

Interview - Kristian Skrede Gleditsch

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In this interview, Professor Gleditsch discusses the global decline of violence since World War II and some of the challenges to this trend.

Recently, several authors have declared that there has been a decline in armed conflict since the end of World War II. From your research on this topic, what does the data say about the global patterns of violence and is war really waning?

On the question, yes, I think war is declining in most common data sources, although the causes remain contested. For civil wars there is at least some evidence that accommodation and conflict management has promoted a decline of war. Although Syria is a severe conflict, it is not by itself sufficient to say that we have a clear reversal. Perhaps the greatest current challenge is the alleged increase in terrorism. However, it is not obvious why we should see an increase in less severe and less organized conflict, and there is also some

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evidence that ethnic terrorism has declined following accommodation in ways similar to civil war.

You mention that the causes of this decline in war remain contested. What are some of the main explanations offered by scholars for this development and what do you feel are the main areas of disagreement on this issue?

I think some of the key explanations include more democratization, less ethnic discrimination, globalization/increase in trade, and greater scope for conflict management by the UN and other regional organizations. All of these in my view are plausible and likely to be part of the explanation, but I think it is also fair to say that none of these alone provide a clear explanation for the decline in conflict.

There has been a great deal of skepticism about some of these factors, especially democratization, as many point to examples where conflict has followed after elections. However, some of this research takes a very binary approach to violence, where any conflict is regarded as a failure even if the level of conflict declines or fewer actors engage in violence. To use another example, although some dissident republicans in Northern Ireland continue to use terrorist tactics, it would be absurd to say that there has been no decline in the volume terrorism after the Good Friday agreement.

Do you feel that there has been a gradual shift in the attitudes of people towards war and, if so, that this might have also contributed to this decline of war?

I think there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes to war. At least a 100 years ago it was common to glorify war as heroic and character forming. Countries

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had ministries of war. Now war tends to be seen as a regrettable last resort, and we have ministries of defense, and literature on the horrors of war. All of this contributes to make war a much harder sell. That is not to say that aversion to war is universal or that people have never approve of conflict, and attitudes can be influenced, in both directions. Moreover, attitudes are probably influenced by views on the costs of war and feasibility of alternatives.

I have been involved in some experiments on support for escalatory actions in territorial conflict with China among Japanese respondents, and there is some evidence that although people are generally quite hard line they become less belligerent when provided with information on the military or economic costs of conflict.

With regards to democratization, why do you feel that democracy reduces the risk of war?

For interstate war, then I think it is fairly well established that democracies rarely fight severe wars with each other. Of course, the risk of interstate conflict is low in general, at least for severe conflicts. Moreover, democracies may fight other states, and the democratic major superpowers are much more likely to be involved in conflict. However, I think there is also some evidence that the increased role of public opinion can constrain the use of force more generally, and that democratic states have supported a liberal order with emphasis on stronger international institutions and conflict management approaches that have helped reduce the risk of conflict more generally.

I also believe that transitions to democracy reduce the risk of civil war, despite widespread pessimism and fears of democracies increasing conflict.

Democracies provide alternative political avenues for conflict, and decrease the

motivation to use violence compared to autocracies. Transitions to democracy may not eradicate all domestic violence. Many democracies have inherited ethnic separatist conflicts that started before democratization, and established organizations may remain active after transitions (ETA in Spain and the IRA can be interpreted in this perspective). Moreover, we may see violence around elections, under a climate of mistrust. However, the overall magnitude of civil violence tends to be lower under democracies.

Whilst civil war is in decline, it became the principle form of armed conflict after the end of the Second World War. What were the main drivers for civil war becoming the main form of conflict?

Civil wars became particularly common with decolonialization. Some anti-colonial movements turned violent, and, in some cases, competing factions continued to fight each other after independence (e.g., Angola). Moreover, after independence, many colonial states were prone to violence for a host of reasons. On the one hand, state weakness can by itself encourage violence as the barriers for taking on the state are lower. Moreover, the post-colonial states often had various features that could encourage violence such as ethnic nepotism, poor governance, or lack of legitimacy. Finally, although the Cold War did not escalate to a direct confrontation between the superpowers, many civil wars escalated as the opposing sides could obtain support from the superpowers.

The end of the Cold War coincided with a spike in civil wars for somewhat similar reasons. Many weak states faced a loss of external support that weakened the central government (e.g., Somalia), and some larger federal units faced challenges from ethnic groups who sought independence and who might be willing to use violence (e.g., former USSR and Yugoslavia). However,

other factors such as democratizations, decrease ethnic discrimination and powersharing, as well as more active UN conflict management efforts have likely all helped reduce the incidence of civil war from the immediate post cold war peak.

Some studies have discussed an apparent revolution in warfare in the post-Cold War world, described using terms such as ‘new wars’, ‘hybrid wars’, and ‘post-modern wars’. Some of the characteristics of these wars include blurred distinctions between public and private combatants, warlords, and criminals; regular targeting of civilians and other war atrocities; war economies sustained by illegal trade in drugs, weapons, resources such as oil or diamonds; and violence being driven more by identity than ideology. Do you feel that these so called ‘new wars’ represent a revolution in warfare and have they also marked a shift in the nature of warfare?

I am actually very skeptical of whether the concept of new wars is very helpful or whether the alleged trends exist at all. It is certainly not the case that targeting of civilians is a new feature – recall the shelling of cities during sieges in the 30 years war. The opium war was thus named for a reason. And the blurred lines between criminal gangs and warfare cannot be a new thing – the North African coast was known as the barbary coast due to the endemic piracy and the Mongol hordes probably picked up some things along the way too.

I suppose this raises the question of why some find this concept so compelling. I can only speculate on this since I do not share this myself, but I believe that the decline of a master narrative of conflict after the Cold War increases people’s sense of new wars as different from old war. However, all systematic research that I have seen raises serious question over this.

In addition to the alleged increase in terrorism, what do you see as the other greatest challenges to the decline in violence in the near and distant future?

I actually think the long-term outlooks is relatively favorable, but I can imagine some cases that may contribute to long-term challenges

1. increasing tension between the major power is unlikely to lead to direct conflict, but it may increase support to opposing sides in civil war and decrease the prospects for the UN to become involved.
2. globalization has in all likelihood increased the costs of conflict and increased the value of peace, but there is a chance that globalization could be rolled back with increasing protectionism. This can make it more difficult to contain some territorial conflicts, such as the ones seen in Asia
3. global challenges such as refugees change require cooperation, and if states fail to cooperate on these then poorer relations may weaken the ties that prevent conflict
4. the consequences of climate change could increase the risk of conflict by undermining livelihoods and increasing competition between states. My own reading of the evidence says that there is little evidence of this happening so far, but skeptics would argue that dramatic consequences would move us into a new scenario.

These are serious concerns, but at best indicate risk, and none of them imply that the decline of violence must be reversed.

Kristian Skrede Gleditsch is Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Essex, director of the Michael Nicholson Centre for Conflict and Cooperation, and a research associate at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). His research interests include conflict and

cooperation, democratization, and spatial dimensions of social and political processes. He is the author of *All International Politics is Local: The Diffusion of Conflict, Integration, and Democratization* (University of Michigan Press, 2002), *Spatial Regression Models* (Sage, 2008, with Michael D. Ward), *Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2013, with Lars-Erik Cederman and Halvard Buhaug), and journal articles in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Biological Reviews*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Conflict and Cooperation*, *Defence and Peace Economics*, *Economic History Review*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Interactions*, *International Organization*, *Internasjonal Politikk*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Politics*, *PLOS One*, *Political Analysis*, *Political Psychology*, *R Journal*, and *World Politics*.

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