foolish fights," foreignpolicy.com, April 4, 2011. The first reason set out is "Because We Can." See also Andrew J. Bacevich, "Do we really need a large Army?" *Washington Post*, February 27, 2014.

Table 1: MILITARY INTERVENTIONS OR POLICING WARS
AFTER THE COLD WAR THAT WORKED, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE

Panama. 1989. US forces invade, depose the government, return an elected one to power, and then leave. Civil peace is maintained. The venture is similar to one conducted by the United States against Grenada in 1983.

Gulf War. 1991. A large, but low casualty, intervention ousts Iraq's (unimpressive to the point of being nonexistent) occupying army in Kuwait. Kuwait's government returns from exile, and civil peace is maintained. US troops return home and various victory parades are staged, the only time this has happened since World War II.

Iraq. 1991. US forces aid Kurds in the north, establishing a safe zone and pushing back Iraqi military forces. Little is done when those forces brutally put down a Shia rebellion in the south of the country.

Somalia. 1992. UN forces, including from the US, intervene, stop a famine caused by civil warfare. Later, things deteriorate as efforts to set up a government fail and armed opposition arises. When occupying troops get killed in small numbers, they are withdrawn. Civil war chaos continues for decades.

Rwanda. 1994. An invasion by a fairly effective (by African standards) Tutsi army brings the government-ordered genocide to a close—the Rwandan army collapses and most génocidaires simply flee. The Hutu government is toppled in the process, and the Tutsis set up a new one. Civil peace is maintained, and in many cases victims and perpetrators of the genocide have lived side by side without violence.

Haiti. 1994. US sends troops to depose a military coup and to return an elected one to power. It the country and meets no real armed resistance; this is partly due to the the fact that, because of the threatening invasion, the offending government had been successfully pressured to leave. Civil peace, but not competent governance, is maintained.

Croatia. 1995. Over a few years, the newly-independent Croatian government creates an effective army. It ousts the mostly criminalized forces from Serb-held areas in the country which mostly flee to Bosnia and Serbia. It had previously liberated other Serb-held areas and enclaves in Croatia in 1993. Civil peace is maintained.

Bosnia. 1995. A continuation of the Croatian military offensive into Serb areas of Bosnia with additional attacks by newly-decriminalized Muslim forces from the Sarajevo government. US works to halt the joint offensive from completely ethnically cleansing Bosnia of Serbs. NATO's bombing of Serb positions in Bosnia probably helps to concentrate the Bosnian Serb mind. However, before the bombing began they had already asked Milošević to negotiate for them knowing that he had previously strongly (and ineffectively) supported accepting a division like the one eventually accepted at Dayton. After the Dayton agreement, civil peace is maintained: for 20 years there have apparently been no episodes (even small ones) of ethnic violence in the country.

Sierra Leone. 1995. Under siege in a chaotic civil war, the government hires a mercenary group, Executive Outcomes, which sends 200 troops to fight and to train. By 1996, the country is stable enough to hold elections. In 1997, the new government refuses to renew EO's contract, and civil warfare quickly returns.

Kosovo. 1999. NATO bombing causes anti-Albanian depredations by Serb militias massively to increase. However, the persistence of the bombing over three months (initial

underexamined anticipations had been that Milošević would break after a few days of bombing) finally does lead Milošević to withdraw and to allow Kosovo to become effectively independent. No ground troops are sent. There are some revenge attacks by Albanians, but, overall, civil peace is maintained.

East Timor. 1999. Operating under a UN mandate, Australian troops invade, and rampaging militia groups supported/encouraged by the Indonesian Army fade away without fighting. A new government is set up. Civil peace is maintained.

Sierra Leone. 2000. Britain sends a few hundred troops to join UN forces in a civil war-like, chaotic situation and is able to stabilize the country and set up a new government. Civil peace is maintained.

Afghanistan. 2001. In alliance with anti-Taliban elements in the north of the country, US bombing contributes considerably to the fall of the Taliban. Except for some foreign fighters, no one seems to be willing to fight for them. Members of the CIA and Special Forces on the ground are effective at directing the bombing and at hiring local combatants. The Taliban flees to Pakistan for several years, and eventually regroups. But for about five years they commit little violence in Afghanistan beyond some isolated terrorist attacks.

Ivory Coast. 2002. The French send troops to help police a civil war situation.

Iraq. 2003. US military forces invade and conquer the country, sending Saddam Hussein fleeing and setting up a new government. Although the invasion is of Iraq itself—rather than, as in 1991, simply of an area it had conquered earlier—the US suffers even fewer casualties in the venture. Social chaos grows, and anti-invader terrorism eventually rises to the level of insurgency.

Liberia. 2003. In a civil war situation in which semi-coherent rebel groups are bombarding Monrovia, Charles Taylor agrees under pressure to leave the country. African troops, mainly Nigerian, invade and face little resistance. Fighting stops, a new government is formed, and civil peace is maintained.

Ivory Coast. 2011. France sends in troops to pacify the country when a civil war breaks out.

Libya. 2011. European and North American countries, under a UN mandate, intervene, particularly by air, in a civil war in which armed rebels seek the removal of the country's long-time leader. With that help, the rebels eventually succeed, but the country then descends into another civil war.

Syria. 2011. When the government seems to be falling to armed rebels, Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah send assistance and combatants to prop it up. The government survives, but the civil war continues as the country is effectively partitioned.

Mali. 2013. Under a UN mandate, France sends troops to quell a civil war that emerged after weapons arrived in the country from Libya when that country descended into civil war.

Central African Republic. 2013. France sends troops to try to help pacify a civil war situation.

Other possibilities:
Russian interventions against Georgia in Abkhazia and in Ossetia
Russian intervention against Ukraine
US, Russian, and other interventions against ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Figure 1: Number of ongoing wars in each year, 1946-2013

Legend:
- Civil wars
- Imperial and colonial wars
- International wars

The data are for "wars," violent armed conflicts which result in at least 1000 military and civilian battle-related deaths in the year indicated.

Sources: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, University of Uppsala, www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/ and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "A Revised List of Wars Between and Within Independent States, 1816-2002," *International Interactions*, 30 (3) 2004, plus additional correspondence with Gleditsch.

Figure 2: Public opinion trends on intervention, 1945-2015

Legend:
- Concentrate on own problems
- Mind own business
- Stay out

Annotations: End of Vietnam War, Beginning of Vietnam War, Beginning of Iraq War, Gulf War, 9/11

We shouldn't think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems and building up our strength and prosperity here at home.

The United States should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along as best they can on their own.

Do you think it will be best for the future of this country if we take an active part in world affairs, or if we stayed out of world affairs?