

John J. Mearsheimer. 'Back to the future: instability in Europe after the Cold War' *International Security* 15, 1, Summer 1990, pp. 5-56.

Note: there is significant overlap between this article and Waltz so I defer to Waltz on discussion of the benefits of bipolarity vis-à-vis multipolarity.

Quick summary: *The keys to war and peace lie more in the structure of the international system than in the nature of individual states. The prospects for major crises and war in Europe are likely to increase markedly if the Cold War ends and a multipolar structure emerges. Long live neorealism!*

What is the central question?

How will the end of the Cold War and departure of the superpowers affect the likelihood of war in Europe? More broadly, what theories best explain conflict before and during the Cold War and, hence, best predict the post-Cold War world? What policy prescriptions does the best theory suggest?

What is the central answer?

A neorealist framework best explains the absence of major war during the past 45 years and the contrast with the bloody period before the Cold War. The distribution of power in Europe, specifically multipolarity and the imbalances of power that often occurred among the major states in that multipolar system, is the crucial permissive condition that led to the wars before 1945. The absence of war in Europe since 1945 has been a consequence of three factors: the bipolar distribution of military power on the Continent, the rough military equality between the two states comprising the two poles in Europe (U.S. and USSR), and the fact that each superpower was armed with a large nuclear arsenal. Hyper-nationalism and other domestic factors affected the likelihood of war but factors of military power are more important.

Neorealism in a nutshell (see Waltz for more)

The keys to war and peace lie more in the structure of the international system than in the nature of individual states. (p. 12)
The anarchic nature of the international system creates powerful incentives for aggression. There is little room for trust among states because a state may be unable to recover if its trust is betrayed and each state must guarantee its own survival since no other actor will provide its security. States therefore seek to survive under anarchy by maximizing their power relative to other states. Relative power, not absolute levels of power, matter most to states. Aggression is a way to accumulate power at the expense of rivals. The distribution of power between states tells us how well-positioned states are to commit aggression. The nature of military power directly affects the costs, risks, and benefits of going to war.

A bipolar system is more peaceful than a multipolar one because the number of conflict dyads is fewer (fewer possibilities for war), deterrence is easier (imbalances of power are fewer), and prospects for deterrence are greater (miscalculations of power and resolve are fewer and less likely). (See Waltz for more on this)

Mearsheimer argues that the prospects for major crises and war in Europe are likely to increase markedly if the Cold War ends and a multipolar structure emerges. This pessimistic conclusion rests on the argument that the distribution and character of military power are the root causes of war and peace.

The departure of the superpowers from the region would have a number of effects.

1. It would transform Europe from a relatively stable bipolar to a less stable multipolar system. Germany, France, Britain, and perhaps Italy would assume great power status within the region.
2. The Nuclear arsenals of the superpowers and the accompanying pacifying effects would be removed. The risk of war would rise if Europe became nuclear-free, states do not expand their arsenals to compensate for the departure of the superpowers' weapons, or nuclear proliferation takes place and is mismanaged. The fourth and least dangerous situation would be the well-managed (by current nuclear powers) proliferation of nuclear weapons. Well-managed means deterring preventive strikes, setting bounds on the proliferation process through security umbrellas, discouraging the deployment of counterforce systems.

The principal policy prescriptions include encouraging a process of limited nuclear proliferation in Europe (specifically a secure German nuclear deterrent), a continued U.S. presence in Europe even if the Soviet Union withdraws, and efforts to forestall the re-emergence of hyper-nationalism in Europe.

What are the possible alternative explanations?

1. Economic liberalism. Peace will be preserved by the effects of the liberal international economic order that has evolved since World War II. Mearsheimer dismisses this as mainly a byproduct of US domination of European relations. It will disappear when the US withdraws.
2. Peace-loving democracies. The ongoing democratization of Eastern Europe will make war less likely because of the 'democratic peace.' According to Mearsheimer, the internal attributes of actors does not determine their behavior, the structure of the system does so democracies will not behave differently than a non-democracy would.

3. Obsolescence of war. Europeans have learned from the World Wars that war, whether conventional or nuclear, is so costly that it is no longer a sensible option for states. History tells a different tale and war is most certainly not obsolete. Mearsheimer states, however, that nuclear weapons actually provide security, generate caution, impose rough equality, and clarify relative power. For these reasons, nukes in Europe would make war less likely but it would not render it obsolete.