

# War's End? Realist, Liberal and Constructivist Perspectives on the Decline-of-War Thesis

*Aryan Sharifi, Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Dr. Aaron Hoffman's POL 141 course *International Relations*. The assignment asked students to evaluate the "decline-of-war thesis" from the perspectives of realist, liberal and constructivist theories. The paper uses Chicago Author-Date citation style.

Within the field of International Relations, there is a lively debate over whether interstate war is on the decline. Many scholars, most notably Steven Pinker, claim that wars between states have decreased in number since the end of WWII. Others remain skeptical of this "decline-of-war thesis," with some rejecting it altogether. Realism, liberalism and constructivism—three well-known theories in International Relations—serve as insightful frameworks with which to analyze such a debate. Hence, this paper evaluates the decline-of-war thesis using these paradigms. Utilizing quantitative and qualitative data from secondary sources, the author argues that realism rejects the aforementioned thesis on the grounds that war is an inherent part of the international system since states constantly seek to become all-powerful hegemons. While, contrary to the realist approach, constructivism and liberalism both subscribe to the above thesis, they do so for different reasons. For liberals, interstate war is waning because multilateral institutions (MIs) have led to the establishment of peace-enabling "security communities." Constructivists, on the other hand, view the decline of war as stemming from a change in how nations and people perceive warfare. In this analysis, common criticisms levelled against each of the three theories, alongside responses by their proponents, are considered. The essay concludes with an examination of the work's implications.

## Introduction

Robert A. Millikan, an American physicist and Nobel Prize Laureate, claims “war will disappear, like the dinosaur, when changes in world conditions have destroyed its survival value” (Forbes, n.d.). Increasingly, scholars in the field of International Relations are claiming that war’s “survival value” is diminishing and that war between states is on the decline. Amongst these scholars, the most prominent is Steven Pinker, whose best-selling book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, garnered vast attention from the media and the public (Gleditsch et al. 2013, 400–405; Pinker 2011). According to Pinker, “War appears to be in decline. In the two-thirds of a century since the end of World War II, the great powers, and developed states in general, have rarely faced each other on the battlefield, a historically unprecedented state of affairs” (Gleditsch et al. 2013, 400). Within academia, some support this “decline-of-war thesis” (Gat 2013; Mueller 2007; Mueller 2009; Spagat and Van Weezel 2020, 129–42), while others dispute it (Braumoeller 2019; Mann 2018).

Each of the three major theoretical approaches in International Relations—realism, liberalism and constructivism—has differing perspectives on the decline-of-war thesis. How these theoretical approaches evaluate this thesis is significant, as the insights these frameworks offer shape foreign policy and impact world affairs. Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s chancellor from 1871 until 1890, for instance, avidly pursued “balance-of-power” politics, which is commonly associated with realism (Nye and Welch 2017, 87–93). Bismarck’s balance-of-power system led to stability in Europe because “it allowed for occasional crises or conflicts without causing the whole edifice to crumble” (93). Thus, theoretical frameworks have real-world consequences. In terms of the waning-of-war debate, realists assert that “major wars are neither waning nor waxing, but fluctuating; such wars tend to recur as the political . . . cycles mature” (Väyrynen 2006, 17). Liberals, on the other hand, argue that multilateral institutions (MIs) create “security communities” “in which willingness to use war shrinks toward the vanishing point” (Morgan 2006, 181). And, lastly, constructivists maintain “attitudes toward the value and efficacy of war have changed” (Mueller 2007, 2), and that this shift has led to war withering away.

## Realism

From a realist standpoint, as mentioned above, any cessation in interstate warfare is merely temporary, marked by changes in power distributions within the international system (Holsti 2006, 146; Väyrynen 2006, 16–17). Indeed, Bear

Braumoeller's research in *Only the Dead* indicates there is substantial variation in the "rate of conflict and war initiation over time" (Braumoeller 2019, 91). Between 1815 and the end of the Cold War, Braumoeller observes a quadrupling of the median rate, followed by a reduction of more than fifty percent thereafter (92). Realists make sense of this variation through "power transition theory" (Holsti 2006, 146).

Further developed by political scientist and realist Robert Gilpin, power transition theory posits that periods of peace and war can be explained in terms of the competition between states to become the international system's hegemon. Nation-states, according to realism, are the principal actors within the "anarchic" international system, which is characterized by the absence of a central governing authority (Kauppi and Viotti 2023, 199–201; Szanto 2021, 134). They are unitary, rational, power-maximizing actors whose main priority is security. In the international system, there is always one predominant power, and it is known as the hegemon (Holsti 2006, 146). A hegemonic position is the most secure and beneficial for a state, as the hegemon establishes the system's rules of conduct based on its own interests. Because of this advantageous position, states aspire to become hegemons. Peace prevails among the great powers when there is no immediate challenger to the existing hegemon. War looms, however, when a challenger arises through economic or political gains (Levy 1998, 148). Two scenarios are likely in such a situation. Either the declining hegemon, while it is still ahead, wages war against the challenger to prevent it from rising or the challenger wages war first. In the aftermath, the challenger is either eliminated from the system or it replaces the hegemon and starts the cycle anew. After the end of WWII, the Soviet Union arose to challenge American hegemony. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States emerged as the clear hegemon of the international order. For Robert Gilpin, "the decline of major power war is not yet an established trend. It is only the manifestation of *temporary* American hegemony, a hegemony that is likely to be challenged in due time" (Holsti 2006, 146; italics in the original).

Critics may assert that the possession of nuclear weapons and the threat of "mutually assured destruction" effectively rule out the occurrence of another hegemonic war. Realists would respond by saying that such a proposition would only apply to nuclear-wielding powers (147). In other words, this proposition cannot explain the behaviour of states that do not have nuclear capability.

## Liberalism

Liberals, in stark contrast to realists, believe multilateral institutions (MIs) produce security communities whose member states refrain from going to war with one another. A multilateral institution has “at least three members, has some sort of fixed membership, is governed by a set of rules or agreements, and has some kind of formal structure or routine by which it works” (Abidin 2022, 102). More specifically, the type of multilateral institutions that liberals have in mind are intergovernmental ones (Morgan 2006, 162–63). Examples include the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Since the end of the Second World War, membership in multilateral institutions has increased tenfold (Gleditsch 2015, 121–22). What explains this dramatic surge? Continuously, states are pursuing the formation of multilateral institutions because they foster peace. Similar to realism, liberalism accepts that anarchy casts its shadow over the international sphere, promoting a sense of distrust among community members (Kauppi and Viotti 2023, 199–201; Szanto 2021, 134). Moreover, they accept the prevalence of the “security dilemma,” where the enhancement of security by one nation-state results in increased insecurity for another. Where liberals differ from realists, however, is in believing that the negative effects of anarchy and the security dilemma, which promote war and conflict, can be mitigated; this is accomplished, liberals say, through MIs (Nye and Welch 2017, 69).

As said by liberal institutionalist Robert Keohane, MIs “provide information and a framework that shapes expectations” (69). They stabilize expectations in a multitude of ways. One way, for example, is that they provide a sense of continuity; most Europeans are confident that the European Union will continue to exist. Another way in which MIs stabilize expectations is by providing an opportunity for reciprocity (69). By providing a sense of continuity, member states are more inclined to settle for less in the short term as they know they will have the opportunity to gain more benefits in the long run (Morgan 2006, 175–76). Combined together, these two methods allow conflicts to be resolved more easily as states are now less concerned over zero-sum calculations. An equally important way in which MIs aid in war aversion, however, is by making information regarding the institution and its member states readily accessible (Nye and Welch 2017, 69). James Fearon, a political scientist, classifies information asymmetries between states as one of the leading causes of interstate warfare (Fearon 1995). Multilateral institutions encourage transparency. These factors cultivate trust and interdependence among the states involved and result in the

formation of security communities—a phrase coined by political scientist Karl Deutsch (Taylor 2020, 23–24). Such communities are less likely to experience interstate war because of “a perpetual dynamic process of mutual attention, communication, perception of needs, and responsiveness in the process of decision-making” (Deutsch et al. 1957, 36). Furthermore, while there is great variation in conflict initiation over time, as Braumoeller declares, liberals would argue that the “peaks” in the number of interstate conflicts are getting smaller and smaller, indicative of a downward trend (Gleditsch 2015, 113–15). Thus, liberals state, the “Long Peace”—spanning from 1945 to the present—has persisted thanks to multilateral institutions.

A common criticism levelled against the liberal argument is that it neglects the instances where multilateral institutions have failed to prevent conflict between major states (Morgan 2006, 166–67). Liberals reply by indicating that MIs are manifestations and embodiments of the international order’s underlying and prevailing norms. These institutions preserve peace as “an integral component of the necessary norms and behaviour” (174). However, when MIs fail to avert war, it is not due to their shortcomings but rather to the difficulties inherent in constructing effective arrangements for interventions, which stem from deficiencies in community building (173–74).

## Constructivism

Finally, constructivism holds the view that changing attitudes about war’s worth and usefulness have triggered a decrease in armed confrontation. Prior to the advent of WWI, war was primarily seen as a method of dispute resolution that was “natural, inevitable, honorable, thrilling, manly, invigorating, necessary, and often progressive, glorious, and desirable” (Mueller 2007, 45). From academics and writers to military generals and politicians, the popular sentiment regarding war perceived it as a purifying and cleansing experience (37). Despite the existence of pacifist and antiwar groups, their voices were largely overshadowed by the opposition (38). Nevertheless, these factions gained traction during the Great War and amassed a large following. John Mueller (2007, 40) credits the antiwar movement as mainly responsible for the attitudinal shift towards war after WWI. Subsequently, people began questioning war’s subsistence and necessity as an institution, with many deeming it “repulsive, uncivilized, immoral, and futile” (40). This movement reached its zenith post-WWII, wherein textbooks were denationalized (Jervis 2002, 3), university programs and courses revolving around

the realities of war were developed (Holsti 2006, 139–40), and combat was portrayed as a “tragedy, horrible mistake, curse, disease, or evil” (140).

Like liberals, constructivists also point to the downward trend of the peaks in the number of conflicts initiated as evidence supporting their claim (Gleditsch 2015, 113–15). Whereas liberals attribute this development to multilateral institutions, constructivists ascribe it to the role norms, values and ideas play in global politics (Richmond 2020, 98–101). Constructivists, such as Alexander Wendt, consider norms, values and ideas to be fundamental in shaping state behaviour. From their viewpoint, norms promote “logics of appropriateness” that frame the manner in which states act (Kauppi and Viotti 2023, 328–37). Logics of appropriateness are based on intersubjective understandings, meanings and identities arising out of socialization and interaction. They dictate what is considered acceptable and legitimate in the global realm. New norms and ideas emerge from and are reinforced by “norm entrepreneurs,” of which the previously mentioned antiwar movement is a prime example. Antiwar societies spread sentiments advocating nonviolence throughout the world, thus altering romanticized perceptions of interstate conflict. This, in turn, decreased the rate of warfare.

Evidently, this ideational shift did not preclude WWII from happening, but Mueller does not fault people’s attitudes for the occurrence of this event (Mueller 2007, 50–65). On the contrary, armed conflict was widely viewed in a negative light during the interwar period. Instead, Mueller blames Adolf Hitler as the chief architect behind the Second World War. Drawing on a range of historical analyses, John Mueller insists that not even Hitler’s military generals—let alone the German people—were in favour of a massive conflict, partly because they feared a repetition of the Great War’s outcomes. The historian Ian Kershaw, in his book, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, maintains that “there were affinities between popular aspirations favouring a growth in Germany’s national prestige and power, and Hitler’s racial-imperialist aims. Expansion of Germany’s borders, especially the incorporation of ‘ethnic’ German territory into the Reich, was massively popular, as long as it was attained without bloodshed” (Kershaw 1987, 229). Using Kershaw’s evaluation as evidence, John Mueller concludes that Hitler dragged the world into war because of his own lust for power (Mueller 2007, 58–60).

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, realism does not agree with the waning-of-war thesis since the frequency of armed confrontation neither rises nor falls; it simply fluctuates according to changes in power distributions within the system. By realist accounts, great-power wars are inevitable because states compete with one another to achieve hegemony. Realists predict war will soon erupt between the United States, the current hegemon, and China, the emerging challenger (Kauppi and Viotti 2023, 231), given that “uneven economic development and diminishing returns” are bound to weaken American hegemony (Holsti 2006, 146). In contrast to realism, liberalism and constructivism both subscribe to the declinist argument, yet they do so for different reasons. Liberals indicate that security communities resulting from multilateral institutions have been the chief contributors to peaceful conditions. Therefore, liberalism would encourage the establishment of more multilateral institutions in order to meet the security needs of nation-states. The constructivist approach sees the decline of war mainly as the consequence of altering attitudes toward the value and efficacy of interstate warfare. As customs are never static, constructivists would advise state and non-state actors alike to work towards reinforcing nonviolent norms (Jervis 2002, 3–4; Richmond 2020, 98–101). Only time will tell whether interstate conflict is truly an artifact of the past.

## References

- Abidin, Shazelina Z. 2022. “International Organizations.” In *Foundations of International Relations*, edited by Stephen McGlinchey, 102–15. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Braumoeller, Bear F. 2019. *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deutsch, Karl W., Sidney A. Burrell, Robert A. Kann, Maurice Lee Jr., Martin Lichtermann, Raymond E. Lindgren, Francis L. Loewenheim, and Richard W. Van Wagenen. 1957. *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Fearon, James D. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49 (3): 379–414.
- Forbes. n.d. "Forbes Quotes: Thoughts on The Business of Life." Accessed September 12, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/7980/>.
- Gat, Azar. 2013. "Is War Declining – and Why?" *Journal of Peace Research* 50 (2): 149–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343312461023>.
- Gleditsch, Nils Petter. 2015. "The Liberal Moment Fifteen Years On." In *Nils Petter Gleditsch: Pioneer in the Analysis of War and Peace*, by Nils Petter Gleditsch, 29:111–37. SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice. Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-03820-9\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-03820-9_8).
- Gleditsch, Nils Petter, Steven Pinker, Bradley A. Thayer, Jack S. Levy, and William R. Thompson, eds. 2013. "The Forum: The Decline of War." *International Studies Review* 15 (3): 396–419. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12031>.
- Holsti, Kalevi J. 2006. "The Decline of Interstate War: Pondering Systemic Explanations." In *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, edited by Raimo Väyrynen, 135–59. London: Routledge.
- Jervis, Robert. 2002. "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 2001." *American Political Science Review* 96 (1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004197>.
- Kauppi, Mark V., and Paul R. Viotti. 2023. *International Relations Theory*. 7th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kershaw, Ian. 1987. *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levy, Jack S. 1998. "THE CAUSES OF WAR AND THE CONDITIONS OF PEACE." *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1): 139–65. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.139>.

- Mann, Michael. 2018. "Have Wars and Violence Declined?" *Theory and Society* 47 (1): 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-018-9305-y>.
- Morgan, Patrick M. 2006. "Multilateral Institutions as Restraints on Major War." In *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, edited by Raimo Väyrynen, 160–84. London: Routledge.
- Mueller, John. 2007. *The Remnants of War*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mueller, John. 2009. "War Has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment." *Political Science Quarterly* 124 (2): 297–321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165X.2009.tb00650.x>.
- Nye, Joseph S., and David A. Welch. 2017. *Understanding Global Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction to Theory and History*. 10th ed. Boston: Pearson.
- Pinker, Steven. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking.
- Richmond, Oliver P. 2020. *Peace in International Relations*. 2nd ed. Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution. London: Routledge.
- Spagat, Michael, and Stijn Van Weezel. 2020. "The Decline of War Since 1950: New Evidence." In *Lewis Fry Richardson: His Intellectual Legacy and Influence in the Social Sciences*, edited by Nils Petter Gleditsch, 27:129–42. *Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, Practice*. Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31589-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31589-4_11).
- Szanto, Balazs. 2021. *War and International Relations: A Critical Analysis*. *Cass Military Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Taylor, Charles Lewis. 2020. "A Life of Productivity." In *Karl W. Deutsch: Pioneer in the Theory of International Relations*, edited by Charles Lewis Taylor and Bruce M. Russett, 25:15–47. *Pioneers in Arts, Humanities, Science, Engineering, Practice*. Cham: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02910-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-02910-8_2).

Väyrynen, Raimo. 2006. "Introduction: Contending Views." In *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, edited by Raimo Väyrynen, 1–30. London: Routledge.

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Student Learning Commons to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Simon Fraser University website or in the SLC Writing Contest Open Journal.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Aryan Sharifi, 2024

Available from: <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwv>