



IS THE WORLD GETTING SAFER – OR NOT?

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A glance at any major newspaper gives the reader an impression of global chaos, with raging conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria and Yemen. The crisis in Ukraine suggests that the potential for a serious conflagration over borders in Europe still exists. Others argue that we really live in a world of prosperity and unprecedented peace.¹ Our own FPRI Senior Fellow Dominic Tierney suggests we recognize a more nuanced distinction between interstate and intrastate conflicts.² He pointed out the dichotomy between recent history's decline in interstate wars and a spate of messy intrastate conflicts. Professor Tierney ends his piece with cautious optimism, suggesting "we live in a better time, if we can keep it."

We agree that the last few decades were a better time, but suggest that keeping the peace is becomingly problematic. In particular we would urge greater caution with statements like "few can dispute that relations between countries have entered an era of almost unprecedented stability." Deterring interstate war and preserving the peace may prove more difficult than in the last few decades. The forces that are credited with dampening interstate war — America's surplus military power, robust set of global alliances, and the lack of competitors — are still present, but fading. New shifts in the security environment may be stacking the deck against the United States and the existing international order.

The notion of a strategically benign world of unparalleled security is unfortunately still distant and growing dimmer. The context that produced positive trends in the past is evolving, and against US national interests. Contrary to rosier depictions, we sense that our alliances are weakening, that the authoritarian leaders in Beijing or Moscow care little for any consensus about international norms, and competitors are certainly vying for influence in Asia, the Persian Gulf, and along Europe's frontiers.

Our perspective of current and future trends is reinforced by a projection by the U.S. intelligence community. The National Intelligence Council issues a long-range forecast every four or five years, and its last report assessed the likelihood of stability in stark terms:

...the risks of interstate conflict *are increasing* owing to changes in the international system. The underpinnings of the post-Cold War equilibrium are beginning to shift. During the next 15-20 years, the US will be grappling with the degree to which it can continue to play the role of systemic guardian and guarantor.³

¹ Michael A. Cohen, "Crisis Inflation: Why the World is Actually Safe for America," *World Politics Review*, May 2015. Accessed at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/print/15758>.

² Dominic Tierney, "Is the Whole World on Fire?" *Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-Note*, December 14, 2014. <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2014/12/whole-world-fire>. Last accessed 9 June 2015.

³ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative World*, Washington, DC, 2012, viii. Accessed at

That assessment is based upon the character of the international system, and America's will and capacity in preserving that system. However, these conclusions were not supported by a recent strategic forecast produced by a team in the United Kingdom. Their periodic reports are highly respected, due to their careful research and measured judgments. The UK report agrees with optimists like Tierney, concluding that:

Although many people see the 20th and early 21st centuries as being the most violent and bloody in human history, evidence suggests that the frequency and intensity of wars, as well as the number of violent deaths, has been declining sharply *and is likely to continue to fall.*⁴

The UK report went out further in time, out to 2045, and there is definitely the possibility that near term trends of higher violence could regress. But we believe that any forecast on future human violence needs to more carefully examine history and account for possible changes in the emerging security environment.

In light of this, it is important we develop a prudent sense of awareness of the geopolitical context that could evolve from a plausible projection of drivers in the near future, and the potentially grave consequences that may emerge. Contrary to assertions about linearity in past patterns, trends are **not** immutable and they do not proceed in only one direction. Neither global peace nor persistent conflict is preordained. Trends are the consequence of multiple drivers.

But what dark forces might appreciably bend what some see as an ineluctable and linear pattern? In this section we offer several possible other drivers:

America in Retreat. What happens to regional stability if the United States decides to come home to rebuild? Who fills in the vacuum in the Middle East or guarantees freedom of navigation in the Pacific? If we decide that we no longer have the wallet or the will to continuing to guarantee or buttress the existing international order, are we comfortable allowing other to decide what rules and norms remain? We are inclined to think that if we collectively decide to opt out of a leadership role in the world, that we should expect a greater degree of violence.

The Return of Geopolitics. Although not universally accepted, the last decade has seen the return of geopolitics. Yesterday's brief unipolar moment was just that, a passing moment. Now the balance of power in the international order matters a great deal. Rising powers like China will be expected to seek greater power and influence, especially in their own region, and may seek to resolve longstanding disputes by force of arms. China clearly knows the Melian Dialogue by heart, might makes right and the weak do what they must. Russia's behavior along the periphery of its borders suggests that Dr. Tierney's notion that "Territorial expansion by force is no longer acceptable" is not widely accepted in Moscow.

The key question for futurists and strategists seeking to maximize the security of their respective countries is how will China evolve? Will it seek a responsible leadership position within the existing set of international rules and norms, or will it seek to alter that system? The prevailing power structure and order of the last 30 years contributed much to subdued levels of interstate conflicts. Alterations to the current power system by China's significant military modernization could conceivably generate a greater likelihood of flashpoints, confrontations, and crises. Will great power competition erupts into a war?⁵ History suggests that periods of great power transition will increase the level of instability and the chances of conflict.⁶ It is not automatic, but the emergence of rising powers tends to produce conflict with existing predominant powers.⁷ The ongoing high level of defense spending in Asia is not indicative of high levels of trust and transparency.⁸

<http://www.dni.gov/index.php/about/organization/global-trends-2030>.

⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Trends Programme: Global Strategic Trends – Out to 2045*. (Doctrine, Concepts and Development Center, Shrivenham), 2014, 96. Accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-strategic-trends-out-to-2045>.

⁵ On Chinese naval modernization, see Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Yang, *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011.

⁶ Christopher Layne, "Sleepwalking with Beijing," *The National Interest*, May/June 2015, 45.

⁷ Graham Allison, Testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, April 14, 2015, accessed at http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Allison_04-14-15.pdf

⁸ Adam Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," Vol. 39, No. 2, *International Security*, Fall, 2014, 53.

Reduced Coalition Capability. A major contributor to peace in both Europe and Asia has been a strong alliance system. America's allies used to be major contributors to preserving the peace in many dimensions. They do not get enough credit for their contributions in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Yet, looking forward, we see America's traditional allies struggling with political, fiscal, and demographic challenges that hamstringing their ability to export security beyond their immediate environs. Domestic security and social welfare systems will tie up our European partners for the foreseeable future. Will their reduced capacity induce Russia to take further steps against Ukraine, Baltic States and other former FSU countries? Could weaker conventional deterrence around Eurasia heighten risks of conflict?⁹

Disruptive Technologies. The evolving character of technology will have a commensurate impact on our security, sometimes in ways we have not yet imagined.¹⁰ Technology is not the sole driver of change in military revolutions, but our age is replete with potentially disruptive sources of innovation that will change how societies fight. Cyber security will be a continual challenge even if it does not technically qualify as a form of warfare, as it can be used to enable or disable crucial elements of our national security and economic system.¹¹ Cyber deterrence remains very uncertain. Crisis instability appears to be growing, given the uncertain balance of capability between nations gaining more nuclear capabilities, fielding anti-satellite capabilities, and the uncertain character of cross-domain technologies. What happens when another country becomes the first to field a weapon based on directed energy or if Russia succeeds with hypervelocity missiles before the West? One must ask if the reliance of states on space or cyber connectivity is increasing the need for preemptive actions. If true, this could increase crisis instability and the higher level of incidences of conflict breaking out and doing so quicker than we have imagined it.

Competition for Scarce Resources. Will future wars center on energy security? Resources like oil, valuable rare minerals and water have been contested resources and a possible driver of wars. U.S. energy requirements may benefit from the recent tight oil and shale gas revolution. But China continues to assert ownership of the South China Sea, perhaps with the notion that oil and rare earth deposits can be exploited there.¹² Far more likely is greater tensions over access to fresh water. The nexus of environmental changes, including drought, water shortages and food price spikes can be expected to lead to decreased political stability. Food price spikes have been tied to flashpoints in northern Africa and Syria's civil war. Could future flashpoints erupt from rising population needs for water and food?¹³

Violent Extremist Organizations. Political violence directed against noncombatants to provoke shock and terror is on the rise, and has been for some time. Groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram are filling security vacuums and exploiting political dissatisfaction throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The frequency and lethality of their use of terrorism appears to be escalating, as these groups compete with regional factions and each other for media attention, funding, and recruits.¹⁴ As extremist groups embrace emerging technologies, the potential for disruption and violence may increase further.¹⁵ Though perhaps not enough to incite wars on its own, terrorism and extremist violence is shifting regional power balances, spreading insecurity, and aggravating ethnic and religious animosities, all of which can spiral into new wars. Do these VEOs pose enough risk to order and stability in key regions that warrant substantial investment? What happens, as U.S. intelligence suggests, when VEOs gain access to more lethal capabilities?¹⁶

Peace Support Operations (PSOs). The last 20 years have seen a great explosion in the number of PSOs. These operations, often authorized and paid for by the United Nations, have helped reduce trends in violence. Will the UN continue to agree to provide the legitimacy and resources for these operations in the future? Will the major powers that sit on the UN Security Council continue to permit PSOs, or will they become another battleground in geopolitical competition? Will the increased levels of violence from violent extremists make conditions in these operations too costly for the states that provide the troops? Depending on the answers to these questions, decreased levels of authorized operations and lower troop contributions could

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, "Stephen Pinker and the long peace, alliance, deterrence, and decline," Vol. 14, No. 4, *Cold War History*, 2014, 661.

¹⁰ Zachary Davis, Ronald Lehman, and Michael Nacht, eds., *Strategic Latency and World Power: How Technology is Changing Our Concepts of Security*, Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2014.

¹¹ Thomas Rid, *Cyberwar Will Not Take Place*, London: Hurst, 2013.

¹² Chris, Horton, "Beijing Zeroes In on Energy Potential of South China Sea," *New York Times*, October 28, 2014, accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/business/energy-environment/beijing-zeroes-in-on-energy-potential-of-south-china-sea.html?_r=0

¹³ Monika Barthawal-Datta, *Food Security in Asia: Challenges, Policies and Implications*, London: IISS 2014.

¹⁴ Dan Byman and Jennifer Williams, "Al-Qaeda vs. ISIS: The Battle for the Soul of Jihad," *Newsweek*, March 27, 2015, accessed at <http://www.newsweek.com/al-qaeda-vs-isis-battle-soul-jihad-317414>

¹⁵ See <http://www.wsj.com/articles/criminals-terrorists-find-uses-for-drones-raising-concerns-1422494268>

¹⁶ James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," Statement to the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, January 29, 2014.

decrease the UN's capacity to previous levels, which will lead to higher recidivism in current conflicts, as well as unchecked levels of misery and violence in conflicts where PSOs could have been deployed. Already, there are signs that support for conflict mitigation is exhausted.¹⁷

History Returns: Combining Mars and Minerva

All told, the combined impact of these trends could generate a return to more significant levels of conflict, increased levels of casualties and other costs. Not all of these drivers will peak at the same time, but several are likely to produce instability and conflict. An unraveling of norms can erode international order and create the conditions for contagious misbehavior.

Reports from both international and U.S. academic centers show that the frequency and violence of contemporary conflict is already reflecting a rise.¹⁸ Fatalities are up sharply, thanks to Syria, Iraq, and Libya.¹⁹ The number of Displaced Persons or refugees is at an international peak.²⁰

Certainly, the whole world is not on fire, and there are no barbarians at our gates (or beaches). Just as certainly, we do not live in a risk-free world, or one in which we can confidently state that the scourge of war is disappearing. An era of declining violence that began with the end of the Cold War has ended. A new era has arrived, with new power struggles, ancient hatreds, and new technologies. Instead of looking backwards and resting on our laurels, we need to accurately capture current data on ongoing wars (Mars) and project forward with more imagination and a greater sense of history. The owl of Minerva provides insights only to those willing to explore history in breadth, depth and context. We should seek answers to the basic context questions posed here before events spin entirely out of control.

¹⁷ Laurence Norman, "UN Ambassador to U.N. Pushes Europe for More Peacekeepers," *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2015. Accessed at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-ambassador-to-u-n-pushes-europe-for-more-peacekeepers-1425925668>.

¹⁸ David Backer, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, and Paul Huth, *Peace and Conflict 2014*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014.

¹⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "ACD Index," *Armed Conflict Database*, Accessed at <https://acd.iiss.org/en/acdindex>.

²⁰ "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-Time High as War and Persecution Increases," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 18, 2015. Accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.