

War and International Politics

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The possibility of great-power war was taken off the table during the unipolar moment, simply because there was only one great power on the planet, and you could not by definition have security competition or war between rival great powers. Moreover, many believed during the early years of unipolarity that we were fast approaching the “end of history” and that inter-state war was going the way of dueling and slavery.²

Consequently, many policymakers as well as students of international politics who came of age during unipolarity have not thought deeply about great-power war. I might note that the ecosystem for studying inter-state war was so dismal in those years that in 1997 Richard Betts published an article in the fiftieth anniversary issue of *World Politics* entitled “Should Strategic Studies Survive?”³

But we have now left unipolarity and moved into a multipolar world where great-power war is once again a possibility and security competition among the great powers is intensifying. Thus, the time is ripe to pay serious attention to great-power politics.

Realism, which has always been deeply concerned with great-power war, provides the best lens for understanding the relationship between war and international politics. I am going to offer a particular realist perspective on this subject, although it is important to acknowledge that some realists would disagree with some of my arguments.⁴

THE ROAD MAP

My paper revolves around three themes.

First, the possibility of great-power war is the dominating feature of international politics, and it shapes how policymakers think about the world in profound ways. Given that war is a brutal

¹ This paper is a revised version of the inaugural Richard K. Betts Lecture, which I delivered at Columbia University on 16 November 2023.

² Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Penguin, 2012); John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011),

³ Richard K. Betts, “Should Strategic Studies Survive?” *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 7-33.

⁴ My realist theory of international politics is laid out in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: Norton, 2014). Many of the arguments put forth in this paper are either not made or not developed in *Tragedy*, although some are.

and violent enterprise that usually involves massive suffering, and especially given the fact that it can threaten a state's survival, the mere threat of war has profound implications for how states interact with each other.

Second, war is a tool of statecraft that policymakers will employ when they think it is necessary for their country's survival. As Clausewitz famously argued, "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means."⁵ Many in the West, however, think about when it is permissible to initiate a war in a non-Clausewitzian way. Specifically, they are guided by the dictates of international law and just war theory, which rule out preventive wars and wars of opportunity – where a state sees a chance to gain power over an adversary to enhance its long-term security. Although leaders are disposed to say they respect these limits on war – and genuinely do – if they feel their country is seriously threatened and think that attacking another country will make it more secure, they are likely to do so, even if it violates international law or just war theory.

Third, modern wars have a powerful tendency to escalate in ways that overwhelm political considerations. In such a situation, war is no longer a continuation of politics by other means. The inclinations of military leaders, coupled with the influence of ideologies like nationalism, as well as the dynamics underpinning war, make it difficult to keep wars limited and under the firm control of political leaders. Nevertheless, it is essential in the nuclear age to make sure that any great-power war that occurs does not escalate into a total war, and indeed is ended as quickly as possible. Those ends are best achieved when war remains subordinated to politics.⁶

Let me now embellish each of these themes.

WAR AT THE CORE

War is the most significant feature of international politics. It has a marked influence on how leaders think about the world around them and how states interact with each other. It is the

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 69. Also see pp. 81, 87, 88, 605-610.

⁶ There is a fourth important theme concerning great-power war that I do not address, mainly because it involves what happens inside of states, not in relations among them, which is my focus. Specifically, security competition and especially war have deep-seated effects on the internal politics of great powers, a point famously made by Charles Tilly, who argued that "war makes the state, and the state makes war," as well as Leon Trotsky, who described war as "a great locomotive of history." Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 42. On Trotsky, see: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/12/comintern.htm>. Also see Otto Hintze, "The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics," and "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in Felix Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 157-215; Bruce D. Porter, *War and The Rise of The State: The Military Foundation of Modern Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

ever-present possibility of war – combined with its destructiveness – that helps explain why politics among great powers is intensely competitive at its core.

This is not to say, however, that the great powers are in a constant state of war, because they obviously are not. But they are always engaged in security competition, which mainly involves competing for power with potential rivals. The possibility of war always lurks in the background of that relentless struggle for advantage, which is why war has been a crucially important dimension of international relations forever, and always will be.

Few would deny that war is a destructive and dangerous enterprise. One can understand why Thomas Jefferson referred to war “as the greatest scourge of mankind.”⁷ But its horribleness is what makes international politics such a deadly serious business. It is the possibility that a state might fall victim to a devastating war that threatens its survival, which explains in good part the intensity of great-power relations. Of course, the horror of war also explains why so much time and effort has been devoted over the centuries to abolishing it. Regrettably, all these efforts have failed.

Why have they failed? Why is war so hard to eradicate and why does it have such a powerful effect on the world we live in? Two factors provide the answer to these questions: the nature of politics itself and the architecture of the international system.

Politics, as both Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama emphasized, is a “contact sport.”⁸ Individuals, groups of all sorts, and states sometime have deep differences with each other over issues that matter greatly to them. They may have clashing belief systems or clashing interests, which create unresolvable differences. Just look at the fervor with which conservatives and liberals in the US now fight over Supreme Court appointments. As Newt Gingrich once said, politics can be “a really nasty, vicious, negative business.”⁹ Sometimes those political differences are so profound that the rival sides may try to harm each other and maybe even kill each other. This danger helps explain why individuals living together in a society need a state. They need a higher authority to keep order – to keep them from killing each other over their differences. But even that solution has limits, as the history of civil wars makes clear. In short, the intensity and enmity that often attends politics should not be underestimated.

Politics naturally remains a contact sport in the international system, but it manifests itself in different ways because there is no world government to provide order and protect states from each other. The structure of the system is anarchic, not hierarchic, as Kenneth Waltz famously

⁷ <https://www.whatshouldireadnext.com/quotes/thomas-jefferson-i-abhor-war-and-view>

⁸ On Clinton, see Sarah Boseley, “Power to the People,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2008; regarding Obama, see William Finnegan, “The Candidate: How the Son of a Kenyan Economist Became an Illinois Everyman,” *The New Yorker*, May 31, 2004.

⁹ <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/12/politics-is-a-nasty-vicious-negative-and-disgusting-business>

argued.¹⁰ This architecture means that states operate in a world where war is an ever-present possibility, but there is no higher authority they can turn to in the event they are threatened or attacked.

To make matters worse, it is not simply the destructiveness of war that strikes fear into the hearts of states, it is also the possibility that their survival might be put at risk. In other words, an adversary might be an existential threat. And if it is not today, it could be tomorrow. After all, the balance of power invariably shifts over time and the intentions of other states, certainly their future intentions, are especially difficult to discern with confidence.¹¹ Simply put, the threat of war is a constant feature of international politics, which leads to relentless security competition among the great powers, while ensuring that survival will be their number one goal.

In sum, politics by its very nature is unremittingly competitive and intense, and when it takes place in an anarchic system, its intensity will be ramped up even more because of the ever-present threat of war. In other words, international politics and war are inextricably bound up with each other.

To help ensure that my argument is crystal clear, a few additional points are in order.

First, I am not arguing that great powers never cooperate with each other, because they do, when they have similar interests and when cooperation does not undermine their security. The US and the Soviet Union, for example, cooperated during the Cold War to curb nuclear proliferation, which was in the interest of both superpowers. States also form military alliances when they are confronted with an especially dangerous opponent, as the US and the Soviet Union did during WWII. Rivals can also rely on diplomacy to resolve some differences or to prevent a dangerous crisis from leading to a war that neither side wants.

The key point, however, is that this cooperation always takes place in the shadow of competition. Moscow and Washington continued competing for power despite cooperating on the proliferation front.¹² While alliances are an important feature of international politics, they are ultimately temporary marriages of convenience.¹³ To paraphrase Lord Palmerston, states

¹⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1979), chapter 5.

¹¹ On the ever-shifting balance of power, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). On the difficulty of assessing intentions, see Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021)

¹² Eliza Gheorghe, "Proliferation and the Logic of the Nuclear Market," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019) pp. 88-127.

¹³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973); Paul Poast, *Arguing about Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Agreements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Glenn H.

have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies, just permanent interests, as the US and the Soviet Union demonstrated after 1945, when those wartime allies morphed into bitter rivals.¹⁴

My point about the relationship between competition and cooperation points up an important difference between theories of international economics and international politics. Most mainstream economists emphasize that cooperation among states on trade and finance is the best way for them to maximize their prosperity, which is not to deny there is much room for economic competition in their story.¹⁵ Of course, globalization is effectively economic cooperation on a planetary scale that states engage in to foster prosperity far and wide as well as on the home front. As Martin Wolf, the chief economic commentator at the *Financial Times*, puts it, globalization, which he defines as “the integration of economic activity across borders,” can lead to “an unparalleled era of peace, partnership and prosperity” if done right.¹⁶

At the same time, however, concepts like the balance of power, security competition, and survival have no place in mainstream economics, mainly because economists do not consider how international anarchy affects the security of states.¹⁷ Nevertheless, survival concerns always trump prosperity concerns when those goals are in conflict, since you cannot prosper if you do not survive. That simple fact of life once again points up that great-power relations are

Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/2114693-therefore-i-say-that-it-is-a-narrow-policy-to>

¹⁵ For example, in a 2012 survey of some of the world’s leading economists, 85 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that “Freer trade improves productive efficiency and offers consumers better choices, and in the long run these gains are much larger than any effects on employment.” No economist disagreed; the remaining 15 percent either did not respond to the question or were uncertain. <https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/free-trade/>. In another 2012 survey involving some of the same economists, 85 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that “Trade with China makes most Americans better off because, among other advantages, they can buy goods that are made or assembled more cheaply in China.” No economist disagreed; the remaining 15 percent did not respond to the question. <https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/china-us-trade/>. In a 2018 survey involving a different set of leading economists, 80 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that “Trade with China makes most Europeans better off because, among other advantages, they can buy goods that are made or assembled more cheaply in China.” None disagreed; the remaining respondents were either uncertain or did not respond to the question. <https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/china-europe-trade/>

¹⁶ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2014/09/pdf/wolf.pdf>

¹⁷ Another way of making the point about the balance of power is to note that in the realist story, states place much emphasis on relative gains when they engage in economic intercourse, while economists tend to privilege absolute gains over relative gains, which is to say they largely ignore the balance of power. It is important to emphasize that international relations scholars who focus on economic issues invariably recognize and engage with the security considerations that result from international anarchy. This point is clearly reflected in one of the foundational articles in international political economy. See Charles Lipson, “International Cooperation in Economic and Security Affairs,” *World Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (October 1984), pp. 1-23.

competitive at their core, which is another way of saying that international politics dominates international economics when those two perspectives offer different policy prescriptions.

Second, I am not arguing that great-power wars are likely. In fact, they are unlikely because of the lethal effects of industrialization and nationalism on modern warfare, both of which make war much more deadly, and the more costly conflict becomes the less likely it is to occur. Of course, the same logic applies to nuclear weapons, which are called weapons of mass destruction for good reason. Nevertheless, war remains a serious possibility, and that fact, coupled with its deadliness, causes states to pay great attention to that danger.

Third, the small group of leaders who formulate and execute a great power's foreign policy understand most clearly the centrality of war in international politics.¹⁸ After all, they are the ones who are directly responsible for ensuring their country's survival in a self-help world. They are in charge in an extreme emergency.¹⁹ That responsibility focuses the mind like few others. This is not to deny that members of the public and certainly members of a country's foreign policy establishment will also be influenced by the ever-present possibility of war, but not as deeply as their leaders, simply because they are not the ultimate deciders.

Fourth, how one defines the concept of survival influences our understanding of how the threat of great-power war affects life in the international system. Survival obviously means not being destroyed as a functioning state. In other words, not ending up like Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany in 1945. But defining survival in terms of that outcome alone is too narrow to be useful for explaining how states behave, a point that is widely recognized in the international relations literature.²⁰

Survival, in my lexicon, means maintaining the integrity of a state's physical base as well as its ability to determine its own political fate, which includes managing both domestic and foreign policy. A state's physical base includes all its territory and population, as well as the resources within its borders. To run its own policy at home and abroad, a state must control its domestic institutions, especially its executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative bodies. This more expansive definition of survival reflects how states think and act. This means that great powers are primed to compete – sometimes fiercely – not just to avoid total military defeat, but also to make sure that they do not lose any territory to a rival, and that they maintain the autonomy of their domestic political order.

¹⁸ For a fuller development of this theme, which also emphasizes the importance of the ultimate decider, see John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

¹⁹ Mariya Grinberg, "Unconstrained Sovereignty: Delegation of Authority and Reversibility," Social Science Research Network, November 4, 2020. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3725113>

²⁰ Burak Kadercan, "Making Sense of Survival: Refining the Treatment of State Preferences in Neorealist Theory," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (October 2013), pp. 1015-1037.

Many people in the West find it difficult to accept the notion that the threat of great-power war and associated concepts like survival have such a profound effect on how policymakers think about the world. This perspective is not surprising, given that so many of them came of age during the unipolar moment, when there was no great-power security competition, and thus it was possible to think that prosperity, not survival, is the main goal of states. Yes, there were wars in unipolarity, but they involved the US and its allies engaging in unfair fights against minor powers like Afghanistan and Iraq, not fights against major powers, much less another great power.

It is also rather easy for Americans to dismiss balance-of-power politics because the US has long been the most secure great power in the history of the world.²¹ This basic fact of life explains why the United States pursued an isolationist foreign policy for part of its history and why that approach still attracts adherents today.²² Regarding Europe, especially Western Europe, it sits underneath the American security umbrella, which effectively guarantees peace in Europe, thus allowing many Europeans to think they have reached the end of history.²³

Nevertheless, the ongoing wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, coupled with the possibility of a war between China and the US, has begun to undermine that optimistic view of international politics.²⁴ Still, that hopeful outlook is so deeply ingrained in Western thinking at this point, especially in universities, that it will take more time for most Americans and Europeans to understand that their world is profoundly shaped by security competition and possible war among the great powers.

THE DECISION FOR WAR

²¹ Andrew Preston, "Monsters Everywhere: A Genealogy of National Security," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (June 2014), pp. 477-500; John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shiffrin, and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol 21, No. 4 (December 2023), pp. 1304-1318; John A. Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1992), pp. 23-43; John A. Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). It is worth noting that during the unipolar moment, which ran roughly from 1991 to 2017, the United States was the only great power on the planet, which provided it with unparalleled security. Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²² Ironically, it also explains why the United States has periodically pursued adventurous and risky foreign policies that were at odds with balance of power logic. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

²³ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why Is Europe Peaceful Today?" *European Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 387-397.

²⁴ According to Paul Poast, "The Uppsala Conflict Data Program, which has been tracking wars globally since 1945, identified 2022 and 2023 as the most conflictual years in the world since the end of the Cold War." Paul Poast, "Not a World War, but a World at War," *The Atlantic*, November 17, 2023.

Let me now turn to my second theme, which deals with an issue that has concerned students of international politics for centuries, and certainly is of great relevance today because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.²⁵ Specifically, when is it permissible for a country to initiate a war? Or to put the question another way: when is it legitimate for one state to attack another state?

In keeping with international law and contemporary just war theory, most people in the West who think seriously about this issue believe that starting a war is only acceptable under a narrow set of circumstances: 1) if a country has good evidence that it is about to be attacked by an adversary and it launches a pre-emptive strike. In other words, it gets in the first blow in a war that is bound to happen; 2) if a state secures permission from the UN Security Council to attack another state; and 3) if one country intervenes in another to prevent mass murder or genocide.²⁶

According to the dictates of both international law and just war theory, preventive wars, which are wars aimed at averting an adverse shift in the balance of power, are verboten. They are illegal or unjust. So are wars of opportunity, where the balance of power is not shifting against the initiator, but it sees an opening to gain more power and enhance its security or perhaps achieve some other political objective like spreading an ideology. Thus, whether you see Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a preventive war, as Naftali Bennett, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Jens Stoltenberg do, or you see it as an unprovoked war of aggression, as most people in the West do, it is both illegal and unjust, and should be condemned.²⁷

In essence, many contemporary Western thinkers reject Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means. For him, war is simply a useful tool of statecraft that states employ whenever it makes good military and political sense. That perspective allows for launching preventive wars as well as wars of opportunity. Naturally, there is no room for moral or legal considerations in Clausewitz's understanding of war, which puts it at odds with how most people in the West think about war initiation.

What is going on here, however, is more than just a disagreement: the aim of just war theorists and champions of international law is to subordinate the conduct of international politics to a

²⁵ The present conflict in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinians is not an interstate war, as the Palestinians do not have their own state. It is violent resistance to a belligerent occupation on the part of the Palestinians, coupled with a violent response by Israel. Nevertheless, that conflict threatens to escalate in ways that could lead to one or more inter-state wars in the region.

²⁶ There is a significant overlap between just war theory and the international laws of war, which, in the context of this paper, allows me to treat them as one and the same.

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/27/world/europe/former-french-president-voice-russia.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK9tLDeWBzs&t=9142s>

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_218172.htm

moral or legal order that dictates when states can start a war as well as how they should wage it. Simply put, they want to create a world where initiating a war is permissible only in narrowly bounded circumstances.

But this is not how the world works. Preventive wars and wars of opportunity are baked into international politics, and nothing is going to change that fact of life in the foreseeable future. Whether states are democracies or non-democracies, they will launch these kinds of wars if they conclude that it is in their strategic interest to do so. One way to grasp why efforts to delegitimize wars of opportunity and preventive wars are likely to fail is to consider a crucial qualification in Michael Walzer's seminal book on *Just and Unjust Wars*.

Walzer opens the book by criticizing realist thinking about war – indeed, the first chapter is titled: “Against ‘Realism’” – and then he takes dead aim at Clausewitz's view that there are no meaningful limits on when states can initiate wars.²⁸ Walzer also makes the case for placing significant limits on how states wage war. But after making a comprehensive and sophisticated case for his views, he allows that in a supreme emergency—when a country is on “the brink of national disaster”—it can ignore just war theory and “do what is necessary” to survive. In other words, it can act according to the dictates of realism.²⁹

Walzer recognizes that bringing survival into his story is playing into the realists' hands, a dangerous game from his perspective. Accordingly, he writes, “I want to set radical limits to the notion of necessity.”³⁰ Specifically, he tries to protect himself by strictly bounding both the imminence and the nature of the threat that a state must face before it can abandon just war theory and embrace realism. He maintains that “the danger must be of an unusual and horrifying kind” and that the threatened country must wait until it is “face-to-face not merely with defeat but with a defeat likely to bring disaster to a political community,” before it can act unjustly.³¹

But this advice makes little sense. Why would a state facing an existential threat wait until the moment when it is on the verge of destruction to act like a realist? Would it not make more sense for a state to deal with a rival before it became a mortal threat? Obviously, it would, but that logic pushes states to act according to realist dictates from the get-go and ignore just war theory unless it is in synch with balance-of-power logic. In essence, the survival imperative in international anarchy leaves states with little choice but to see preventive wars and wars of opportunity as acceptable tools of statecraft. Indeed, if a state strictly adhered to just war theory or international law, it would put its survival at risk.

²⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1977), chapters 1 and 2.

²⁹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, pp. 248-249.

³⁰ Walzer writes: “I want to set radical limits to the notion of necessity.” *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 261.

³¹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, pp. 253, 268.

This perspective has a rich pedigree, as is clearly reflected in the writings of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Thucydides. To quote Rousseau:

It is quite true that it would be much better for all men to remain always at peace. But so long as there is no security for this, everyone, having no guarantee that he can avoid war, is anxious to begin it at the moment which suits his own interest and so forestall a neighbour, who would not fail to forestall the attack in his turn at any moment favourable to himself, so that many wars, even offensive wars, are rather in the nature of unjust precautions for the protection of the assailant's own possessions than a device for seizing those of others. However salutary it may be in theory to obey the dictates of public spirit, it is certain that, politically and even morally, those dictates are liable to prove fatal to the man who persists in observing them with all the world when no one thinks of observing them towards him.³²

One might surmise from this discussion about the limits of just war theory that there is no room at all for moral considerations in international politics. That would be wrong, however. For starters, we are all moral beings at our core. Each of us has a moral compass that helps inform how we think about the world. And that includes hard-nosed realists. In practice, this means that most foreign policymakers employ both a moral and a realist compass to help them understand the world and navigate their country through it. In some cases, the needle will point in the same direction, which means there will be little disagreement over the appropriate policy. For example, it made both moral and strategic sense to fight against Nazi Germany in World War II.

In some other cases, strategic considerations will be largely absent, thus making it relatively easy to pursue a morally correct policy. Intervening to stop the Rwandan genocide is a good example here, as doing so had hardly any consequences for the balance of power. The most important and difficult cases, however, are those where the moral and strategic compasses point in different directions. In those instances, strategic logic wins almost every time. This is truly tragic. But it can be no other way in an anarchic system in which concerns about survival are paramount. The US decision to ally with the Soviet Union in WWII is a case in point. Stalin's regime was one of the most murderous in modern times, but the US needed the Red Army to win the war against the Third Reich.³³

³² Quoted in Kenneth M. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 180. Thucydides maintains that in "human affairs the question of justice only enters where there is equal power to enforce it." Quoted in Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, p. 211. Hobbes wrote that in the state of nature, "nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law, no Injustice." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1986), p. 188.

³³ When the moral and strategic logics are in synch, the foreign policy elites will invariably emphasize the moral case for war in their public pronouncements, even though the strategic considerations will be of paramount

There is an alternative way of looking at the relationship between moral and strategic calculations that bears mentioning. One could argue that there is no meaningful clash between them. The leaders of any country have a moral obligation, so the argument goes, to protect their people from foreign threats. Indeed, that is surely their most important responsibility. Thus, if they have no choice but to pursue policies that violate just war theory – or international law – to secure their state’s survival, their behavior will nevertheless be moral or indeed just.

To illustrate my point, consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was a preventive war, which is impermissible according to both just war theory and international law. But Russian leaders surely believe the invasion was just or at least justifiable because they are convinced that Ukraine joining NATO is an existential threat that must be prevented.³⁴ I believe that almost every world leader would think that a preventive war aimed at eliminating a mortal threat is a just or morally correct decision, even if just war theory says it is not. For example, if President Kennedy had been forced to attack Cuba in 1962 to remove the Soviet missiles located there, few people in the West would have condemned him for launching an unjust war. Surely, most Americans would have considered it a just decision even if meant a preventive war that violated just war theory.

The bottom line is that in the world of great-power politics, Clausewitzian logic best explains when states go to war, not international law or just war theory.

POLITICS AND ESCALATION

My third theme concerns escalation in wartime, which is an ever-present danger in the modern world, and which has the potential to undermine political control of the military once the fighting begins. The threat of escalation, in other words, is a threat to undercut war’s political essence.

Given that wars are ultimately fought for political reasons, military strategy must be subordinated to political direction. For this to work, civilian decisionmakers must have considerable flexibility in selecting their state’s political goals and tailoring the military strategy

importance. When those two logics do not line up, the leaders will act according to strategic dictates and try to cover up their behavior with moral rhetoric.

³⁴ Putin made the case that an invasion of Ukraine was in accordance with international rules three days before it happened. He said on 21 February 2022: “Kiev has long proclaimed a strategic course on joining NATO. Indeed, each country is entitled to pick its own security system and enter into military alliances. There would be no problem with that, if it were not for one ‘but.’ International documents expressly stipulate the principle of equal and indivisible security, which includes obligations not to strengthen one’s own security at the expense of the security of other states. This is stated in the 1999 OSCE Charter for European Security adopted in Istanbul and the 2010 OSCE Astana Declaration. In other words, the choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia’s security.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>

for realizing them. This way of doing business matters most when political leaders aim to wage limited wars, which invariably necessitate restricting military operations to prevent unwanted escalation. In short, politics is not only the driving force behind war, but politics also puts limits on wars once they start.

Keeping wars limited is particularly important in the nuclear age, given the catastrophic consequences of full-scale nuclear escalation. There are two scenarios that are of paramount importance: preventing a conventional war between two-nuclear-armed countries from escalating to the nuclear level; and making sure that if one side uses a small number of nuclear weapons to signal resolve, that neither side climbs too far up the escalation ladder.

Yet, it is difficult for political leaders to keep wars – especially great-power wars – limited, as there is a strong tendency for wars in the modern world to escalate and become absolute or total wars in which the aim is to decisively defeat the adversary. This phenomenon is a result of a variety of factors, including: the military's preferences; the dynamics of war; and nationalism as well as other ideologies that are inclined to see the world in terms of good and evil.

First off, militaries are disposed to favor decisive victories and to resent political leaders interfering in the waging of war. As Betts argues in *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, military leaders are not trigger happy, but when they go to war, they “prefer using force quickly, massively, and decisively.”³⁵ Their basic attitude is that war is a deadly enterprise that invariably involves the security of the state and the lives of their airmen, sailors, and soldiers, and thus everything should be done to defeat the enemy decisively and quickly. Limited wars, they tend to think, are not the way to do business.

This perspective is reflected in US General Mark Clark's comments to a Senate subcommittee during the Korean War:

Once our leaders, our authorized leaders, the President, and Congress, decide that fight we must, in my opinion we should fight without any holds barred whatsoever. We should fight to win, and we should not go in for a limited war where we put our limited manpower against the unlimited hordes of Communist manpower If fight we must, let's go in there and shoot the works for victory with everything at our disposal.³⁶

David Rees writes in his book on the Korean War: "Apart from Generals Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor it appears that every single senior American commander involved in the Korean War disagreed with the policy of limited hostilities."³⁷

³⁵ Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 5

³⁶ General Mark Clark quoted in Acheson, *Power and Diplomacy* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), pp. 35-36.

³⁷ David Rees, *Korea; The Limited War* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), p. xv.

To compound the problem of keeping wars limited, military leaders are inclined to believe that political leaders are not equipped to manage a complicated endeavor like war. Only the admirals and generals are, as they have professional expertise. Thus, once a nation commits its forces to fight, the military tends to favor a separation of politics and military strategy, which will allow the military to conduct the war free from civilian interference. In effect, many generals reject Clausewitz's view of the relationship between war and politics.³⁸

This argument for compartmentalization is articulated in an oft-quoted comment by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of the German General Staff under Bismarck: "At the moment of mobilization the political adviser should fall silent and should take the lead again only when the Strategist has informed the King, after the complete defeat of the enemy, that his task has been fulfilled."³⁹ Similarly, General Erich Ludendorff, who effectively commanded the German army in the latter years of World War I, argued that in wartime, "politics must ... be subservient to the conduct of war."⁴⁰

The propensity for great-power wars to escalate is not just the result of the military's disdain for limited war and civilian interference once the fighting starts. Nationalism, which is the most powerful political ideology on the planet, also pushes states toward total or absolute war. Indeed, this is a central theme in Clausewitz's *On War* and surely one of the main reasons he placed so much emphasis on the need for political leaders to be in the driver's seat during wartime – so they can limit the scope of a war if necessary.⁴¹

Nationalism is built around the twin assumptions that nations are the highest-level social group of real significance for most people in the world, and that nations want their own state, or should I say nation-state.⁴² Naturally, people distinguish between their nation and other nations as well as their nation-state (if they have one) and other nation-states. Otherness lies at the

³⁸ On this point, Clausewitz remarked that "subordinating the political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that creates war." *On War*, p. 607. Clausewitz's perspective is clearly reflected in Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), which is arguably the most influential book ever written on civil-military relations. He writes: "When the military man receives a legal order from an authorized superior, he does not argue, he does not hesitate, he does not substitute his own views; he obeys instantly. He is not judged by the policies he implements, but rather by the promptness and efficiency with which he carries them out. His goal is to perfect an instrument of obedience; the uses to which that instrument is put are beyond his responsibility." *Soldier and the State*, p. 73.

³⁹ Moltke quoted in <https://companyleader.themilitaryleader.com/2019/05/24/beware-the-casual-clauswitzian/#:~:text=Prussian%20Chief%20of%20General%20Staff%20Helmuth%20von%20Moltke%20praised%20Clausewitz,the%20Strategist%20has%20informed%20the>

⁴⁰ Erich Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, trans. A.S. Rappoport (London: Hutchinson, n.d.), p. 24.

⁴¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, book 8.

⁴² For a more comprehensive discussion of my views on nationalism, see Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, pp. 83-108.

core of nationalism. That particularistic ideology also tends to foster an innate sense of superiority that can lead to deeply antagonistic relations among nation-states. Think of Madeleine Albright's condescending claim – recently repeated by President Biden – that the US is “the indispensable nation,” as “we see further than other countries into the future.”⁴³

Moreover, when nation-states go to war with each other their nationalism almost always morphs into hypernationalism: the belief that the other nation is not just inferior but dangerous and must be dealt with harshly if not brutally. In such cases, contempt, and hatred of “the other” suffuses the nation and creates powerful incentives to eliminate that threat, which is hardly conducive to limiting wars.

To make matters worse, other political ideologies can help push states up the escalation ladder. This is certainly true when states with rival ideologies clash, as happened between 1941 and 1945 when fascist Germany collided with the communist Soviet Union.⁴⁴ The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries are another example of this phenomenon at work.⁴⁵ Putting aside conflicts between rival ideologies, some ideologies – like liberalism – have a crusader impulse built into them, which lends itself to pursuing policies aimed at ridding the world of evil – a mission that lends itself to winning decisive victories.⁴⁶ Other ideologies like Naziism have an eliminationist impulse at their core, which obviously leads to total war of the worst sort.⁴⁷

It is worth noting that the increasing destructiveness of war over the past two centuries – especially the capability to severely punish an opponent's civilian population during a conflict – is likely to inflame ideological passions, thus frustrating efforts to keep the fighting limited.

⁴³ On Albright, see <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>. On Biden, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamas-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russia's-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/#:~:text=We%20are%2C%20as%20my%20friend,time%20is%20of%20the%20essence.>

⁴⁴ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Bryce Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military* (New York: Berghahn, 2021).

⁴⁵ Peter H. Wilson, “Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years War,” *International History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 2008), pp. 473-514. For a more detailed treatment, see Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*.

⁴⁷ This eliminationist impulse is clearly reflected in the Nazi regime's Hunger Plan and Generalplan Ost. See Alex J. Kay, *Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940-1941* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006). Also see: https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206247.pdf

Robert Osgood succinctly makes this point: "the scale of war and the passions of war, interacting, will create a purely military phenomenon beyond effective political guidance."⁴⁸

Finally, the dynamics of war itself push states to escalate. Three logics are at play here. First, if a state launches a limited war and achieves success, at least some of its leaders are likely to conclude that it can achieve even greater success if it widens the conflict. A limited success, in other words, might whet the appetite of the attacking state. For example, the initial aim of the U.S. intervention in the Korean War in June 1950 was to defeat the North Korean invasion and drive the attacking forces back to the 38th parallel. But after the successful landing at Inchon, American leaders expanded their war aims and invaded North Korea, thinking that escalating the war would eliminate future threats to South Korea and that neither China nor the Soviet Union would intervene.⁴⁹ This phenomenon, which is sometimes called the "victory disease," will be most pronounced in situations where ideological fervor abounds.

Second, even when a limited attack is unsuccessful, the potential for escalation is ever-present. In such cases, military leaders are likely to argue that if they are allowed to escalate the conflict, they can promise success. Political leaders will be incentivized to believe them, since losing a war is hardly an attractive outcome for any policymaker. For example, the Vietnam War was going badly when Richard Nixon entered the White House in early 1969. The military had long been arguing that escalation was necessary to rescue the situation. Nixon began a secret bombing campaign in Cambodia in March 1969 and then sent US ground forces into Cambodia in May 1970.⁵⁰ Of course, the steady growth of the US military presence in South Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 reflected this same logic at play.

Third, as Alexander Downes has shown, when states get involved in protracted and costly wars, they will be strongly inclined to escalate the conflict by attacking the other side's civilian population. He writes: "Warfare, particularly in the age of nationalism follows an inexorable logic of escalation that sets in if victory does not come quickly."⁵¹ This logic, as Downes shows, was evident in the Allies' starvation blockade against Germany in World War I and in the strategic bombing campaigns waged by Britain, Germany, and the US in World War II. In short, if you are winning, go for more; if you are losing, double down; if you are facing a long war, target civilians.

⁴⁸ Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 25-26.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the Korean case and other cases, see Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Summer 1997), pp. 1-49.

⁵⁰ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

⁵¹ Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 257. Also see Fred C. Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), chapter 3.

My bottom line is that great-power wars have a propensity to escalate in ways that can be at odds with the preferences of policymakers. When that happens, war is no longer subordinate to politics. This phenomenon matters enormously when states attempt to wage limited wars, where there is an ever-present danger of unwanted escalation.

Given the destructiveness of modern war, especially regarding nuclear weapons, it is imperative that political leaders understand the dynamics of escalation and be able to control it. In other words, it is essential to make sure that war remains under the control of responsible political leaders who understand these dangers.

CONCLUSION

More broadly, there is an enduring need to understand the nature of war and its intimate connection to politics. In that regard, it is essential to recognize that conflict is endemic to politics, and political disputes always have the potential to become deadly. In international politics, this means that war is an ever-present danger that sometimes puts the survival of states at risk. That possibility causes great powers to fear each other and compete for power. In such a world, preventive wars and wars of opportunity can never be ruled out, which is not to say they are frequent or desirable ways for states to defend their interests or resolve their differences. Yet, the fact remains that the danger of war can never be fully eliminated, and thus political considerations will invariably trump economic, legal, and moral considerations whenever they are in conflict.