



LITERATURE REVIEW

Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023), 99 pages.

Professor Keith B. Payne is without contemporary peer in the quality and quantity of his analyses of the history and continued need for nuclear deterrence. His latest publication, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament*, has a novel focus—both for his own work and virtually all other studies of nuclear deterrence and disarmament.

Most opponents of nuclear disarmament dismiss the arguments of the other side in just a few sentences, as unworthy of serious analysis. In contrast, Dr. Payne’s new study takes advocacy of nuclear disarmament as an important, if basically flawed, position. Thus, he has devoted almost all of this new study to analyzing the stated arguments for the elimination of nuclear weapons and the dangerous impracticality of those ambitions. The title of the study—*Chasing a Grand Illusion*—captures well Dr. Payne’s approach; the belief in the possibility of peace through nuclear disarmament is definitely illusory, but important.

Another rare—and perhaps novel—feature of Dr. Payne’s study is its foundation in his long years of thorough, careful study and analysis of nuclear deterrence. It is fitting that his acknowledgements section opens with an expression of gratitude to some professors and mentors who had a strong influence on his early professional development. This study could not have been written by someone without Dr. Payne’s deep familiarity with relevant historical as well as contemporary analyses—see his discussion of the thoughts of St. Augustine! Perhaps even more important, it could not have been written by someone without Dr. Payne’s profound understanding and analysis of the subject. Because he has no peers in that regard, only he alone could have written *Chasing a Grand Illusion*.

An especially noteworthy feature of Dr. Payne’s analysis is that, just as he does not dismiss disarmament advocacy as unworthy of serious consideration, he does not condemn its foundational vision. He summarizes well his approach to the subject in the study’s Preface:

A century after the publication of *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, Sir Norman [Angell]’s “Great Illusion” appears to have been replaced by a wholly different illusion. That new *Grand Illusion* is the contemporary proposition offered by church-based and secular advocates that nuclear disarmament can replace the need for nuclear deterrence. ... my conclusion that this proposition is an illusion does not reflect any lack of appreciation for the vision of a cooperative world order and nuclear disarmament. It does, however, reflect deep skepticism regarding its plausibility as envisaged, and thus comparable skepticism about the prudence of any U.S. policies that would prioritize that vision over sustaining deterrence.¹

¹ Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence with Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023), pp. 7-8.



The core problem with the “Grand Illusion,” is not the desirability of its vision, but the impossibility of its realization absent fundamental changes in human nature. As Dr. Payne stresses throughout his study, “you can’t get there from here.”

Religious and secular arguments for replacing nuclear deterrence with nuclear disarmament claim that nuclear deterrence is both morally wrong and profoundly dangerous. The history of the past 75 years suggests just the opposite. While it is impossible to prove that nuclear deterrence has prevented major conflict, it is difficult to imagine that the profound U.S.-Soviet hostility of the Cold War and perhaps the renewed contemporary U.S.-Russian hostility would not have resulted in active conflict if it were not for nuclear deterrence. Moreover, the early history of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) makes clear that important U.S. allies agreed not to acquire nuclear weapons primarily because of the security provided by U.S. extended deterrence. For example, in January 1969, National Security Council Staff member Spurgeon Keeney informed new National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that the Johnson Administration had told the West German Government that it “would have adequate reason to exercise its rights under the [NPT] withdrawal clause (Article X) in the unlikely event that NATO should lapse.”²

Some disarmament advocates might point to the long, successful history of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union (EU) as evidence that it is possible for previously-hostile nation states to transform their relations dramatically. Indeed, the trust, confidence and cooperation that developed among the members of NATO and the European Union could never have been predicted during the first half of the 20th century.

However, the experience of the United States, Canada and eventually most of Europe does not suggest that a comparable transformation is possible worldwide. Even if it were, it would still not provide the foundation necessary for global nuclear disarmament.

Those conclusions are based on five closely-related factors that were essential for the creation and success of NATO and/or the EU, whose absence on a global scale is stressed by Dr. Payne. First was the devastation of two world wars in less than 40 years that persuaded France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries that they could never tolerate another war among them. Second was the strong, but benign, military and political leadership of the United States whose commitment to strengthening and protecting Western Europe was essential to its partners’ security. Third, especially for NATO, was the existence of a common enemy in the Soviet Union which made collective defense essential. The fourth factor was provided by the common culture, political and ethical values that were shared among the NATO and European Community members despite the past history of conflict among many of them. Finally, NATO and EU membership is entirely voluntarily. France could decide in 1966 to leave the military arm of the Alliance, and then in 2009 to return. Britain could decide in 2016 to leave the EU. Such freedom would be incompatible with the certainty of a new international order that would be required for nuclear disarmament.

² Spurgeon Keeney, “Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger: Provisions of the NPT and Associated Problems,” The White House: Washington, D.C., January 24, 1969, p. 7.

Dr. Payne's thorough analysis of religious and secular arguments for nuclear disarmament provides an essential addition to the literature on the essential nature of the requirement for nuclear deterrence for the foreseeable future, and potentially for all time. The case for continued reliance on nuclear deterrence is made stronger and clearer than ever before by this thorough analysis of the reasons for, and the impracticality and dangers of, nuclear disarmament. This serious treatment of the issue is far more persuasive than simple dismissal of disarmament advocacy.

*Reviewed by Susan J. Koch
former Senior Advisor, Department of State*

Ashley J. Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 303 pp.

The issuance of increasingly brazen nuclear threats by both Moscow and Beijing has again elevated attention on the issue of nuclear deterrence and the risks of potential nuclear conflict. Understandably, analysts and commentators are focused on the possibility that Russia may employ nuclear weapons to avoid defeat in Ukraine and China may resort to nuclear use in a conflict over Taiwan. As both major nuclear powers seek to challenge the United States in this new trilateral nuclear context and overturn the established world order, the prospect of greater global instability grows. Yet, there is another trilateral nuclear balance that is often overlooked, though may prove similarly perilous—that among India, Pakistan, and China.

In his book, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia*, respected scholar, analyst, and former U.S. government official Ashley Tellis reviews the evolution of nuclear forces and deterrence strategies among the three regional players. With his extensive background and experience in the area and his knowledge of regional dynamics, Tellis is well qualified to offer a thoughtful and comprehensive assessment of this topic. His analysis is shaped by conversations with senior military and civilian decision makers in each country. Although much about deterrence is necessarily speculative, the picture he paints of developments on the Indian subcontinent is comprehensive and informative, though not all readers may share his assessments or conclusions.

Tellis' assessment of China's nuclear posture credits Beijing's long-standing emphasis on a "minimum deterrent" to the fact that China was not a "principal protagonist" in the bipolar Cold War international competition. However, he acknowledges that recent Chinese nuclear developments "prove that China is transforming its nuclear deterrent to meet the demands of a new era that will be defined centrally by U.S.-Chinese rivalry at the core of the international system." Nevertheless, he tends to discount the prospect that China will abandon its No First Use policy or that Beijing is seeking a "sprint to parity" with the United States. His conclusion that China's nuclear arsenal "will remain smaller than the capabilities

maintained by first-rank nuclear powers such as the United States and Russia” seems to downplay the possibility that China’s ICBM force alone—under current expansion plans—could exceed the total number of deployed U.S. and Russian strategic weapons accountable under the New START Treaty. Overall, he concludes that China “does not seem to be aiming for quantitative parity with U.S. nuclear forces,” nor does Beijing seek to make nuclear competition with the United States the “centerpiece” of its nuclear strategy.

To his credit, Tellis acknowledges the uncertainties surrounding Beijing’s nuclear posture. Nevertheless, he concludes that China maintains a “steadfast conviction that the fundamental utility of nuclear weapons lies in deterring nuclear attacks and nuclear coercion rather than nuclear warfighting.” Though India continues to eye China warily, he argues that New Delhi’s approach to nuclear deterrence is similar in that both countries share a “common conviction that nuclear weapons are primarily political instruments useful to deter nuclear attacks and nuclear coercion by other nuclear powers rather than being useable tools of war” and that “their efficacy derives primarily from possession rather than from use.” This conclusion suggests both China and India subscribe to the theory of deterrence popularized by Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling that deterrence relies on a “threat that leaves something to chance.” It also appears to echo the conclusions of the U.S. Catholic Bishops who argued in 1983 against the use of nuclear weapons in their Pastoral Letter but concluded that their possession could contribute to deterrence because even a “centimeter of doubt” regarding their employment would be sufficient to deter. Although both India and China espouse nuclear No First Use policies, India’s official nuclear doctrine clearly states that it will “retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons” in the event of a WMD attack.

Tellis cites the ongoing debate in India over its No First Use policy, which he correctly notes is “an assurance that is unverifiable.” Yet he considers this NFU policy “realistic” and “likely to persist” despite growing concerns over Pakistan’s nuclear developments. He argues that India’s leaders believe a nuclear threat to India remains “remote” and that India is capable of responding to any nuclear attack with sufficient force to be a credible deterrent. This may explain, in part, India’s “painfully slow” emphasis on missile defenses, as Tellis contends New Delhi remains focused on “preserving deterrence through the threat of retaliation.” As a former Pentagon official who personally engaged the Indian government two decades ago regarding the possibility of missile defense cooperation with the United States, I find Tellis’ assessment about the relative lack of missile defense progress since then to be reasonable.

India seeks to deter China, and Beijing has helped advance Pakistan’s nuclear program. While “India’s nuclear weapons program remains remarkably placid,” Tellis notes that “The Pakistani military is unfettered by political constraints from its civilian government and enjoys considerable autonomy where nuclear force decisions are concerned.” Pakistan, he explains, “is moving as fast as its resources and its efficiency permit to build the largest, most diversified, and most capable nuclear arsenal possible.”

Tellis argues that—despite public pronouncements of “nuclear restraint” and the desire for “minimum credible deterrence”—Islamabad’s nuclear doctrine is focused more on the

potential use of nuclear weapons, which serve as a counterbalance to India's conventional force dominance. Moreover, Tellis discerns a doctrinal shift from "minimum deterrence" to what he calls "full-spectrum deterrence," leading Pakistan toward an expansive, "open-ended" nuclear arsenal similar to China's approach, along with the desire to develop a triad of nuclear delivery systems on land, at sea, and in the air. (However, he acknowledges Pakistan's assertions that its nuclear program 'is not open ended.')

Nevertheless, his characterization of Pakistan's nuclear program as focused on "a large number of diverse and survivable nuclear weapons" bears more resemblance to the deterrence thinking of eminent strategist Herman Kahn than to Thomas Schelling.

In short, Tellis sees significant asymmetries in the nuclear postures of China, India, and Pakistan, concluding that Pakistan "perhaps represents the best exemplar of a country that desperately holds on to its nuclear weapons because they exemplify the indispensable guarantee of its security." In this context, he argues that, unlike India and China, "Islamabad is convinced that its security... cannot be assured either by diplomacy or by conventional military power alone" and is unlikely to ever forego its nuclear capabilities. Yet it is not self-evident that either India or China would agree to nuclear disarmament even under the most favorable of circumstances.

In *Striking Asymmetries*, Tellis reviews the evolution of nuclear forces of the major regional actors in considerable detail, along with their organization, operational posture, and command and control arrangements. He assesses the nuclear postures of each country and their impact on deterrence stability. He challenges the notion that India and Pakistan are engaged in an arms race or that India and China will engage in one as well, despite their historical animosities and nuclear programs. Moreover, he concludes that the likelihood of a nuclear crisis between Beijing and New Delhi is "relatively low." While some of his conclusions are debatable, the research and scholarship he brings to this volume are commendable.

After comprehensively weighing a variety of deterrence factors, Tellis concludes that despite asymmetries in the objectives, capabilities, and nuclear postures of China, India, and Pakistan, "the dangers of nuclear instability may be less acute than many widely voiced fears suggest." Yet he caveats this conclusion by noting that there are "uncertainties" that could change this assessment. This includes potential qualitative changes in their respective postures, such as more robust missile defenses, the development of greater hard-target counterforce kill capabilities, or "asymmetric intelligence transparency" vis-à-vis their rivals.

Finally, Tellis notes that nuclear developments in southern Asia pose challenges for U.S. policymakers and that Russian actions in Ukraine could embolden China in a crisis over Taiwan (or possibly even India). However, his recommendations for U.S. policymakers are short on practical specifics. For example, he notes that "the United States ought to begin thinking now about how nuclear weapons ought to be utilized to prevent any unfavorable outcomes to [U.S.] interests." At a generic level, this clearly makes sense, but the reader might have hoped for something more concrete and useful to those who have the serious responsibility of adapting U.S. nuclear strategy and posture to contemporary international

realities. Nevertheless, *Striking Asymmetries* is well worth the read for the insights it provides on a region whose nuclear politics are often overshadowed by more urgent concerns.

Reviewed by David J. Trachtenberg
National Institute for Public Policy

Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022), 272 pp.

Alliance politics has been an understudied field of international relations since the end of the Cold War. This could be due to perceptions of diminishing threats, America's unipolar moment, and, until relatively recently, a preoccupation with studying terrorism. These perceptions may have created an impression that alliances are self-sustaining and do not require significant political, military, and diplomatic work beyond the habitual engagement among allies forged in the heat of the Cold War. This impression has come to an end, however, as strategic competition and potential U.S. conflict with Russia and China are back at the forefront of debate. This context gives a new impetus for updating the U.S. understanding of alliance dynamics because allies provide the United States with a distinct advantage over (potential) adversaries, and the U.S.-backed global alliance structure provides an asymmetric source of power. *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* by Alexander Lanoszka, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and in the Balsillie School of International Affairs at the University of Waterloo, is an excellent source for those seeking to increase their understanding of alliance politics.

The book is divided into six parts that discuss major themes in alliance politics: alliance formation, the logic of entrapment, the logic of abandonment, questions related to burden-sharing, how alliances wage warfare, and how alliances end. In each of the chapters, Lanoszka discusses "conventional wisdom" related to alliances and checks it against empirical evidence. In doing so, the author dispels several myths related to alliance politics. For example, he demonstrates that an alliance dilemma, or a situation in which a guarantor of an ally's security emboldens the ally to pursue bolder foreign policy and potentially entrap the guarantor in a conflict, is not endemic to all alliances. In fact, it is much less prevalent than policymakers may think. Because of concerns over entrapment, policymakers are on the lookout for the danger signs and seek measures to mitigate its risks, e.g., by keeping alliance treaties vague to not automatically commit a state to active military participation in an ally's conflict.

Lanoszka also explores the well-rehearsed debates on why some states contribute more to alliances than others. He notes the tension between the need to sustain investments in technologically advanced (and thus more expensive) weapons and the efficacy of nuclear deterrence, which, in the author's opinion, makes a large-scale conventional war less likely.

This perceived lesser likelihood of war makes investing in conventional military capabilities less pressing and more difficult to sustain amid competing fiscal priorities.

Lanoszka observes that alliances rarely fight their primary adversaries anymore. He also notes that increases in allies' aggregate military capabilities do not automatically translate into increases in an alliance's military effectiveness. One needs only look at a long list of restrictions that some U.S. allies imposed on their forces that operated in Afghanistan to appreciate this aspect of alliance relationships. And while conventional wisdom postulates that alliances are only useful as long as the strategic circumstances that led to their emergence hold, the author notes that alliances often continue despite the diminishment of conditions that gave rise to their existence in the first place. Alliances can and do outlast the original threat they were formed to counter and can adapt to meet changing needs, as the example of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization illustrates.

The book makes a significant contribution to academic and policy discussions by not only succinctly reviewing major scholarship on alliance politics to date, but also applying empirical evidence to different arguments regarding the creation, functioning, and death of alliances. In doing so, the book challenges some of the conventional wisdom regarding alliance politics and identifies factors that are important for alliance dynamics. Due to the increasing importance of alliances and their management in an emerging era of great power multipolarity, the book is a must read for policymakers and scholars alike.

*Reviewed by Michaela Dodge
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Toby Dalton, Megan DuBois, Natalie Montoya, Ankit Panda, and George Perkovich, *Assessing U.S. Options for the Future of the ICBM Force* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), 28 pages.

President Biden and the U.S. Congress reportedly agree that the United States should not only retain intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), but also carry out the plans set in motion by Presidents Obama and Trump to replace the current Minuteman III ICBMs with, what was recently christened, the Sentinel ICBM program. The bipartisan support for modernizing U.S. ICBMs, however, does not mean that the decision is without controversy.

The U.S. Department of Defense awarded a contract to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to "consider the relative risks and benefits of options for the future U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile force." The authors of the report are quick to note, however, that the scope of the award did not allow them to "assess *whether* the United States should deploy ICBMs at all or change its nuclear strategy and doctrine." (Emphasis in the original)

To accomplish their task, the report's authors invited a range of experts from across academia, think tanks, and current and former government officials, including this reviewer, to participate in a series of workshops and present their views. The report's focus is not on

summarizing the views of the participants as much as referencing those views in the context of the authors' recommendations and findings. The workshop participants were not, to this reviewer's knowledge, consulted on the authors' findings and recommendations.

The authors center their report around three questions. Are there viable alternatives to the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (the previous name for Sentinel), including life-extending Minuteman III? Are there any new factors that should make the Department of Defense reconsider its commitment to a new ICBM program? And, which issues should rise to the level of the President regarding ICBMs?

On the first question, the authors, in essence answer "No," there is no viable alternative to the planned new ICBM. Even if life-extending a viable Minuteman III force was technically possible, which, as the authors note, Department of Defense officials provided information that indicated it was not, presidential guidance on the performance requirements for the ICBM force makes the Minuteman III option unacceptable. Nevertheless, the authors argue that the Department of Defense should commission an independent study, with an unclassified report, to grade its homework from the 2014 Analysis of Alternatives on ICBMs. The authors claim this would boost "public confidence" in the DOD approach, but it is far from clear what a retrospective study would accomplish in this regard since the approach has been supported by presidents and Congress on a bipartisan basis for eight years now.

Second, the authors explore the possibility of U.S. ICBMs becoming vulnerable to a large-scale conventional attack via an adversary's hypersonic boost-glide missiles over the next few decades. In the authors' estimation, if this possibility came to fruition, a U.S. president could face the unpalatable choice of launching U.S. ICBMs before they are potentially destroyed, thus initiating a nuclear strike, or riding out the attack and hoping that the missiles survive. They claim that this possibility should throw into question the U.S. commitment to retaining silo-based ICBMs.

The authors are right to point out that DOD should consider silo vulnerability to potential future hypersonic threats, and official commentary on this point would be welcome, but the authors do not subject their hypothetical scenario to some basic critical questions, such as: is it likely that Russia or China will have enough intercontinental-range *conventional* hypersonic weapons to attack every one of the 450 U.S. ICBM silos? Or, if they are air-launched weapons, how many bombers would be necessary to carry what would likely be, at minimum, 900 conventional missiles? Even more fundamentally, what logic would lead an adversary to attempt what amounts to a conventional first strike, but only against U.S. ICBMs? Also, the authors leave unaddressed the possibility of terminal missile defenses to protect U.S. ICBM fields. Admittedly, the authors cannot address all of these points in a small study, but raising the possibility of a conventional first strike on U.S. ICBM fields in the future without discussing its viability is an unforced error. On this point, readers should keep in mind the finding of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces, also known as the "Scowcroft Commission," in 1983, which acknowledged the possibility of silo-based ICBM

vulnerability as “a matter of concern,” but believed that concern would “be far more serious” were it not for the existence of the triad as a whole.³

Third, the authors focus on “further factors for high-level consideration”—again, more in the spirit of raising their doubts about the wisdom of relying on silo-based ICBMs versus sticking to the stated purpose of the report, the risks *and benefits* of future ICBM options. In other words, there is little effort in Carnegie’s report to examine ways to bolster the deterrence value and safety of U.S. ICBMs, even if retaining silo-based ICBMs does not appear to be their preferred policy option. Instead, the authors summarize the familiar objections and counters to the issues of ICBM overflight of Russia and launch under attack options. The “Arms Control and Disarmament” section is notable in that the authors claim U.S. ICBMs carrying only one re-entry vehicle are “stabilizing,” and uploading additional warheads should be “seen as something else,” i.e., destabilizing. Two remarks are appropriate here. First, if the authors believe ICBMs with multiple warheads are destabilizing, they should have at least acknowledged that the backbones of Russia’s and China’s strategic nuclear arsenals are ICBMs with multiple warheads. Second, even if the United States uploading additional warheads on its ICBMs was destabilizing, how does that purported risk compare to the risks of keeping the U.S. nuclear force size constant as both Russia and China race upward?

Just before their conclusions, the authors let slip perhaps one of their most fundamental assumptions that permeates the analysis in the report—it is instructive for general readers to understand. They state: “The challenge will then be to redress Russia’s and China’s worst-case assessments that the capabilities the United States deploys to deter *both* countries could or would be used to defeat *either one* of them.” (Emphases in the original) This contrasts sharply with a recent *Occasional Paper* by Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg in which they assess one of the fundamental challenges facing the United States is deterring Russian and Chinese nuclear strikes, whether by one state alone or in tandem, perhaps in two different theaters simultaneously.⁴ The former concern is focused on reassuring adversaries while the latter is focused on deterring adversaries. One can argue that both concerns are valid, but the difference in emphasis is instructive and highly consequential for U.S. policy.

The authors end their report with four conclusions. First, that presidential guidance should determine how each nuclear weapon system contributes to a variety of objectives, including “deterrence effectiveness, damage limitation if deterrence fails, mitigation of escalation risks, and the predictability that arms control enables.” (Strangely left out of this list, whether intentionally or not, are two other canonical objectives: assurance of allies and hedging against unexpected developments.)

Second, the authors conclude, “in a strategically and economically rational world, cost-effectiveness should be the decisive consideration.” This is a strange assertion to say the least. Put charitably, the authors may be trying to say that if all other factors are equal between multiple ICBM options (all options will deter effectively, assure allies, hedge, etc.),

³ President’s Commission on Strategic Forces

⁴ Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, August 2022), *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.

then the deciding factor should be the cost. That, indeed, would be rational. Yet, surely the authors know that other factors are never equal in the real world. Cost cannot, and should not, be granted automatic veto power over decisions about weapon procurement—it is an important consideration to be sure, but it cannot be the ultimate arbiter. The authors leave a parting shot in the section by concluding that “there is little political incentive to reduce defense spending by pushing for the lowest-cost programs.” This will come as news to many in the nuclear policy field who have witnessed firsthand the consequences of cost reduction efforts, such as the decades-long deferred maintenance for the U.S. nuclear infrastructure and successive life-extension programs (not the least of which is the now 50-year-old U.S. Minuteman III).

The authors’ third and fourth conclusions are more defensible: that the U.S. Department of Defense should share more unclassified information pertaining to U.S. ICBMs, and that potential silo vulnerability in the future should inform analyses about alternative ICBM-basing modes.

In truth, if this report had focused on the potential costs and benefits of shifting the U.S. ICBM force to a different (i.e., mobile) basing mode in the future, the resulting product would have been of greater analytic value for the defense community. Regrettably the authors chose a different direction. Instead of focusing on the future, the authors devote too much space to an ultimately futile discussion of an eight-year-old, classified, Analysis of Alternatives document. Given the seismic shift underway in the security environment, U.S. nuclear policy analysts cannot afford to undertake myopic quests for budget savings at the cost of deterrence effectiveness.

*Reviewed by Matthew R. Costlow
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Beatrice Heuser, *War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 448pp..

War is simultaneously a conceptually simple and intellectually overwhelming endeavor. It can be, and on innumerable occasions has been, conducted with stone and bronze weapons by warrior practitioners lacking any meaningful academic theory of war. Indeed, organized violence occurred for millennium after millennium before anyone had the capability to use written language to speculate about fighting. One does not require an extravagantly multifaceted theory of nutrition to eat a piece of fruit, or a similarly sophisticated theory of war to smash a cranium with a club.

An institution that is both monstrous and central to human affairs, however, is not easily overlooked. Most foundationally, societies and individuals place war in a moral framework, incorporating it into their fundamental understanding of fate and justice. The knowledge that one is *vulnerable* to war—that violence may shatter one’s own everyday world, leading

to every conceivable horror—is a terrible burden. Even emperors may be cast down, and the observable reality that mighty polities rise and fall by violence has been a subject of fascination for thinkers throughout the world.

Attempting to analyze how even one small, relatively isolated culture thinks about war is a daunting task; addressing many distinctive cultures over a vast physical space and across a long time is excruciatingly difficult. This makes Beatrice Heuser's *War: A Genealogy of Western Ideas and Practices* a particularly notable work of scholarship. Heuser, who holds the Chair in International Relations at Glasgow University, is willing to take on big challenges, and she ably covers an immense amount of multidisciplinary material in this work.

Given the incredible size of her subject, the author of course cannot explore every facet in depth; her narrative moves speedily, always in search of ideas and their practical application. She carefully maps out her interpretation of how ideas have traveled, while noting that subtle changes—such as the interpretation of the meaning of words—accumulate and progressively alter cultural understandings. Her sources and discussion are sweeping: the book ranges from discussions of Biblical interpretation to combat robots.

Heuser is critical of the tendency in Western thought for binary categorizations related to war—just versus unjust war, interstate versus intrastate warfare, and so forth. She emphasizes the contradictions that invariably occur when actors use organized violence to further their objectives. This point is well-taken. An individual may simultaneously be a drug trafficking warlord running a small, quasi-independent polity and a member of their country's parliament; occasional border clashes between two countries do not equal a state of war, even if that is little comfort for the families of the dead; and the Russian Federation and the United States are, formally, at peace with each other, even though American weapons claim Russian soldiers' lives every day. Heuser is right to emphasize how amorphous—and difficult to abolish—war is in practice.

In the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, many scholars treated war as a fading human institution that would soon be confined to the political margins—the business of drugged-out militiamen wandering failed states and similar low-rent characters. Insofar as great powers would engage in warfare, it was to be as bringers of order: leading peace operations, hunting down the leaders of terror groups, and otherwise ensuring that the world of the latter twenty-first century would be a gleaming neoliberal Tomorrowland. Like counterinsurgents operating at the global level, the wealthiest and most powerful states would export security to more and more of the world, driving war into the shadows.

To say that such thinking represented the triumph of hope over experience is a titanic understatement, yet it was enormously popular—and its influence almost certainly was tragic. Instead of approaching the post-Soviet global security environment as a priceless and delicate gift, a political Fabergé egg whose survival would require exquisite care and wisdom, the most well-situated states simply assumed that favorable conditions would continue forever. There was no need for caution, because truly excruciating outcomes were impossible—the world (or at least its more prosperous countries) was postbellum, and major states would not fight each other ever again because *something*—a quite slippery, difficult-to-characterize something—had shifted and history had moved past war. Yet,

although there still has not been a great power war as such, the possibility that peace could collapse now is widely dreaded. For millions, great power war shifted in mental categorization from “unimaginable” to “frighteningly plausible” as political conditions changed. Like war, human fickleness and impressionability have not been abolished.

Now, having never left, war is back. But it exists in a technological environment radically different from that of the past. A world filled with people raised with (and to a very considerable extent by) interactive screens is unlike any experienced by humanity before. (More than a century after their invention, it is still difficult to gauge the impact of movies on the human propensity to engage in organized violence.) In short, the future is deeply unknowable and not reliably predictable, yet it is imperative that there be no Third World War.

Thoughtful and serious scholarship about war cannot guarantee a peaceful future, but it perhaps is prerequisite to one, and *War* is a highly impressive work—rigorous and deeply scholarly, yet bold and challenging in its argument. It is also, especially given the complexity of its topic, highly readable, as Heuser is a surefooted author who avoids unnecessary jargon and takes care to ensure that the reader can follow her brisk pace. *War* is an excellent book, and highly recommended.

*Reviewed by C. Dale Walton
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