Logics of War

Weisiger, Alex

Published by Cornell University Press

Weisiger, Alex.
Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/43578

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1706953
Most interstate wars are limited, in either duration or intensity. In a small number, however, intense fighting continues for years without the two sides resolving their differences. Indeed, in rare cases one side in a war categorically refuses to negotiate with its opponent, despite the extraordinary costs of a war to the death. The long, intense conflicts, which I have referred to as “unlimited wars,” may be rare, but they are responsible for most of the suffering caused by war in the past two centuries. Existing scholarly explanations for these wars have not been entirely satisfying, however. Political scientists and historians have generally been more interested in why wars start than why they end and frequently focus exclusively on the most destructive and politically consequential conflicts. These studies have contributed many valuable insights, but they have also left an important gap—the field simply did not have a convincing answer to the question of what separates the many more limited conflicts from the few that are particularly destructive. Why, in short, do the two sides in a war sometimes come to a quick resolution of their dispute, while in others they refuse to resolve their political disagreements even in the face of extended and painful fighting? This book, I hope, helps to fill this gap in our knowledge.

In this conclusion, I first recapitulate the arguments and findings in this book. The next section highlights their implications for two related topics—civil war and strategies of conflict management—that are not discussed elsewhere in the book. The final section discusses the implications of my findings for questions about the future of war and of international politics more generally.
Conclusion

Recapitulations: Little Wars, Long Wars, Large Wars, and Wars to the Death

In this book, I argue that the size of wars is a function of the causal mechanisms that drive them. When countries fight because their leaders disagree about what is likely to happen once the shooting begins, events in the war cause expectations to converge—more quickly when fighting is more intense—until a mutually agreeable settlement appears. When leaders pursue private goals at the expense of the national interest (the principal-agent mechanism), they face domestic constraints that force them either to settle quickly or to ensure that fighting is not too intense, so that they can distract public attention from the war. Only commitment problem wars are thus not logically limited. In situational commitment problems, a declining power begins a preventive war to prevent the anticipated consequences of decline; doing so, however, entails high war aims that the declining power will be reluctant to relinquish even in the face of battlefield difficulties. Moreover, in some cases, the target of a preventive attack concludes that its adversary is dispositionally aggressive and undeterred by the costs of fighting, and hence that peace can only be guaranteed by fundamental change in the adversary’s political system. Given these beliefs, negotiation is futile; the only acceptable form of war termination is the opponent’s unconditional surrender. The remainder of this section recapitulates the logic of these claims and the evidence adduced to support them.

Informational Wars

Under the informational mechanism, war participants fight because they disagree about what is likely to happen should they resort to war. Indeed, as Blainey noted, they generally disagree quite substantially, expecting not only to win but to do so quickly and at low cost. Once fighting begins, optimistic expectations will be challenged by events on the battlefield. If both sides expect to win the opening battle, at least one will be surprised when it is fought. That surprise in turn provides reason to revisit one’s expectations, allowing for an increased probability that the war will end badly. Once this possibility is acknowledged, political settlements that previously seemed unattractive will become more palatable. As the participants lower their demands, a settlement that both prefer to continued fighting will eventually appear; at this point, the participants should identify the settlement and end the war. Indeed, because both sides expect to win quickly, the amount of surprise in the war will be large, with the result that updating of beliefs (and hence settlement)
Conclusion

will occur in a matter of months rather than years, especially when fighting is relatively intense.

Both quantitative and qualitative evidence provide support for these claims. In statistical analysis, high war intensity, which should proxy for the speed at which information is revealed, is associated with shorter wars and with quicker settlement, although demonstrating this effect required separating out the commitment problem wars, which can be both long and intense. Two case studies provide further support. In the nineteenth-century Anglo-Iranian War, an initial disagreement about British resolve was cleared up by the onset of fighting, allowing for a quick political settlement. More recently, the Persian Gulf War of 1991 occurred because Saddam Hussein underestimated both American willingness to fight for Kuwait and the opposing coalition’s ability to evict Iraqi forces from occupied Kuwait at acceptable cost; once the course of fighting demonstrated the coalition’s resolve and capability, Saddam backtracked dramatically in his political demands, thus permitting a settlement.

By contrast, arguments based on divergent expectations provide an unconvincing explanation for larger wars like World War II. Hitler and his generals recognized that Germany’s initial expansion was quite risky and had the potential to plunge the country into an unaffordable long war, but they undertook it anyway; even more glaringly, they refused to contemplate negotiation with the Soviet Union even as military defeat and occupation became ever more glaringly inevitable. Similarly, despite the undeniable military disaster of the collapse of France and the expectation of an imminent German invasion of the British Isles, British leaders refused altogether to negotiate with Germany, even when German demands proved to be relatively moderate. While the belief that the German economy was vulnerable provided some (poorly grounded) basis for confidence, the informational mechanism simply cannot explain why a country that had seen its strategy for victory completely undone and that faced the imminent threat of total defeat would have been unwilling to even consider negotiation.

Taken together, these findings indicate strongly that wars driven primarily by the informational mechanism tend to be limited. As most wars are limited, this finding is quite consistent with the view that differing expectations about how the war will go account for most uses of force. That said, this mechanism cannot account for the most destructive wars.

Principal-Agent Wars

Domestic-political explanations for war are unified under what I refer to as the principal-agent mechanism. Under this mechanism, leaders use
war to pursue goals, be they a stronger hold on power or policy goals in foreign or domestic politics, that the public would not support, at least at the costs that the war entails. They must worry, however, about the constraints—whether they be institutional checks on policy, the army’s refusal to fight, or the possibility of removal from power—that society can place on a ruler who is seen as following undesirable policies. As a result, highly visible diversionary strategies, as with the Falklands War, will be successful at best for a short period of time before the public catches on that the leaders are running unnecessary risks or refusing reasonable settlement offers and withdraws support. If the leader is able to keep the war less visible, however, most obviously by ensuring that the fighting is not particularly intense, then she will have greater freedom of action and likely will be able to extend a war for longer if necessary. In either case, however, the constraints placed on leaders mean that these wars will not be both long and intense.

Again, both qualitative and quantitative work provides evidence in support of these propositions. As with the informational mechanism, the path to peace depends on the revelation of information through war, in this case to the public. The relationship between war intensity and the speed of settlement in the noncommitment problem wars thus is also consistent with theoretical expectations for the principal-agent mechanism. Moreover, consistent with the argument that constraints on leaders limit their ability to impose policy unilaterally, I find that leaders of democratic states—who face greater institutional constraints on their actions—tend to settle more quickly, although the relevant relationships are less statistically robust than some project. Contrary to some prior work, I also found no evidence to suggest that partially democratic war losers present particular obstacles to settlement.

Case studies of the Falklands War and the Franco-Turkish War are similarly consistent with these arguments. In the Falklands War, a military junta that faced threats to its hold on power was willing to run risks that it would not otherwise has countenanced, if only because it underestimated the size of those risks. By invading the Falklands, the junta brought about a war with Britain in which it could not make concessions on the central issue—final sovereignty over the islands—without losing power, and thus it was willing to continue the war even after the Argentine garrison was forced to capitulate. Military failures, however, turned the public against the leadership and left it unable to continue the war or even to maintain its hold on power. The post–World War I Franco-Turkish War by contrast was undertaken not to divert the public from domestic troubles but because foreign policy had come under the control of a faction that wished to expand France’s colonial empire, even in the face of general opposition to such a policy and at the cost of a significant
deterioration in France’s security in Europe. In line with theoretical expectations, the colonial faction stifled coverage of the war in Paris while taking steps to limit demands on the central government and thereby increase their freedom of action. This approach allowed for an extended war, although in the end funding cuts imposed by a hostile legislature combined with threats to their position in Syria to force the colonialists to abandon their claim to Cilicia, the territory in dispute with Turkey. Once again, therefore, domestic constraints on undesired leadership behavior brought about war termination, although because the colonial faction was able to keep its actions quiet this war lasted substantially longer. Overall, then, both theory and evidence indicate that principal-agent problems in domestic politics can account both for relatively short wars and for longer conflicts, but that they cannot account for wars that are both long and intense.

Commitment Problems: Preventive Wars and Unconditional Surrender

Only commitment problems, in their two different guises, remain to account for the most destructive unlimited wars. When faced with a situational commitment problem, declining powers fight preventive wars because they fear that if current trends continue they will be forced into unpalatable concessions or a war on worse terms. War can only address this problem if it forestalls the decline, however, and typically the victory necessary to prevent the decline from occurring will be quite large. As a result, in wars driven by this mechanism, the initiator typically has unusually large war aims and is unwilling to settle on intermediate terms, a combination that frequently leads to unusually risky military and diplomatic strategies. If the initial attack miscarries, which, given the risky strategies often chosen, it frequently will, the result can be a quite extended military conflict, in which even significant suffering may not be sufficient to convince the declining power to settle. I argue that these wars will be rare, precisely because these wars tend to be risky and costly, but that when they happen they are likely to be unusually destructive.

This argument has a number of testable implications for the conduct and termination of war. Statistical tests reveal that larger shifts in relative prewar capabilities, which proxy for anticipated future shifts, are associated with more destructive wars, an in particular with increased difficulty reaching a political settlement. By contrast, when leaders have reason to fear decline, they are more likely to resort to relatively risky strategies, with the result that these wars are unusually likely to end through the conquest of one side by the other, sometimes quite quickly.
Qualitative evidence also provides significant support. The nineteenth-century Paraguayan War, which almost totally destroyed Paraguay while imposing incredible costs on its opponents as well, started because Paraguayan president Francisco Solano López feared that a rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil and an effectively joint intervention in Uruguay would put his neighbors in a position to partition his country. Facing this increasing threat, he decided that an aggressive war to break up the incipient alliance and restore the government of Uruguay was preferable to the risks associated with accepting continued relative decline. He thus launched an aggressive and risky war that, although understandable given the difficult situation he faced, ultimately miscarried badly. Adolf Hitler in Germany similarly believed his nation to be headed for a serious decline that, if not addressed, might well lead to the extinction of the German race, although in this case his beliefs were grounded more in his ideology than in the structural situation of Germany. Moreover, by the late 1930s, he had concluded that the combination of German rearmament and Stalin’s purge of the military had opened up a narrow window of opportunity for Germany to make the substantial territorial gains necessary to address the broader decline identified by his ideology. He thus launched an incredibly aggressive and risky war with the ultimate goal of annexing much of European Russia; as long as the war continued he resisted any form of settlement with the Soviet Union. Shorter case studies of the Crimean War, the Pacific War in World War II, and the Iran-Iraq War provide further support. In the Crimean War, the British believed the Russians to be on the verge of acquiring control over Constantinople and the Black Sea Straits and responded by fighting for war aims designed to drive the Russians back to a point at which such gains were impossible. The Japanese believed that only significant expansion could maintain their status as a great power; the urgency with which they sought that expansion increased dramatically as they perceived a window of opportunity created by World War II in Europe and as an American oil embargo threatened to throttle their military forces. Finally, Saddam Hussein saw the disruption created by the Iranian Revolution as a golden opportunity to revise the results of past disagreements in Iraq’s favor and potentially eliminate the threat that an ideologically hostile regime posed to his hold on power.

**Wars to the Death**

Even in preventive wars, the declining power remains at least theoretically open to negotiation, if not on terms that the rising power would be at all likely to accept. Thus, once his attack had clearly miscarried, Paraguay’s López demonstrated at least a potential willingness to talk,
while Hitler was willing to negotiate with Britain and seems to have expected that some form of rump Russia would survive beyond the Urals. In both these wars, however, as well as in the Pacific component of World War II and the Iran-Iraq War, some participants categorically refused to negotiate with the existing regime on the opposing side, instead preferring to fight a war to the death. This behavior, which I refer to as a sincere demand for unconditional surrender, guarantees a particularly long and bloody war; the preference for such a war over any possible settlement is puzzling from a theoretical perspective. Existing work, however, has not provided a good explanation for it, nor can any of the three mechanisms discussed here provide a fully convincing account.

I argue that sincere demands for unconditional surrender arise out of a two-part process. First, a declining power launches an aggressive preventive war designed to forestall that decline; then the target of the preventive war attributes the attack not to the fear of decline but to the innately aggressive disposition of the opposing ruler or of the opposing society more generally. This inference, however, implies the existence of what could be called a dispositional commitment problem: an innately aggressive opponent will view any peace deal as simply providing an opportunity to choose the optimal time and place for the next attack. Having attributed the war to the enemy’s aggressive character, the target of the war thus logically concludes that a viable peace will require the fundamental remaking of the opposing political system, something that can only be achieved following a total victory. The result is a war to the death. I further argue that this process is more likely when the rising power that is targeted in the attack lacks the intentions attributed to it by the power that fears decline. This discussion identifies a range of testable hypotheses that can be tested in case study analysis.

The case studies examined here correspond closely to this argument. Thus, in the Paraguayan War, López feared that Brazil intended to work with Argentina to partition Paraguay. This fear was reasonable, but Brazilian actions after the war, when they had every opportunity to extinguish Paraguayan independence, demonstrate that they were misplaced; the subsequent Brazilian refusal to negotiate—justified on the basis of López’s iniquity—thus conforms to the argument that innocent targets will be more likely to demand unconditional surrender. Moreover, the Argentines, who gave every indication of wishing to annex Paraguay, did not join in Brazil’s refusal to negotiate, consistent with the argument that targets who are in fact hostile will understand the motivation behind the attack and thus be open to talks. Similarly, in World War II, none of the Allies shared Hitler’s theory of world politics, and thus they
Conclusion
did not intend to do what he feared, nor did they understand the motivations behind his actions. As a result, they attributed his actions to an innate desire for war and concluded that no settlement with Hitler or, for most Allied leaders, with any potential German representative would bring a sustained peace. Moreover, my argument is able to account for more microlevel features of this conflict—such as the willingness to relax the terms of unconditional surrender for Germany’s allies, the way in which Allied leaders’ views of Hitler changed over time, and the particular emphasis that American leaders placed on unconditional surrender—that are also consistent with my argument. Similarly, the Japanese attack in World War II was grounded in fears that the United States intended to render Japan a third-rate power, quite possibly through war in the next few years, that were inconsistent with American intentions. The Iranian refusal to negotiate in the Iran-Iraq War also can be read in this light, although definitive evidence in this case is unavailable. By contrast, the case study of the Crimean War, in which Britain’s preventive actions did not induce Russia to refuse to negotiate, is also consistent with the argument about innocence, as the Russians clearly wished to acquire Constantinople, the development that the British were fighting to prevent.

Taken together, then, this process provides the logic for unconditional surrender: an aggressive action, taken out of perceived necessity, is seen as evidence of an aggressive disposition that must be expunged. This, in other words, is how people end up in a war to the death.

Implications: Internal Conflict and External Intervention

The primary goal of this book has been to develop a better understanding of the determinants of particularly long and bloody wars. To render the analysis more tractable, I focused on interstate wars, setting civil wars aside. A reasonable question is to what extent the findings from this work can be translated to intrastate conflicts. Because civil wars differ structurally from interstate wars in certain significant respects, direct translation of results is not possible. Nonetheless, there are several relevant implications of this study for our understanding of civil wars; this section thus highlights those implications. Similarly, by focusing primarily on the decisions of the leaders of the warring parties, I set aside the question of how outsiders might facilitate or encourage war termination. That said, because effective strategies will directly address the underlying causes of war, a better understanding of why wars continue or end provides a useful basis for generating policy prescriptions. The second part of this section thus highlights several implications for policy that follow from the findings here.
Conclusion

What Lessons for Civil Wars?

This book focuses on interstate wars, which include most of the particularly deadly wars throughout history. From a theoretical perspective, interstate wars are easier to understand because participants are generally more easily separable—the participants typically are not competing over a population whose preferences lie somewhere between those of the principal actors—and the spoiler problem associated with splintering actors poses much less of an obstacle to settlement. 1 For both these reasons, interstate wars are closer to the assumptions of the standard bargaining model and thus provide a more attractive initial testing ground. That said, given the frequency of civil wars, both today and likely in the future, it is appropriate to assess the implications of the findings here for our understanding of internal conflict.

The central finding here, that preventive wars arising from shifting power make for the worst wars, dovetails with an emerging consensus in the civil wars literature. 2 Absent secession, a comparatively rare outcome, a prerequisite for a functioning state following civil wars is the demobilization and integration of the armed forces on each side. As Walter notes, however, to the extent that one side cheats in the demobilization phase or manages to secure control over the unified forces after demobilization, the other side will find itself in an extremely dangerous position and will certainly not be able to enforce the political agreement on which the two sides settled the war. 3 Given the prevalence of this problem in civil wars, it is thus unsurprising that they frequently prove far more intractable than interstate wars and thus that civil wars last substantially longer than interstate wars on average. That said, while these wars tend to be long, the limited capabilities of weak states and especially of many rebel groups mean that fighting is frequently less intense than in the interstate context.

Other differences between civil and interstate wars are starker. A now large literature highlights the role of natural resources in generating intractable civil conflicts. 4 In many ways, natural resource wars are comparable to principal-agent conflicts, in that the wealth that accrues from controlling an exploitable resource tends to accumulate in the hands of a small number of leaders. An important question in these conflicts is how these leaders are able to convince the people whom they claim to represent to follow them. To the extent that outsiders are able to convince rebel soldiers that the leaders for whom they are fighting, who often grow rich without allowing the benefits of wealth to trickle down beyond the highest echelons of their movement, are the only ones who would really suffer from the imposition of peace, these leaders likely will find it far more difficult to reject settlement on terms the government proposes.
Where civil wars seem to differ most clearly from interstate wars is in the difficulty of clearly identifying the relevant actors. As was noted above, spoiler processes can lead wars to continue even when political leaders of all relevant factions have concluded that a proposed settlement is preferable to continued fighting. Perhaps more problematically, in failed states, such as Somalia since 1991, it may be the case that it is impossible to identify an appropriate set of actors with whom one can conduct negotiations. The difficulty that the United States faced in identifying a strategy to end the Iraq insurgency arose in part because it faced opposition from a wide range of domestic factions, many as antagonistic toward each other as they are toward the Americans. This situation is not one that can be captured easily using any of the mechanisms analyzed here, meaning that it is not possible to derive clear lessons from this study for these types of cases.

Ending Wars Once They Have Started

Postmortems on violent conflict frequently bemoan the failure of the international community to act prior to the outbreak of violence, when it is presumed that the costs of intervention would have been low and the positive effects in securing peace would have been great. In an ideal world, policymakers would be able to identify potential violent conflicts before they begin and intervene to prevent their occurrence. Yet achieving this goal will likely remain elusive: there are strong theoretical reasons why identifying future wars out of the larger set of potential conflicts is difficult, and there is no indication that the international community would be willing to commit sufficient resources to make proactive measures in all countries in which conflict might occur possible. In this context, then, it makes sense to discuss strategies for ending wars after they have begun.

One of the central implications of the bargaining model of war, and one of the key findings of this study, is that wars are characterized by equifinality: there are multiple individually sufficient causes of conflict. If we grant the argument that the problems that led to war must be resolved before we can return to peace, then any discussion of strategies for ending wars must acknowledge that appropriate policies may vary based on the underlying causes. An intervention strategy designed to address preventive motivations for war will not be effective if the underlying problem is simply that both sides think that they are likely to win on the battlefield. We must also be cognizant of the ways in which different problems interact, as with the observation that in diversionary wars the informational mechanism is also frequently active.
Existing work on strategies for ending ongoing wars has only just begun this process, however. Most theoretical studies of mediation, for example, focus on only one mechanism, and few scholars explicitly address multiple mechanisms or mechanisms in combination. Kydd’s work, which constitutes an important exception to this generalization, highlights the ways in which prescriptions may change as the underlying problem leading to conflict changes. When the problem is private information, Kydd finds that only biased mediators can credibly convey information (as pessimistic statements from the perspective of the side that the mediator favors can convince that side to make concessions). In contrast, he finds that an unbiased mediator will generally be more effective when the participants wonder whether it is wise to trust the other side, an endemic concern in the context of preventive motivations for war. These observations thus demonstrate the importance of emphasizing the contingent nature of policy prescriptions and—a step that the field has shown little interest in undertaking—of developing tools to help policymakers identify the underlying causes of conflict so that they can better identify which strategies will likely prove more effective.

This book has been primarily concerned with evaluating the relative effectiveness of different mechanisms in explaining wars of varying destructiveness, and thus comments on policy prescriptions will necessarily be preliminary. That said, several significant implications emerge from the findings here. In general, ending informational wars requires convincing participants of their overoptimism and thus inducing them to update their beliefs. Doing so may be difficult, but especially better-informed mediators, such as representatives of the great powers, may be able to credibly convey information that will convince participants to modify their expectations and hence their demands. Ending wars in which principal-agent dynamics are at play will require alerting the citizens of their leader’s shenanigans and providing other assistance so that they can impose greater constraints on that leader’s ability to continue the war. Ending preventive wars will generally be most difficult, and will require more active intervention, for example through the formation of defensive alliances that will provide that declining power with some guarantee that it will not suffer excessively from its decline. The unfortunate implication here is that outsiders will probably have the greatest leverage over those conflicts that are most likely to end quickly without outside intervention, while they will have the least control over precisely those wars that they will most want to influence.

To turn to more specific observations, several nonobvious implications for ending wars can be derived from this framework. Thus, for example, highly public bargaining may be counterproductive when the primary
concern is private information (as the two sides may have incentives to adopt extreme positions to signal resolve) but efficacious when leaders on one side are extending wars unnecessarily (as knowledge of the other side’s bargaining stance may help the constituents of leaders who are pursuing a diversionary strategy to recognize this tactic and respond appropriately). Similarly, biased military intervention will frequently be extremely effective in bringing an end to informational conflicts (indeed, often the source of disagreement is precisely whether an outsider will intervene), but it may do little to bring about war termination when fighting is driven by other mechanisms. One general implication of this book is thus that work on strategies of conflict management will benefit from careful consideration of the underlying mechanism producing violence.

**Prognostications and Terminations**

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the apparent end of ideological conflict and a consequent convergence in worldwide preferences provided a basis for forecasts of the substantial reduction or even end of the violent conflict that has dogged humanity throughout its history: pessimists were fighting a rear guard action based on predictions that many saw as fanciful at the time and that have as yet failed to materialize. Violent conflict in the Balkans and genocide in Rwanda provided initial correctives to these expectations; September 11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated that ideological conflict persists and that interstate wars are still possible. Even so, however, many people still believe that major wars, or interstate wars more generally, are rapidly becoming obsolete. It is certainly true that the Western and Central Europeans, long the protagonists of many of the biggest interstate wars, have devised a political system in the European Union in which resort to violence seems unthinkable. Elsewhere in the world, however, violence remains more than just thinkable, while the likely retreat of US hegemony in the next few decades may make the world a more unpredictable place.

Indeed, the apparently inexorable rise of China has raised concerns about a possible war with the United States in the future. China’s rise generates understandable concerns among Americans about the concessions that the United States will need to make in the future in light of Chinese power. Indeed, concern about the implications of China’s rise has led its neighbors to seek to ensure continued American involvement in Asia, while some in the United States have called for a more confrontational approach based on mistrust of long-run Chinese intentions.
Conclusion

That said, there are several good reasons to doubt that China’s rise will lead to great power war. Indeed, precisely because such a war would be enormous, the potential participants have a very good reason to avoid it; it is likely only to the extent that the declining power—in this case the United States—can identify a reasonable plan for preventing the decline from occurring. While the United States is and will for the foreseeable future remain the dominant military power in the world, there are significant limits on its ability to impose its will directly on China. China’s economic growth, while driven by the coasts, is broad-based and is driven by factors—most notably an extremely large population—that could not be changed by anything short of a war to break up the state of China, an undertaking that no serious academic or policymaker has contemplated. To put it simply, it is entirely unclear how, having started such a war, the United States might plausibly expect to be able to end it: at a minimum, it would need to break off several of the large and economically prosperous coastal cities like Shanghai, but having done so it would have no plausible policies for what to do with them. In such a context, even someone who is genuinely concerned by the significant military buildup that China has undertaken will lack a convincing argument for why war would serve American interests.

The most likely source of conflict between China and the United States would be a dispute over Taiwan. Theory here indicates that the Chinese, as the rising power, should see little need to demand immediate concessions on this issue, as they can wait until later, when they can negotiate from a position of greater strength. Indeed, Chinese policy on Taiwan appears to be following this prediction quite closely: the military buildup around the Taiwan Straits appears to be intended primarily to deter the Taiwanese from making any overt move toward independence. Moreover, while Taiwan is symbolically and economically significant, its broader strategic significance is limited: in contrast to British fears about Russian control over Constantinople freeing the Russians to move into the Mediterranean, there is little more that China could do after acquiring Taiwan that it could not do beforehand. War could nonetheless still occur if, for example, the Chinese leadership underestimates American resolve, or possibly if threats to their rule induced the Chinese leadership to launch a diversionary invasion. Given the size of the combatants, such a war would no doubt be destructive, but it would not be the unlimited conflict that has been the greatest concern of commentators. It is more likely that China and the United States will manage the transition without war, with the United States making some tacit concessions along the way.

While the implications of this study’s findings for the US-China relationship thus are a source for optimism, some of the more general results
provide reason for caution. Great power war in the nuclear era is admitted-ly unlikely. Indeed, given the reduction over time in the number of great powers, there simply are fewer dyads in which such a conflict could occur. That said, one point emphasized in this book is that one does not need great powers to have big wars. The Paraguayan War and the Iran-Iraq conflict provide evidence that medium powers are perfectly capable of inflicting horrendous costs on each other. Moreover, while these wars too are rare, there is no trend to indicate that they are decreasing substantially over time: after all, the Iran-Iraq War was hardly in the distant past.

And if nuclear-armed states are unlikely to fight each other, the process of acquiring nuclear weapons can be profoundly destabilizing. While nuclear threats are frequently incredible, given that any attack will provoke an equally destructive response, a nuclear-armed state nonetheless protects itself against bullying by existing nuclear powers and opens up a range of options for conventional mischief making. Thus the shift in relative capabilities associated with the acquisition of nuclear weapons provides a potent rationale for preventive war, the more so because destroying a nuclear weapons program—which will be reliant on a limited number of nuclear plants and testing centers—may seem easier than preventing other sources of shifts in relative capabilities. From this perspective, the American attack on Iraq may be only the first of several such preventive wars. Moreover, as nuclear proliferators learn from past targeted attacks on reactors in Iraq (in 1981) and Syria (in 2007) to disperse and harden potential targets, opponents will discover that truly eliminating a nuclear program will require deep penetration by ground forces, as the international coalition did in Iraq in 2003. This motivation for preventive war is unlikely to disappear soon.

Separately, the dramatic changes in the international system with the end of the Cold War may have both good and bad implications for the nature of war in the future. On the one hand, the end to superpower competition eliminated the imminent threat that any conflict might escalate into a catastrophic great power war, and also decreased the likelihood that peripheral conflicts will serve as proxy wars in which external assistance sustained each side’s military capacity and hence extended the potential amount of bloodletting. On the other hand, it is unclear that superpower competition necessarily made for worse wars. Precisely because of the possibility that a local war might escalate to include one or both of the superpowers, with the specter of nuclear use that such a possibility raised, leaders in both the United States and the Soviet Union had a strong incentive to keep third-world conflicts limited. Indeed, frequently the worst conflicts arise when no one is able or willing to address the fears of declining powers. In the Paraguayan War, outside powers
simply did not care enough about events in the interior of the South American continent to intervene with any enthusiasm. In the Iran-Iraq War, an essential element of the conflict was the mistrust with which the Revolutionary regime in Tehran viewed the rest of the world, which complicated any outsiders’ attempts to bring about peace. In World War II, the powers were completely sorted into the two camps by the end of 1941, leaving no outsiders who could intervene to allay the concerns of the participants. From this perspective, then, the reduced interest of the great powers in events in the developing world may in fact remove a check on big wars, possibly making such conflicts more likely.

To say that such wars are as likely to occur as they were in the past is not, of course, to say that they are imminent. The most deadly wars remain for very good reasons thankfully rare; it is thus entirely possible that we could see several decades pass without a particularly large interstate war. Because declining powers can, and frequently do, respond to their decline by simply accepting a loss of influence, predicting the occurrence of preventive wars is extremely difficult: we may be able to identify situations, as with the US-China relationship, in which relative decline makes such conflicts a possibility, but it is much harder to pick out from among the dyads in which conflict is likely those in which war will actually occur. When it does, however, as it almost certainly will, a better understanding of its dynamics may help policymakers to find the strategies that will help bring fighting to a close.