War and International Politics

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It is commonplace to hear that the world is witnessing the return of great power politics, which were taken off the table during the unipolar moment (1991–2017). After all, it is impossible to have security competition or war between great powers when there is only one great power on the planet. This is not to deny that the United States—the sole great power—fought wars during unipolarity, but they were unfair fights against minor powers. Yet we are now in a multipolar world. Great power war is once again a possibility and security competition among the great powers—China, Russia, and the United States—is intensifying.[1] Thus, the time is ripe to examine the fundamentals of great power politics.

One reason this task is so important is that many policymakers as well as students of international politics came of age during unipolarity and have not thought deeply about great power politics. This is unsurprising, because the subject was largely irrelevant for understanding what was going on in the world during that period.

This problem is compounded by the fact that thinking about international politics more generally was dominated by a body of liberal theories, which either ignore or misconstrue the military variables that are so important for understanding relations among the great powers. In fact, some prominent

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1. The international system was bipolar from the end of World War II (1945) until the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991. It then became unipolar with the United States as the world's only great power. By about 2017, China and Russia had developed sufficient economic and military capabilities to qualify as great powers, thus making the world multipolar. This new reality explains why the first Donald Trump administration (2017–2021) consistently portrayed the world as multipolar, maintaining from its start that "great power competition [had] returned." Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), p. 27.

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thinkers maintained during unipolarity's early years that the world was fast reaching the point when war would be relegated to the dustbin of history. Francis Fukuyama famously argued that with liberalism's triumph over communism in the Cold War, the world had reached the "end of history," and great power wars would no longer trouble it.[2] Others argued either that war was no longer cost-effective or that because of humanity's moral progress, inter-state war was going the way of dueling and slavery.[3] In short, the liberal thinking that dominated the unipolar ecosystem—and that is still influential today—is not especially helpful for understanding the current international system.

This article seeks to help rectify this problem by explaining the realities of great power politics. Specifically, it focuses on the all-important relationship between international politics and war—especially war between the great powers. The story I tell is essentially a realist one that focuses on military factors and the role of war in the international system.[4]

Many first-rate articles and books deal with different aspects of great power war. Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* is probably the most important work on the subject.[5] Yet there is an important gap in the literature on how war relates to great power politics. To be sure, Clausewitz famously maintains that war is an extension of politics by other means. While this brilliant insight informs my analysis, he says little about the fundamental nature of politics and how it relates to war. In fact, hardly anyone does.[6]

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2. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
3. Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Penguin, 2011); Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 42–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538750; John E. 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, 2012).
4. I explicate my realist theory of international politics in John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014). Also see: John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023). The key arguments in this article are either not made or made but not fully developed in *Tragedy*.
5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed., trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
6. One exception is Carl Schmitt, who maintains that the essence of politics is the friend-enemy distinction, which is bound up with the possibility that violence might break out with an enemy. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (1932; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Schmitt and I agree that politics is fundamentally conflictual and

To be sure, many scholars focus on how domestic political factors like interest groups, ideologies, and social classes, just to name a few, affect the prospects of great power war and international politics more generally. But such perspectives are not quite the same as focusing directly on the concept of politics and exploring its essence. My aim is to do just that and then explain how my understanding of the political is connected to war. I then examine how the interplay between politics and war affects how states both initiate and conduct armed conflict. Specifically, I examine how states decide when to start a war, and how political and military considerations interact to foster escalation during wartime.[7]

I offer three related arguments. For starters, politics—be it domestic or

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can turn deadly. But there are important disagreements between us. For starters, Schmitt says little about the source of the friend-enemy distinction, other than to say that the state makes such distinctions (pp. 29–30, 45). For me, as I argue in the next section, politics is rooted in inherent disagreements among individuals and groups about fundamental values and questions regarding the good life. People's limited ability to settle their differences through reason reinforces such disagreements. Moreover, the state in my story plays a key role in preventing those disagreements from turning violent. For international politics, I emphasize that the anarchic structure of the system greatly influences state behavior. Specifically, the global distribution of power helps determine which states are friends and which are adversaries. Schmitt pays hardly any attention to the structure of the international system; he relies on the claim that the state assigns the friend and enemy labels without providing any basis for that decision. Finally, Schmitt and I have different understandings of liberalism. He tends to think that liberalism is a serious threat to eliminate politics because it leads to a harmonious society in which the friend-enemy distinction is largely irrelevant (pp. 28, 53–54, 69–73). In essence, he fears the liberal world that Francis Fukuyama describes in "The End of History?" I believe that political conflict, which might turn deadly, is an inescapable aspect of the human condition and that liberalism, properly understood, recognizes that problem and attempts to mitigate its downside. There is no possibility of a harmonious society inside a liberal state, a point that Schmitt fails to fully recognize. For my views on liberalism, see Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, chap. 3.

7. There is a fourth topic concerning great power war that I do not address, mainly because it involves what happens inside states, not in relations among them, which is my focus. Specifically, security competition and war have deep-seated effects on the internal politics of states, a point famously made by Charles Tilly, who argued that "war makes the state, and the state makes war," and by Leon Trotsky, who described war as "a great locomotive of history." Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 42; Leon Trotsky, "Report on the Communist International," trans. John G. Wright, *Fourth International*, Vol. 4, No. 8, Whole No. 36 (August 1943), pp. 245–250, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/12/comintern.htm. Also see inter alia: Michael C. Desch, "War and Strong States, Peace and Weak States?," *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 237–268, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300028551; Otto Hintze, "The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 157–178; Otto Hintze, "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, pp. 178–215; Bruce D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundation of Modern Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992).

international—is a fundamentally competitive enterprise that has the potential to turn deadly. This basic fact of life means that war is always a danger in the international system, which has no higher authority that can protect states from one another. Given that war is a brutal and violent enterprise that invariably involves massive suffering, and especially because it can threaten a state's survival, it is the dominating feature of international politics. It shapes how policymakers think about the world and how states interact with one another in profound ways.

Moreover, it is difficult to erect meaningful legal or moral barriers that can limit when great powers start wars, mainly because survival is their principal concern. Yet they operate in a world where the potential for war is ever present and there is no night watchman that they can turn to for help if their survival is threatened. Thus, leaders are inclined to opt for war in this self-help world if they think it is necessary to enhance their state's security—even if doing so violates international law or just war theory.

Finally, limited wars have a propensity to escalate into absolute wars. One might think that political leaders can prevent unwanted escalation, given the political nature of war and fear of its sheer destructiveness. This is sometimes but not always true. Periodically, the combative nature of politics propels violence to its extreme, rather than limiting it. Furthermore, the inclinations of military commanders—who do not like limited wars or politicians interfering in how they conduct a war—as well as the dynamics underpinning war make it difficult to keep wars limited and under political leaders' firm control. Yet, it is essential in the nuclear age to make sure that if a great power war occurs, it does not escalate into a total war and indeed ends as quickly as possible.

Politics Is a Contact Sport

One must comprehend politics' essence to appreciate war's role in the international system. There is little doubt that war is ultimately a political act, as Clausewitz famously argued. War, in his well-known words, is "a continuation of political activity by other means." In other words, political logic is dominant when states go to war, even though military logic also matters. Again, Clausewitz put the point well, "The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it."[8] Nevertheless, that seminal argument is not saying that

8. Both quotes in this paragraph are from Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87.

war casts a giant shadow over international politics, which is the argument I am advancing. To understand war's profound importance requires a firm grasp of the political.

Politics is a deeply competitive and potentially violent enterprise. Individuals, groups of all sorts, and states invariably have differences with one another and sometimes those disagreements concern issues that matter greatly to them.[9] They may have clashing belief systems or clashing interests, which create unresolvable conflicts. Those differences might involve first principles, to include salient moral issues and questions about the good life.

Many people believe that reason can lead people—and ultimately states, which are run by individuals—to compromise and reach agreement, or at least manage their differences, when they are at loggerheads. That is what politics is all about, so the argument goes. As Russian President Vladimir Putin put it, "Politics is the art of compromise."[10] Certainly, that often happens, but not always. Sometimes reason leads people—and this obviously includes the leaders of states—to reach fundamentally different conclusions, where there is little to no room for compromise. Just look at the fervor with which conservatives and liberals in the United States fight over Supreme Court appointments. As Newt Gingrich put it, politics can be "a really nasty, vicious, negative business."[11]

At its core, politics is all about getting one's way in bitter disputes that involve key issues. Winning matters greatly in such circumstances, which is why politics, to quote both Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, is a "contact sport" that not only produces winners and losers but also does not guarantee that the outcome is permanent.[12]

POLITICS INSIDE THE STATE

At times, those political disagreements become so profound that the opposing sides try to harm each other and sometimes even kill each other. This lurking possibility of political violence explains why individuals living together in a

9. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, chap. 2.
10. "Putin Calls Politics 'Art of Compromise,' Says Russia Ready for Talks, Unlike Ukraine," TASS, December 19, 2024, https://tass.com/politics/1890081.
11. Jonathan Karl, "Gingrich: Politics Is a 'Nasty, Vicious, Negative' and Disgusting Business," *ABC News*, December 30, 2011, https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/12/politics-is-a-nasty-vicious-negative-and-disgusting-business.
12. On Bill Clinton, see Sarah Boseley, "Power to the People," *Guardian*, August 11, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/12/clinton.ethiopia; regarding Barack Obama, see William Finnegan, "The Candidate," *New Yorker*, May 31, 2004, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/31/the-candidate-5.

society need a state, which is effectively a political order with coercive power that is designed to keep people in line. It also explains why liberal states place a high premium on tolerance. A higher authority that has a monopoly on violence keeps people from harming or killing one another over their differences. In essence, individuals need some person or body responsible for organizing and administering daily life to ensure that no member endangers the survival of other members. But even that solution has its limits, as the history of civil wars makes clear. In short, the intensity and enmity that often attends politics should not be underestimated.

Some readers might think—owing to their own experiences—that politics is surely a rough and tumble business, but that I exaggerate the potential for violence and its effects. Two points are in order. First, that perspective is largely a consequence of the fact that almost all those readers were born and raised inside a state where the police and other institutions keep order and keep them safe for the most part. Take away the state—or just take away the police and any equivalent organization—and political life would quickly become far more dangerous.

Second, the likelihood of violence does not have to be especially high for people to worry incessantly about that danger. The reason is simple: The consequences are so horrible, even if it is a low-probability event. In other words, even if there is only a small chance someone is going to fall victim to political violence, which might include death, that person will be deeply concerned about their survival.

Inside a state, where the threat of violence is greatly reduced and there is much cooperation and compromise, politics is mainly concerned with determining who controls the governing institutions, and thus who gets to write the laws or rules. After all, those rules reflect a particular set of first principles and invariably favor the interests of some individuals or factions more than others. Therefore, it matters greatly who writes, interprets, and enforces the laws, because whoever does these things can shape daily life in ways that reflect their interests and views about the good life. In short, there will almost always be fierce competition within any large social group to determine who controls its political institutions.[13] Unsurprisingly, power matters greatly in determining which faction wins that competition. The more resources an individual or fac-

13. This competition to control institutions also exists among states. See John M. Owen IV, "Why Great Powers Compete to Control International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Winter 2024/25), pp. 84–121, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00503.

tion possesses, the more likely it is to control or influence the actions of the governing institutions.

POLITICS IN INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

Politics naturally remains a contact sport in the international system, but it manifests itself in different ways than it does within a state for two principal reasons. First, there is no world government to provide order and protect states if another state threatens or attacks them. As Kenneth Waltz famously argues, the system's architecture is anarchic, not hierarchical, which means that states operate in a world where the potential for war is always present, and there is no higher authority they can turn to for protection in dangerous times.[14]

Second, war is a destructive and dangerous enterprise. One can understand why Thomas Jefferson referred to war "as the greatest scourge of mankind."[15] But its horribleness is what makes international politics such a deadly serious business. It is the persistent possibility that a state might fall victim to a devastating war that 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 trying to abolish it.

To make matters worse, it is not simply war's destructiveness that alarms leaders; it is also the possibility that their state's survival might be put at risk. In other words, an adversary might be an existential threat. And if not today, it could be tomorrow. After all, the balance of power invariably shifts over time, and other states' intentions, certainly their future intentions, are difficult to discern with confidence.[16] It is clear from the historical record that today's ally can quickly become tomorrow's adversary. In 1945, for example, the United States was allied with China against Japan. Within five years, the relationships had reversed. The same switch took place during those years regarding Germany and the Soviet Union, which was a U.S. ally in the fight against Germany in World War II but became the United States' mortal foe a

14. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), chap. 5. Also see G. Lowes Dickinson, *The European Anarchy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
15. "From Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 13 May 1797," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-29-02-0288.
16. On the constantly 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: First Vintage Books, 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).

few years after that conflict ended. Meanwhile, West Germany became a close U.S. ally in the 1950s.

As emphasized, politics is unremittingly competitive and intense, which means that the possibility of conflict and even killing are baked into the enterprise. In international anarchy, there is always a possibility that a political dispute might turn into a war. That danger leads to recurring security competition among the great powers, whose top goal is to ensure their survival. In other words, even in peacetime, states must prepare for war. Invariably, this involves building military capabilities to improve their security, which potential rivals will see as threatening to their own security. This phenomenon is called the "security dilemma."[17] Those rivals, of course, will respond in kind, leading to security competition among them.

This is not to say that the great powers are in a constant state of war, because they obviously are not. But they do continually compete for power with potential rivals while the possibility of war always lurks in the background. This struggle for advantage explains why war is, has been, and always will be the central feature of international politics.

cooperation and survival

To help ensure the clarity of my arguments about the competitive nature of international politics and how that phenomenon turns war into such a significant concern for states, four additional points are in order.

First, I am not arguing that great powers hardly ever cooperate with one another, because they do, mainly when they have similar interests and when cooperation does not undermine their security. The Soviet Union and the United States, for example, cooperated during the Cold War to curb nuclear proliferation, which was in the interest of both superpowers.[18] Likewise, China

17. John H. Herz first introduced the concept of the security dilemma. John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1950), pp. 157–180, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009187. Also see Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100014763; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167–214, https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958; Sebastian Rosato, "Competition Under the Security Dilemma" (unpublished manuscript, 2025).

18. George Bunn, *Arms Control by Committee: Managing Negotiations with the Russians* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, "Collusion and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (October 2015), pp. 983–997, https://doi.org/10.1086/682080; Eliza Gheorghe, "Proliferation and the Logic of the Nuclear Market," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019) pp. 88–127, https://doi.org/10.1162/

and the United States both have a vested interest in cooperating to address climate change, which they are now doing, albeit in limited ways.[19] States also form military alliances when they are confronted with an especially dangerous opponent, as the Soviet Union and the United States did during World War II. Rivals can also rely on diplomacy to resolve differences or to prevent a dangerous crisis from leading to a war that neither side wants, as Moscow and Washington did during the Cuban missile crisis and the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict.

The key point, however, is that this cooperation always takes place in the shadow of security competition, as the possibility of war is ever present. The Americans and the Soviets, for example, relentlessly competed for power despite cooperating on proliferation during the latter half of the Cold War. Alliances are an important feature of international politics. In most cases, they are temporary marriages of convenience, although the longevity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) shows that they sometimes last a long time.[20] To paraphrase Lord Palmerston, states have neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies, just permanent interests, as the Soviet Union and the United States demonstrated after 1945, when those wartime allies became bitter rivals.[21]

My point about the relationship between competition and cooperation high-

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isec_a_00344; Roland Popp, "Introduction: Global Order, Cooperation Between the Superpowers, and Alliance Politics in the Making of the Nuclear-Nonproliferation Regime," *International History Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 2014), pp. 195–209, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2014.899263; William C. Potter and Sarah Bidgood, *Once and Future Partners: The United States, Russia, and Nuclear Non-proliferation* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018).

19. Xinhua, "China's Role Highlighted at COP28 in Global Climate Action," State Council Information Office, People's Republic of China, December 6, 2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/in-depth/2023-12/06/content_116861192.htm; "U.S-China Cooperation on Climate Change," press release, White House, September 3, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/03/fact-sheet-us-china-cooperation-climate-change; "U.S-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s," press release, U.S. Department of State, November 10, 2021, https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-china-joint-glasgow-declaration-on-enhancing-climate-action-in-the-2020s/; Lia Zhu and Hou Liqiang, "China, U.S. Can Clear the Air Through Climate Change Cooperation," *China Daily*, November 17, 2023, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202311/17/WS6556c692a31090682a5eeb12.html.

20. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Paul Poast, *Arguing About Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Negotiations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

21. "Henry John Temple," Quotes, Goodreads, accessed October 9, 2024, https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/2114693-therefore-i-say-that-it-is-a-narrow-policy-to.

lights important differences between theories of international economics and realist theories of international politics.[22] Most mainstream economists maintain that the best way for states to maximize their prosperity is to create an overarching cooperative framework that allows them to compete economically. In particular, the aim is to create international institutions that can write and enforce rules that will facilitate free trade and govern economic intercourse among the member states. 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."[23] In another 2012 survey involving many 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."[24] 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."[25] Of course, globalization represents this kind of economic cooperation on a planetary scale. According to Martin Wolf, the chief economic commentator at the *Financial Times*, globalization is "the integration of economic activity across borders," which can lead to "an unparalleled era of peace, partnership and prosperity" if done right.[26]

Mainstream economists can focus on facilitating economic competition within a fundamentally cooperative worldwide system because they pay

22. It is important to note that international relations scholars who focus principally 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 (1984), pp. 1–23, https://doi.org/10.2307/2010304.
23. No economist disagreed; the remaining 15 percent either did not respond to the question or were uncertain. "Free Trade," Kent A. Clark Center for Global Markets, March 13, 2012, https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/free-trade/.
24. No economist disagreed; the remaining 15 percent did not respond to the question. "China-US Trade," Kent A. Clark Center for Global Markets, June 19, 2012, https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/china-us-trade/.
25. None disagreed; 2 percent were uncertain, and 19 percent did not respond to the question. "China-Europe Trade," Kent A. Clark Center for Global Markets, April 12, 2018, https://www.kentclarkcenter.org/surveys/china-europe-trade/.
26. Martin Wolf, "Shaping Globalization: Done Wisely, It Could Lead to Unparalleled Peace and Prosperity; Done Poorly, to Disaster," *Finance and Development*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (September 2014), p. 22, https://doi.org/10.5089/9781475566987.022.

hardly any attention to how states think about survival in international anarchy, in which war is always a possibility. Thus, concepts like security competition and the balance of power, which are fundamentally important for studying international politics, have no place in conventional economics. In that realm, fostering prosperity, not maximizing a state's prospects for survival, is the principal concern. Moreover, economists tend to privilege a state's absolute gains, not its relative gains, which is to say they largely ignore the balance of power.[27]

Nevertheless, survival concerns almost 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 competitive at their core, which is another way of saying that international politics dominates international economics when those two perspectives offer different policy prescriptions.[28]

Second, I am not arguing that great power wars are likely. In fact, they are unlikely because industrialization and nationalism make modern warfare much more deadly; the more costly conflict becomes, the less likely it is to occur. Of course, states have launched wars that they expect to be highly costly and extremely risky—Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War—but such instances are rare.[29]

Nationalism allows states to produce huge armies that are willing to fight for long periods. It also infuses the wider society with animosity, if not hatred, toward the other side.[30] Industrialization, on the other hand, puts a vast array of lethal weaponry in the hands of militaries, turning them into giant killing machines.[31] The same logic obviously applies to nuclear weapons, which are

27. Michael Mastanduno, "Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 73–113, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539052. The author makes it clear that the commitment of most economists to absolute gains logic stands in marked contrast to almost all other groups of the U.S. population, who care more about relative gains logic.

28. For evidence of this phenomenon during the Joe Biden administration, see Sam Fleming, Demetri Sevastopulo, and Claire Jones, "How National Security Has Transformed Economic Policy," *Financial Times*, September 3, 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/6068310d-4e01-42df-8b10-ef6952804604.

29. Michael E. Brown, *Deterrence Failures and Deterrence Strategies: Or, Did You Ever Have One of Those Days When No Deterrent Seemed Adequate?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1977), https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P5842.html.

30. Barry R. Posen, "Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 80–124, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539098.

31. Writing before World War I, Jean de Bloch believed that "the weapons with which men fight

called weapons of mass destruction for good reason. War is especially unlikely between rival great powers that have nuclear arsenals that can survive—at least in part—a first-strike by the other side. This is a world where no matter who strikes first, the likely result is mutual assured destruction (MAD). But even in a MAD world, it is possible for rival great powers to fight a conventional war against each other or use nuclear weapons in a limited way to gain bargaining advantage over their rival.[32] In short, war remains a serious possibility in the modern world, 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 invariably understand the centrality of war in international politics.[33] After all, they are directly responsible for ensuring their country's survival in a system that places a premium on self-help, since there is no higher authority that can rescue their state if trouble comes knocking. Those decision-makers are in charge in an extreme emergency.[34] That responsibility focuses the mind like few others. Of course, the perennial possibility of war also influences many members of the public and certainly members of a country's foreign policy community—but not as deeply as their leaders, simply because the first two groups are not the ultimate deciders.

Fourth, how one defines survival influences our understanding of how the possibility of great power war affects life in the international system. Survival obviously means not being destroyed as a functioning state, which is to say not ending up like Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany in 1945. But defining survival by 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.[35]

. . . are, indeed, becoming so deadly that before long you will see they will never fight at all." Jean de Bloch, *The Future of War in Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations*, trans. R. C. Long (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1914), p. xv.

32. For an expanded discussion of my views on great power war in a nuclear world, see Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 13–33, 145–147, 224–232. Also see: Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution That Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Nuclear Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

33. For a fuller development of this theme that also emphasizes the importance of the ultimate decider, see Mearsheimer and Rosato, *How States Think*.

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

35. 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, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000538.

Survival, in my lexicon, means that a state maintains its physical base and 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. All this is to say that great powers are primed to compete—sometimes fiercely—not just to avoid total military defeat. They also compete to ensure that they do not lose any territory to a rival, and that they maintain the autonomy of their domestic political order.[36]

Some people in the West find it difficult to accept the notion that the threat of great power war and associated concepts like survival have a marked effect on how policymakers think about the world. This perspective is unsurprising, given that many of them came of age during the unipolar period, when there was no great power security competition, and the sole pole in the system was a Western country. At that time, it was possible for people living in the West to think that prosperity, not survival, was a state's main goal. Yes, the United States and its allies fought wars during unipolarity, but those were unfair fights against minor powers like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Serbia, not fights against major powers, much less another great power. Of course, countries outside the West like China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, just to name a few, worried greatly about their survival and balanced against the United States.

It is also rather easy for the United States to disregard or downplay concerns about survival even when other great powers are in the system, because it is the most secure great power in world history.[37] No country in the Western

36. The importance that states attach to territory has varied over time. Today, when nationalism is an especially powerful ideology, states are inclined to treat their territory as sacred and be willing to fight and die to maintain or regain it. Burak Kadercan, *Shifting Grounds: The Social Origins of Territorial Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

37. Andrew Preston, "Monsters Everywhere: A Genealogy of National Security," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (June 2014), pp. 477–500, https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhu018; John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shifrinson, and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (December 2023), pp. 1304–1318, https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759272100222X; John A. Thompson, "The Exaggeration of American Vulnerability: The Anatomy of a Tradition," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 1992), pp. 23–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1992.tb00482.x; 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 because the United States was the only great power during the unipolar moment, it enjoyed unparalleled security. Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Hemisphere is a serious military threat, and giant oceans separate the U.S. homeland from the world's other great powers in Asia and Europe. This basic fact of life helps explain why the United States pursued an isolationist foreign policy for part of its history and why that approach still attracts adherents today.[38] Europe, especially Western Europe, has long sat underneath the U.S. security umbrella, which effectively guarantees peace in Europe, thus allowing many Europeans to think that they too have reached the end of history.[39]

Nevertheless, the ongoing fighting in the Middle East and Ukraine, coupled with the possibility of a war between China and the United States, has cast doubt on that optimistic view of international politics. 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."[40] Still, that hopeful outlook is so deeply ingrained in Western thinking at this point, especially inside universities, that it will take more time for most Americans and Europeans to understand that security competition and possible war among the great powers profoundly shape their world.

The Decision for War

My understanding of the relationship between politics and war shows why it is impossible to institutionalize meaningful legal or moral barriers to initiating wars. The question of when it is permissible for one country to attack another has concerned scholars and policymakers for centuries and is highly relevant today because of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[41] Many in the West think that leaders should be guided by international law, just war theory, or some combination of the two, when contemplating whether to attack an-

38. Paradoxically, the United States' abundant security during the unipolar moment allowed it to pursue foolish adventures around the world that invariably failed. After all, the price of failure for the United States was small, given how powerful it was compared with every other state in the system. See Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*.
39. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why Is Europe Peaceful Today?," *European Political Science*, Vol. 9 (September 2010), pp. 387–397, https://doi.org/10.1057/eps.2010.24.
40. Paul Poast, "Not a World War, but a World at War," *Atlantic*, November 17, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/11/conflicts-around-the-world-peak/676029/.
41. The war in the Middle East has also dominated the world's attention. The fighting began on October 7, 2023, when Hamas violently attacked Israeli military forces and civilians. In response, Israel launched a violent campaign against the Palestinians in Gaza. I contend that this is not an interstate war, as the Palestinians do not have their own state.

other state. This liberal perspective, which aims to sharply curtail when states can start wars, is unrealistic in international anarchy and thus of little use for curbing their behavior.

According to international law and contemporary just war theory, starting a war is only acceptable under a few circumstances: (1) if a country has good evidence that it is about to be attacked by an adversary and it launches a preemptive strike to get in the first blow; (2) if a state secures permission from the UN Security Council to invade another state; or (3) if one country intervenes in another to prevent mass murder or genocide. There is significant overlap between the core tenets of just war theory and the international laws of war, which, for this article, allows me to treat them as one and the same. According to one scholar of just war theory: "Just war thinking and the law of war constitute intersecting, interwoven conversations that often reflect each other like mimes in a mirror: just war thinkers cite legal arguments to defend ethical intuitions while lawyers turn to ethics and philosophy to work around the strictures of the law. This extensive overlap is not surprising, given the histories of these two traditions."[42]

From this perspective, both preventive wars and wars of opportunity are forbidden. Preventive wars aim to avert an adverse shift in the balance of power; for wars of opportunity, the balance of power is not shifting against the initiator, but it sees a chance to gain more power and enhance its security or perhaps achieve some other political objective such as spreading its ideology. Thus, whether you see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a preventive war—as former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and the former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg do—or you see it as an unprovoked war of opportunity, as most people in the West do, it is both illegal and unjust and should be condemned.[43]

In essence, many contemporary Western thinkers reject Clausewitz's famous

42. Valerie Morkevičius, "Introduction: The Roles of International Law and Just War Theory," *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Winter 2017), pp. 431–432, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679417000417.

43. Roger Cohen, "A Former French President Gives a Voice to Obstinate Russian Sympathies," *New York Times*, August 27, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/27/world/europe/former-french-president-voice-russia.html; Naftali Bennett, "Bennett Speaks Out," YouTube, February 4, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK9tLDeWBzs; Jens Stoltenberg, "Opening Remarks," presented at joint meeting of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 7, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_218172.htm.

dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means. In his view, war is simply a tool that states use when it makes good military and political sense. This obviously includes preventive wars and wars of opportunity. Naturally, there is no room for moral or legal considerations in Clausewitz's understanding of war, which is realist to the core and at odds with how most people in the West think about war initiation.

What is going on between the two sides in this dispute represents a fundamental disagreement about the workings of the international system. The aim of just war theorists and champions of international law is to subordinate the conduct of international politics to a moral or legal order that dictates when states may 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.

This is not how the world works, however. Preventive wars and wars of opportunity are recurring features of international politics, and nothing is going to change that reality in the foreseeable future. Whether states are democracies or nondemocracies, they will launch these two kinds of wars if they conclude that doing so is in their strategic interest. The reason is simple: There is no higher authority in the international system that can enforce the rules, which means states must do whatever is necessary to protect themselves.

For sure, states need laws and norms to help them interact efficiently with one another, and there is no question that the great powers mainly write the rules—for their own benefit. But powerful states will ignore those rules if they think that following them is at odds with their vital interests, which means such rules are not a meaningful check on war.[44] Of course, when states go down this road, they will be quick to deny that they are violating international law, even when it is obvious that they are.

Consider Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was in large part a preventive war, which is impermissible according to both just war theory and international law.[45] Putin, however, made the case that invading Ukraine was in accordance with international rules three days before doing so. He said on February 21, 2022:

44. John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–49, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078; John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342. Also see Rochelle Terman, *The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

45. Barry R. Posen, "Putin's Preventive War: The 2022 Invasion of Ukraine," *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Winter 2024/25), pp. 7–49, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00501.

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 [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] 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.[46]

MICHAEL WALZER—THE REALIST

One way to grasp why efforts to delegitimize wars of opportunity and preventive wars are bound to fail is to consider a crucial qualification in Michael Walzer's important work, *Just and Unjust Wars*. He opens the book by criticizing realist thinking about war; indeed, the first chapter is titled: "Against 'Realism.'" He then takes aim at Clausewitz in the subsequent chapter for failing to recognize that war is a crime.[47] Walzer is not simply concerned with stipulating meaningful limits on when states can initiate wars; he also wants to place significant limits on how states wage war.

After making a comprehensive and sophisticated case for his version of just war theory, he allows that in a "supreme emergency"—when a country is on "the brink of national disaster"—it can ignore the rules that he lays out and "do what is necessary" to survive. In other words, it can act according to the dictates of realism.[48]

Walzer recognizes that bringing survival into his story runs the risk of 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."[49] Specifically, he tries to protect his case 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. Before a country can act unjustly, Walzer maintains that "the danger must be of an unusual and horrifying kind" and

46. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, February 21, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828.
47. For Carl von Clausewitz, according to Michael Walzer, "War is never an activity constituted by its rules." Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chaps. 1–2, p. 25.
48. Ibid., pp. 248–249.
49. Ibid., p. 261.

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."[50]

Walzer's advice makes little sense. Why would a state facing an existential threat wait until the last moment, when it is on the verge of destruction, to act like a realist? Would it not make more sense for that 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 beginning and ignore just war theory unless this moral approach to war is in sync with balance of power logic. In essence, the survival imperative, coupled with the difficulty of discerning other states' future intentions, leaves states with little choice but to pursue preventive wars and wars of opportunity when circumstances warrant doing so. Indeed, if a state strictly adheres to just war theory or international law, sooner or later it is likely to put its survival at risk.

This perspective has a rich pedigree, which is 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.[51]

The bottom line is that in a world shaped by great power politics, realist logic best explains when states go to war, not international law or just war theory.

THE ROLE OF MORALITY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

One might surmise from this discussion about the limits of just war theory that there is no room for moral considerations when it comes to relations among

50. Ibid., pp. 253, 268.
51. Quoted in Kenneth N. 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 ibid., 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* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1986), p. 188.

states. That would be wrong, however. For starters, we are all moral beings. Everyone has a moral compass that helps inform how they think about the world. And that includes hard-nosed realists.[52] In practice, this means that most policymakers use both a moral and a realist compass to help them comprehend the world and navigate their country through it. In some cases, the two needles will point in the same direction, in which case there will be little disagreement over the appropriate policy. For example, it was morally and strategically wise for the United States to fight against Nazi Germany in World War II.

In other cases, strategic considerations will be largely absent, thus making it relatively easy to pursue a morally correct policy. The United States, for example, should have intervened to stop the Rwandan genocide in 1994, as doing so would have had hardly any consequences for the balance of power, and it was certainly the morally correct thing to do.[53] The most important and vexing cases, however, occur when the moral and strategic compasses point in different directions. In those instances, strategic logic wins almost every time. This is truly tragic, but it is to be expected in an anarchic system in which concerns about survival are paramount. A case in point is the U.S. decision to ally with the Soviet Union during World War II, which helped make it the most powerful state on the European continent until it collapsed in late 1991. Joseph Stalin's regime was one of the most murderous in modern times, but the United States needed the Red Army to win the war against the Third Reich, which was a greater threat than the Soviet Union.

When the moral and strategic logics are in sync, the foreign policy elites will invariably emphasize the moral case for war in their public pronouncements, even though the strategic considerations will be of foremost importance. When those two logics do not line up, the leaders will act according to strategic dictates and work to cover up their behavior with moral rhetoric.[54] This behavior of course resembles how states use shrewd lawyers to explain why they are not violating international law when in fact they are doing just that.

There is an alternative way to look at the relationship between moral and

52. See for example Michael C. Desch, "It's Kind to Be Cruel: The Humanity of American Realism," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 2003), pp. 415–426, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210503004157.
53. Alison L. Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999). Stopping the genocide would have been a substantial operation.
54. Ido Oren, "The Subjectivity of the 'Democratic' Peace: Changing U.S. Perceptions of Imperial Germany," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 147–184, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539232.

strategic calculations that bears mentioning. One might argue that there is no meaningful clash between them. In this view, a country's leaders have a moral obligation to protect their people from foreign threats—indeed, it is 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 ultimately be moral or just.

I believe that almost every world leader as well as their publics would think that a preventive war aimed at eliminating a mortal threat is a morally correct decision, even if just war theory says it is not. For example, if diplomacy had failed to resolve the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and President John F. Kennedy had used military force to remove the Soviet missiles and nuclear weapons from Cuba, 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 it was a preventive war that violated just war theory. Furthermore, Russian leaders surely believe that launching a preventive war against Ukraine was just or at least justifiable because they are convinced that Ukraine joining NATO is an existential threat that must be prevented.[55]

While this alternative approach might seem attractive at first glance, it is ultimately unconvincing. It implies that virtually every military measure that a state takes to enhance its security—including purposely murdering huge numbers of civilians—can be justified as morally correct. This rationale denies that there is any meaningful conflict between moral and strategic considerations in foreign policy, and in effect, takes moral considerations off the table.

There are two fundamental problems with this argument. First, allowing strategic considerations to define what is morally right or wrong mistakenly diminishes politics' central role in determining how individuals and states think and act in the international arena. After all, most people care a lot about morality, but sometimes they disagree in fundamental ways about what is the morally correct thing to do. This is one reason why disputes about first

55. William Burns was the U.S. ambassador to Russia when NATO decided in April 2008 that it would bring Ukraine into the alliance. At the time, he wrote a memo to then–Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that succinctly describes Russian thinking about this matter. In Burns's words: "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests." NATO, he said, "would be seen . . . as throwing down the strategic gauntlet. Today's Russia will respond. Russian-Ukrainian relations will go into a deep freeze. . . . It will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine." William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019), p. 233.

principles are at the heart of politics. That concern for acting in a just fashion also explains why states invariably attempt to justify their foreign policy decisions as morally correct and their adversaries' behavior as unjust, to both their own people and audiences abroad. In reality, moral and strategic calculations sometimes clash in foreign policy; it is important to acknowledge such deep political tension rather than pretend that it does not exist.

Second, there is little doubt that states prioritize strategy over morality when the two conflict. States sometimes act in profoundly unjust ways because they think that their survival leaves them no choice. This grim reality points up what a brutal business international politics can be. But better to recognize that awful fact of life than try to claim that any measure taken to enhance a state's security is moral.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

One might surmise that basic realist logic, which privileges strategic considerations over moral ones, justifies wars of extermination against rival great powers. The best way to survive in the cutthroat world of international politics—so the argument goes—is to eliminate any potential threats once and for all, as Rome did to Carthage in 146 BC. In that instance, the Romans enslaved or killed most of the Carthaginian population, destroyed Carthage's towns and cities, and eliminated it as an independent political and territorial entity. Athens had earlier imposed a similar solution on Melos in 416 BC.[56]

There is no question that such a policy would be morally depraved, which further illustrates why it is important to avoid claiming that any policy that aims to enhance a state's security is just. An eliminationist policy, however, is not only morally bankrupt but also strategically unnecessary according to realist logic. Indeed, it is likely to backfire.

Survival in international anarchy simply requires a state to be much more powerful than all the other states in the system. This logic explains why states seek regional hegemony and why being the sole pole in a unipolar world is the ideal situation for a great power. In such circumstances, there are no serious threats to the dominant country's security, much less existential threats. Thus, once a dangerous rival is knocked out of the great power ranks, there is no reason to erase it from the planet.

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56. On Carthage, see: Serge Lancel, *Carthage: A History*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); Richard Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization* (New York: Penguin, 2012). On Melos, see Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pp. 351–357.

Furthermore, a Carthaginian strategy is likely to be counterproductive. For starters, it would eliminate countries that might be useful allies for balancing against another threat. Germany and Japan, for example, played that role for the United States after their devastating defeats in World War II. Each helped contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and they were an integral part of the Western order that Washington established after 1945. In addition, an annihilation strategy would be especially difficult to execute. Great powers are hard to destroy, especially if they have a powerful incentive to fight to the last person. Not to mention that doing so would cause almost every other state in the system to come together and fiercely oppose the aggressor.[57] After all, one of them might be the next victim, so best to deliver it a devastating defeat. Relatedly, a state that pursued an eliminationist policy would have great difficulty finding allies should it need them. In short, an eliminationist strategy is both strategically myopic and morally wrong.[58]

Politics and Escalation

In this section, I consider how political and military considerations interact to affect the conduct of war itself. The key issue is escalation, one of the least understood but most important wartime phenomena. My argument is two-fold. First, limited wars—especially among great powers—tend to escalate into absolute or total wars, where the aim is to win a decisive victory. Second, given that war is an extension of politics by other means, one might think that politi-

57. It would be feasible—at least in some instances—for a great power to annihilate a minor power. But given that minor powers rarely pose a serious threat to great powers, there would be no security rationale for pursuing this horrific option. This is not to deny that a great power might be motivated by an eliminationist ideology.

58. In contrast to my argument that states would be unwise to pursue an eliminationist strategy, Thomas Hobbes famously argues in *Leviathan* that individuals in the state of nature have a sound strategic reason to try to kill one another. But individuals are not the same as states. It is relatively easy to kill an individual who must sleep and is therefore vulnerable for a substantial portion of each day. Moreover, if you strike at an individual, it makes sense to kill that person so that they cannot retaliate. States are difficult to destroy, however, because they are much bigger and alert 24-7. It is much more difficult for a state to destroy another state than it is for an individual to kill another individual. Hobbes also emphasizes that pursuing an eliminationist strategy leads individuals to lives that are "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short," which is why he advocates creating a powerful state to transcend that merciless world. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 186. States have never moved to create a world state, in part because they are more secure in international anarchy than individuals are in the state of nature. For other factors that work against a world state, see Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, pp. 149–151.

cal leaders can manage escalation with relative ease. But powerful political and military forces make it difficult—sometimes impossible—for those leaders to control escalation and keep wars limited. Wars, in other words, have a propensity to escalate in ways that can be at odds with policymakers' preferences.[59]

One of the driving forces behind escalation is the intensity and enmity that is integral to politics. Paradoxically, politics can undermine political control over the prosecution of a war. Moreover, the military's preference for winning decisive victories, and its inclination to resent political leaders interfering in the conduct of a war, both work to undermine political control over the course a war takes. Indeed, military thinking about how best to wage war threatens to turn Clausewitz's dictum about the relationship between politics and war on its head. Finally, the dynamics of war can cause limited conflicts to escalate in a variety of ways. Escalation is a particularly dangerous phenomenon in the nuclear age, given the catastrophic consequences of full-scale nuclear war.

POLITICAL PASSIONS AND ESCALATION

Given that war is ultimately a political struggle, the passions and animosity that are integral to politics are always present in wartime and can easily turn into profound hatred of the enemy, which pushes both sides up the escalation ladder toward total war. In particular, the large-scale killing that takes place in most wars is likely to cause the rival sides to loathe each other. Moreover, to motivate their own people to fight, rival leaders have a powerful incentive to portray their adversary as the devil incarnate. This creates a paradox. Because war is a political act, it is essential that it be subject to political control, so it can be limited when that makes strategic sense. But politics sometimes makes it extremely difficult to put meaningful limits on war.

To illustrate the power of the political to fuel escalation, consider the relationship between nationalism and war. Nationalism is the world's most powerful political ideology, and it pushes states toward absolute war. Indeed, this

59. There is an important distinction between horizonal and vertical escalation in the international relations literature. Horizontal escalation involves widening a war to include other countries, or what might be called the geographic expansion of a conflict. Vertical escalation involves one or both sides in an existing conflict either using new weaponry or expanding their war aims. My focus is principally on vertical escalation, especially as it relates to war aims. On the distinction between horizontal and vertical escalation, see Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), pp. 18–19.

is an important theme in Clausewitz's *On War* and perhaps the main reason that he places so much emphasis on the need for political leaders to be in charge during wartime—so they can limit a war's scope if necessary.[60]

Nationalism is built on the twin assumptions that nations are the highest-level social group of significance for most people in the world, and that nations want their own state, or what is commonly called a nation-state.[61] 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 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. Consider Madeleine Albright's condescending claim—which former President Joe Biden repeated on more than one occasion—that the United States is "the indispensable nation," as "we see further than other countries into the future."[62]

When nation-states go to war with each other, their nationalism usually 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 for and hatred of the "Other" suffuses the nation and creates powerful incentives to eliminate that threat, which is not helpful for limiting wars. The abundant killing that attends war fuels this hateful sentiment, as does the fact that leaders understand that hypernationalism has a rally around the flag effect. During World War II in the Pacific, for example, Japan and the United States progressively demonized each other's society, depicting the opponent as near subhuman by the end of the conflict.[63]

There are additional political ideologies besides nationalism that can help push states up the escalation ladder. This is certainly true when states with rival ideologies clash, as happened from 1941 to 1945 when fascist Germany col-

60. The impact of nationalism on warfare is clearly reflected in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 577–637.
61. For a more comprehensive discussion of my views on nationalism, see Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, pp. 83–108.
62. Madeleine K. Albright, "The Today Show with Matt Lauer," NBC, February 19, 1998, U.S. Department of State Archive, https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html; "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference," White House, July 11, 2024, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/07/11/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-9/.
63. John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986). The same demonization pattern took place between China and Japan in their 1937–1945 war. Rana Mitter, *China's War with Japan, 1937–1945: The Struggle for Survival* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

lided with the communist Soviet Union.[64] The religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are another example.[65] Putting aside conflicts between rival ideologies, some ideologies—like liberalism—have a crusader impulse built into them, which often leads to pursuing policies aimed at ridding the world of evil—a mission that mandates winning decisive victories.[66] Other ideologies such as Nazism contain an eliminationist impulse, which obviously leads to total war of the worst sort.[67]

It is worth noting that wars have become increasingly destructive over the past two centuries. A state's 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. 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."[68]

THE MILITARY'S PREFERENCES

The propensity for great power wars to escalate also stems from the military's dislike of limited wars and resistance to civilians interfering in the conduct of the fighting. Taken to its logical extreme, the military's thinking effectively subordinates political considerations to military considerations once the shooting starts. Of course, that outcome would make it extremely difficult for political leaders to put limits on a war, which is usually the military's preference anyway.

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64. 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 Books, 2019); Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (New York: Vintage, 2007); Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Picador, 2006); Richard Overy, *Russia's War: A History of the Soviet Effort: 1941–1945* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

65. 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, https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2008.10415483. For a more detailed treatment, see Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2009).

66. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*.

67. 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 "Generalplan Ost," Shoah Resource Center, International School for Holocaust Studies, accessed October 9, 2024, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206247.pdf

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

Military commanders favor decisive victories. As Richard Betts argues in *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, leaders in uniform are not trigger-happy, but when they go to war, they "prefer using force quickly, massively, and decisively."[69] Their basic attitude is that war is a deadly enterprise that involves not only the security of the state but also the lives of airmen, sailors, and soldiers. Thus, everything should be done to defeat the enemy quickly and decisively. Limited wars, military leaders tend to think, do not serve the national interest.

This perspective is reflected in 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."[70] 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."[71]

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 the necessary professional expertise. Therefore, once a nation commits its forces to fight, the military tends to favor separating politics from military strategy, which would allow the military to conduct the war without civilian interference. Writing in 2001, U.S. Naval Officer Charles R. Blair articulates this view:

> Within the military, it is a widely regarded belief that beyond the determination of the political objective, politics and the military do not mix. Recently, some senior military leaders have expressed consternation with civilian leadership involvement at what appears, to them at least, to be inappropriate levels within the military organization. They have expressed concern that this increased involvement has resulted in a less efficient and effective use of military forces in accomplishing the political objective they have been tasked to

69. Richard K. Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 5.
70. Mark W. Clark quoted in Dean Acheson, *Power and Diplomacy* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), pp. 35–36.
71. David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), p. xv.

achieve. This fear of unwanted political "interference" has even led to questioning of the political objective itself and the role of the military in achieving it. . . . Naturally, senior military leaders are reluctant to express their concerns about political interference openly, lest they become the next MacArthur in Truman vs. MacArthur. Consequently . . . it exists in the background as an ethos and feeling that most in the military acknowledge, but that few articulate publicly.[72]

In effect, many generals reject Clausewitz's view of what the relationship between war and politics should be once the shooting starts. 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."[73] Clausewitz's perspective is clearly reflected in Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, 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."[74]

This argument for separating responsibilities in wartime is articulated in an oft-quoted comment by Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, the chief of the German General Staff under Chancellor Otto von 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."[75] Similarly, General Erich Ludendorff, who effectively commanded the German Army in the later years of World War I, argued that in wartime, "politics must . . . be subservient to the conduct of war."[76] Once that happens, however, there is little chance that political leaders can manage escalation and keep wars limited.

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72. Charles R. Blair, "I Could Get My Job Done If They Would Just Leave Me Alone" (thesis, U.S. Naval War College, February 5, 2001), pp. 1–2, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA389612.pdf.
73. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 607. For a detailed and sophisticated discussion of Clausewitz's views on civil-military relations, see Suzanne C. Nielsen, *Political Control over the Use of Force: A Clausewitzian Perspective* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2001).
74. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964) p. 73.
75. Helmuth von Moltke quoted in Michael Howard, "The Influence of Clausewitz," in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 31.
76. Erich Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, trans. A. S. Rappoport (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p. 24.

Ludendorff's and Moltke's views notwithstanding, civilian control of the military has generally been the rule in democracies and nondemocracies during the past century, especially for the great powers. Nevertheless, military leaders usually have significant influence in decision-making during wartime. Thus, their views on limited war and civilian involvement in nitty-gritty military matters invariably influence how a state prosecutes a war.

THE DYNAMICS OF WAR

Finally, the dynamics of war itself push states to escalate. Four logics are at play here. First, if a state launches a limited war and achieves success, at least some of its military or political 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 attacking state's appetite. For example, the United States initially intervened in the Korean War in June 1950 to defeat the North Korean invasion and drive the attacking forces back to the 38th parallel, which would restore the status quo ante. But after U.S. troops successfully landed at Inchon in September 1950, U.S. leaders expanded the United States' 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 in the fighting.[77] This phenomenon, which is sometimes called the "victory disease," will be most pronounced in situations in which ideological fervor abounds.[78]

Second, even when a limited attack is unsuccessful, the potential for escalation is ever present.[79] In such cases, military commanders are likely to argue that if they are allowed to escalate the conflict, they can deliver success. Political leaders will be incentivized to believe them, given that losing a war is hardly an attractive outcome for any politician or policymaker. For example, the Vietnam War was not going well when Richard Nixon entered the White House in January 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 U.S. ground forces into Cambodia

77. 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, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419708429321.
78. Timothy Karcher, "Victory Disease," *Military Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (July–August 2003), pp. 9–17.
79. Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), chap. 3. Also see Hein E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

in May 1970.[80] Of course, the steady growth of the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 reflected this same logic.

Third, as Alexander Downes shows, when states get involved in protracted and costly wars, both their political and military leaders will be strongly inclined to escalate the conflict by attacking the other side's civilian population—even if the prospects for success are low. He writes: "Warfare, particularly in the age of nationalism follows an inexorable logic of escalation that sets in if victory does not come quickly."[81] This logic, as Downes shows, was evident in the Allies' starvation blockade against Germany in World War I and in the strategic bombing campaigns that Britain, Germany, and the United States waged 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.

Fourth, there is a danger of inadvertent escalation—not purposeful escalation—which is when a state's desire to strike an expansive list of enemy targets unintentionally triggers escalation.[82] To be more specific, policymakers in the attacking state either fail to realize that the target state will view their actions as highly threatening, or they exaggerate the threat that the other side and its ostensibly limited military actions pose. The result is a spiral of escalation. This danger is exacerbated by the fact that states cannot be certain of other states' intentions, especially in wartime, when both sides are heavily engaged in trying to deceive the other. In addition, political control over the military, which is otherwise a good thing, may not prevent this kind of escalation, as civilians usually do not know much about the nitty-gritty of warfare and thus might order a move that produces a cycle of escalation.

My bottom line is that great power wars tend to escalate, sometimes in ways that are at odds with policymakers' preferences. Given the destructiveness of modern war, especially regarding nuclear weapons, it is imperative that political leaders understand escalation dynamics and be able to control them.[83] In

80. William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Cooper Square Press, 2002).
81. Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 257; Iklé, *Every War Must End*, chap. 3.
82. Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Spring 2017), pp. 50–92, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00274.
83. Three scenarios are of paramount importance in this regard: (1) preventing a conventional war between two nuclear-armed countries from escalating to the nuclear level; (2) 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; (3) preventing nuclear escalation when one or more nuclear powers are drawn into a conventional conflict between their allies or proxies.

other words, it is essential that war remains under the control of responsible political leaders who understand these dangers.

Conclusion

There is an enduring need to understand the nature of politics and its intimate connection to war. It is essential to recognize that conflict is endemic to politics, and political disputes have the potential to become deadly. In international politics, this means that war is a perennial danger that can put the survival of states at risk. That possibility causes great powers to fear one another and compete for power. In such a world, preventive wars and wars of opportunity can never be ruled out, and the threat of escalation in wartime is ever present. In the final analysis, political considerations will invariably trump economic, legal, and moral considerations whenever they are in conflict. This is hardly a rosy picture. But that is what politics looks like in the international realm.