

Why War Has Become Obsolete in Europe

It is quite remarkable that a continent, which for much of its modern history was embroiled in internecine warfare, now seems to be one of the most stable regions of the world. Since the end of World War II, no wars have been fought in Europe. That is if one excludes the Balkan wars of the 1990s, something I will return to below. It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars working within the discipline of International Relations have been eager to explain this apparent puzzle in an effort to see this state of affairs maintained and/or to transfer any “lessons learned” to other regions of the world. In this essay I will set out three sets of explanations which are debated in the literature 1) Cold War overlay arguments; 2) democracy and economic interdependence arguments; and 3) security community arguments. These should not necessarily be seen as competing explanations – although they are sometimes presented in this way – but rather as different “lenses” through which to focus on a particular aspect of the puzzle.

Cold War Overlay

The starting point for the first set of explanations or arguments is the particular situation Europe found itself in at the end of World War II. Germany had been defeated and divided into two occupation zones: a Western one, governed by Britain, France and the United States, and an Eastern one, administered by the Soviet Union. In the years that followed, this division between East and West was extended to encompass the whole of Europe as the former allies who had fought against Nazi Germany embarked on a new conflict which was soon known as the Cold War. Winston Churchill, the wartime prime minister of Britain, in 1946 spoke of an “iron curtain” having descended upon Europe, dividing the continent from Stettin in the Baltic Sea to Trieste in the Adriatic Sea. The Western nations, under the leadership of the United States, banded together in the NATO alliance, and the Eastern nations, led by the Soviet Union, in the Warsaw Pact.

The core arguments which follow from this are that the overarching conflict between the two so-called super-powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, armed with nuclear weapons, worked to suppress any open hostilities within Europe. This was why it was termed a Cold War. Moreover, it also helped to suppress traditional

rivalries within each opposing ‘camp’: for example, (West) Germany and France, and (East) Germany and Poland. To put it bluntly, it was no longer feasible to have isolated wars between individual European states, everything was subsumed within the larger East-West confrontation, which due to the presence of nuclear weapons, had to remain cold. A hot war, it was believed, would inevitably lead to mutual annihilation.

Democracy and Economic Interdependence

The first thing that should be noted is that democracy and economic interdependence can be considered two different sets of arguments. However, most of the time they are presented as interconnected and hence this will also be the way they are dealt with here. The basic premise of these types of arguments is that in the aftermath of World War II all the nations of Western Europe became democracies, and democracies do not seem to wage wars against each other. Scholars have come up with a number of supporting arguments for why this is the case, ranging from democratic norms working against the use of force in international relations to various checks and balances in democratic systems that make it hard for hawkish decision-makers to choose such policies without the consent of the people. The latter argument is often also based on the assumption that a given people will be rationally opposed to war, since it is likely to bear most of the costs. This fits nicely with the economic interdependence argument, which holds that democratic nations seem to trade more with each other and thus have strong economic incentives not to jeopardise this with war.

During the Cold War, these kinds of arguments obviously only applied to the democracies of Western Europe, but since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the EU and NATO, they have been marshalled in support of a pan-European peace.

Security Community

The point of departure for the third set of arguments is that two or more peoples, regardless of their form of government, may as a matter of fact develop a very hostile relationship or a very friendly one. They are thus about collective feelings of enmity and amity. The concept of a “security community” refers to the latter situation, where war has become *unthinkable* as a means of settling political

differences amongst a given set of states. Here there are also various supporting arguments, some focusing on amity as a function of interdependence (both economic and societal), and some focusing on the incremental process of change in collective identities. In the European context, these types of arguments are used to explain why France and Germany, which could very well be seen as the main protagonists in both world wars, reconciled and are now key partners in the EU. An important aspect of this way of thinking about the problem of war is also that politicians, and states more generally, can consciously work to change a hostile relationship. Staying with the Franco-German case, the two states decided to establish the Coal and Steel Community in the 1950s (the forerunner of the EU) for the explicit purpose of controlling the two main resources needed for war, and also enacted various programs of reconciliation. The achievement of a security community was thus not an accident, but a consciously pursued policy.

Will War Stay Obsolete?

This is obviously the natural question which follows from the discussion above. Currently Europe is still at peace, but there are certain political developments that can potentially challenge this state of affairs. For one there were the Balkan wars of the 1990s mentioned in the introduction. Some would attribute these to the disappearance of the Cold War overlay with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the “window of opportunity” this provided for old conflicts between ethnic groups to reassert themselves. Regardless of whether this interpretation is right or wrong, the Balkan tragedy demonstrated that even during our modern era, war could still threaten to engulf the continent.

More recently, the relationship between Russia and the West has become quite strained, particularly following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. This has led some politicians and commentators to speak of a new cold war in the making. Dire predictions are something international relations scholars are experts in. However, it is perhaps wise never to stop pondering the question of whether and under what conditions Europe will stay at peace. After all, several tens of millions of people had their lives cut short here during the first half of the 20th century.