

According to Henry Kissinger 'those ages which in retrospect seem most peaceful were least in search of peace. Those whose quest for it seems unending appear less able to achieve tranquility.' Comment on this claim in light of events since 1945.

Authors note: In response to this question I will take an international approach, looking to explore the suggestions within the comment, considering statistical phenomena regarding global warfare and for the purposes of this essay disregarding internal and civil conflict. The definition of peace will alter accordingly between "freedom from disturbance" and the typically historically accepted "a state in which there is no war, or a war has ended."

Kissinger, like his suggested historical model Metternich, takes a particularly defeatist world view. A cursory look at history from 1945 onwards substantiates the claim made in his first comment. Statistically we have experienced, and are continuing to live through, a golden age of peace. In pre 19th century societies 15% of the population died violently, five times the number recorded in the 20th century resulting from war, genocide and man-made famine combined (Pinker, 2011). Hyper globalization, fast communication and huge progress defines the peaceful post war era. Yet this, according to Kissinger, is an entirely retrospective narrative. Underlying these achievements, a cold war ensued. The competing political ideologies left nations not "in search of peace" but global domination. Revisionist historians have gone on to rename the conflict "the long peace" despite the threat of humanity's destruction (Cuban missile crisis 1962) and the hot pockets of violence created in the developing world.

Likewise, his assertion that earnest attempts at peace can often be the undoing of this same ambition are demonstrated in the major geopolitical fault lines that have emerged. The quest for peace and unity in areas such as Israel and Palestine, North and South Korea, have remained unresolved. The interstate tensions continuing to resurface throughout the latter half of the century despite attempts made for peace. Looking at the global peace movements of this century, Kissinger's view is that our interconnectedness in the "international system" is also our weakness, leaving us "at the mercy" of rogue states or "rebel chieftains" (Kaplan, 1999). This can be seen played out in the wars that consumed both Vietnam and Iraq. This essay will explore whether this "real politik" hard stance perspective is in line with wider movements of peace in this half of the century.

The overarching narrative consuming international politics since 1945 is the Cold War and this can be viewed as a remarkably peaceful era. Historian Harari suggests it was during this time humanity broke the "Chekhov law" that states "a gun appearing in the first act of a play will inevitably be fired in the third". Despite acquiring the scientific capabilities for mass destruction, the gun was never fired (Harari, 2016). "Nuclear weapons have turned war between superpowers into a mad act of collective suicide". Yet, the "guns" presence on our global stage meant living in constant anticipation of the apocalypse. Against all expectations, zero nuclear weapons were used, and zero violent wars occurred between western or developed countries. Kissinger's claim is correct in light of the escalating tensions between the USSR and the US throughout the period. If

you take war to be merely a clash of ambition, then the increasing conflict surrounding the established political doctrines meant peace was not possible until one dominated. Why then did this have so little impact, statistically, on the Western nations involved? It is because, instead, the issue of peace and its resolution within the cold war, manifested itself in emerging fault lines during the decolonization of former empires. Post war, the economic benefits of empire plummeted, creating 96 new nations since 1945 across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The fear of European powers was that this new political map contained “quasi states” that would become economic and political liabilities in the global order (Christopher, 2002). Countries such as Vietnam and Korea were halted in their “quest” for self-actualization, peace and unity. Instead these emerging nations were used as testing grounds to let capitalist democracy and autocratic communism come to a head. In the Cold war, states quickly became enmeshed in the profound ideological and military rivalry. Although peace was a desperate dream for these newly freed nations, they continued to be pulled further away by conflicting political doctrines.

To explore both elements of Kissinger’s claim I will look at the two largest post-colonial conflicts since 1945: The Korean War 1950-53 and The Vietnam War 1955-75. Since the peninsula’s freedom from Japanese imperialist power, Korea has experienced some of its most tumultuous years. Known as the “forgotten war” the conflict by proxy between the US and the Soviet Union killed over 2.5 million Korean people. Kissinger’s claim is correct in application to an era that was relatively free from disturbances for Western nations in “retrospect” but left newly emerging countries torn apart. The Cold War players let their conflict become heated in developing nations, whilst preserving peace in their own. Korea had been unified for nearly 1,500 years. The idea of unity equating to peace became embedded in nationalist ideology when the ancient Silla dynasty united the country in the 7th century. What disrupted this “quest” for peace post 1945 was America’s desperation to contain the spread of communism. Korea has been named the “storm center” of the far east, feeling the activities of superpowers Russia, China and Japan. Once communist influence in North Korea began to take shape, foreign leaders arbitrarily drew up the 38th parallel divide (still in place 70 years later) drawing the nation away from ambitions of peace. However, it is not the “unending quest” that has left ambitions unfulfilled as Kissinger suggests, it is the international political battleground that subsumed the nation as the nationalist cause played out above it. The urge for peace has never diminished yet tensions and frictions are still evident. In the 21st century, “reunification was still fresh on the minds of the Korean people but with separate administrators it seemed unlikely to occur under peaceful auspices” (Wilson, 2002) The external climate in which Korea emerged as a newly freed nation ensured their “quest” for self-identification, peace and unity remained futile, not the chase itself.

One year after the Korean war a new arbitrary divide was created by the great foreign powers in Vietnam. At the Geneva conference of 1954 the division between the North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel was decided. Similarly, the pattern of strong nationalist desire for unification, overtaken by the clashing ideologies of the cold war emerged. By this time the Truman administration in

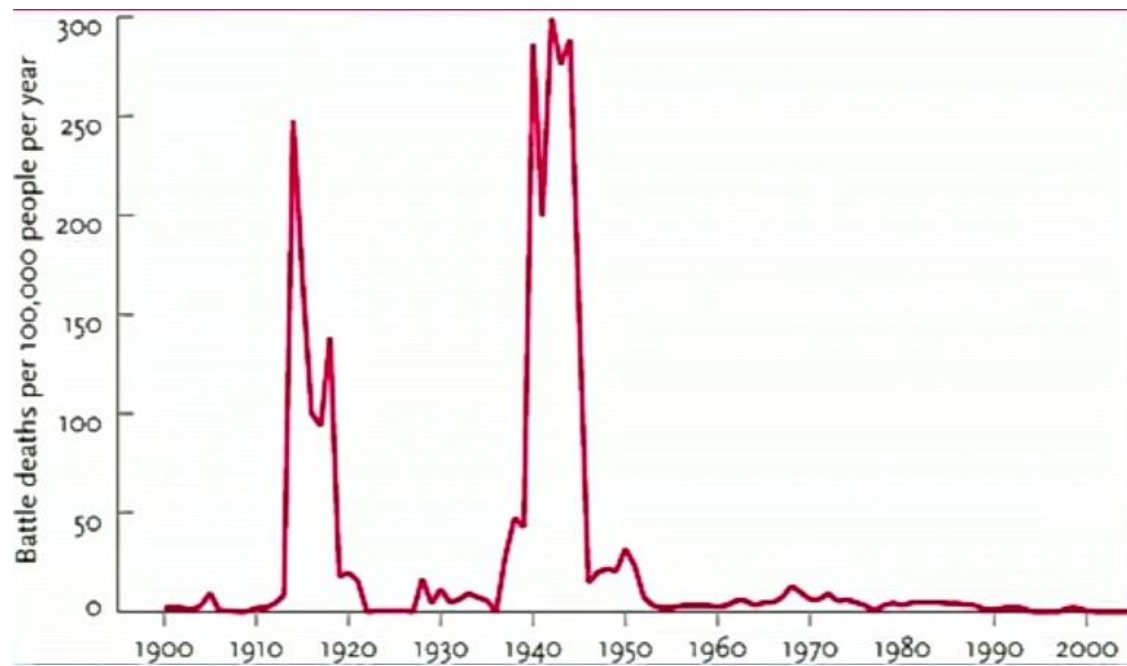
the US had come to believe and fear the “domino effect”. The communist ideologies propagating the minds of North Vietnamese people became too threatening to America’s ideal of global capitalist democracy. So much so that appeasement of North Vietnamese ambition had to be resisted. This is where Kissinger would play his own role in world history. The American involvement in the Vietnam war lasted for a violent and bloody twenty years, an estimated 4 million Vietnamese people were killed in the conflict and 58,000 American troops. Nixon’s election in 1968 upon the promise of “peace with honor” had Kissinger appointed as National Security advisor in a supposed attempt for peace and an end to the Vietnam War. Kissinger’s peace talks successfully aided the initiation of cease fire on January 23rd, 1973, outlining the machinery for peace settlement. For this feat, he was awarded a Nobel peace prize the same autumn. Yet many historians have criticized his methods for attaining “peace” as merely bombing the Vietnamese into submission (Bernam, 2001). The “Christmas bombings” of Hanoi in which Nixon ordered 11 days of intensive bombing between December 18th to the 29th 1972 provides an example of Kissinger’s use of continued violence to attain peace. Furthermore, the secret bombing of Cambodia in March 1969 exposes actions “prolonging and expanding war” (Thompson, 2018). This “ends justify the means” ideology, even when these means are duplicitous, is possibly what he alludes to in his proposition. Those ages, he suggests, that are “least in search” for peace using any means necessary to quell rogue states are those who in “retrospect” come out on top. Perhaps this claim, in light of his involvement in post 1945 events, serves as a justification for peacekeeping methods away from the “moral commonplace of our age” (Pinker, 2011). It is interesting to note that Vietnam when left to its own devices has emerged as a peaceful player in the economic world stage.

Now looking with a macro approach at international history it is clear to see that, leaving the deadliest military conflict in history behind, the “quest” for a peaceful utopia has consumed our major world leaders in the second half of the 20th century. “A basic historical change had taken place in the attitudes of European (and American) peoples towards war” (Brodie, 1973) The peacemakers of our age have enacted an unprecedented avoidance of war that in contrast to Kissinger’s view has largely been successful. Continuing from Wilsonian doctrines the 1946 liaison committee of organizations for peace put energy into supporting the UN that, unlike the failed league of nations, is supposed to “save succeeding nations from the scourge of war” (Boulding, 2000). The major western players have built a series of strategic and commercial clubs aiming to establish and maintain peace globally (UNESCO, EU, NATO, APEC, NAFTA). There has been a sharp decline in death by warfare since 1945 (see graph). You are now more likely to commit suicide than be killed in warfare (800,000 to 120,000 as of 2012 (Harari, 2016)). Where this united blanket of diplomatic peace has failed across the fault lines in our globe, interference from foreign nations can be rooted out as the cause. After the demise of communism, ending the cold war, America emerged as the “global policeman” but “keeping order out of moral outrage is sometimes prioritized over the principles and practice of law” (Annita Lazar, 2005) undermining universal respect for human rights and self-autonomy. Since its inception in 1948 there have been attempts to foster peace between the state of Israel and Palestine but after 70 years it seems more intractable than

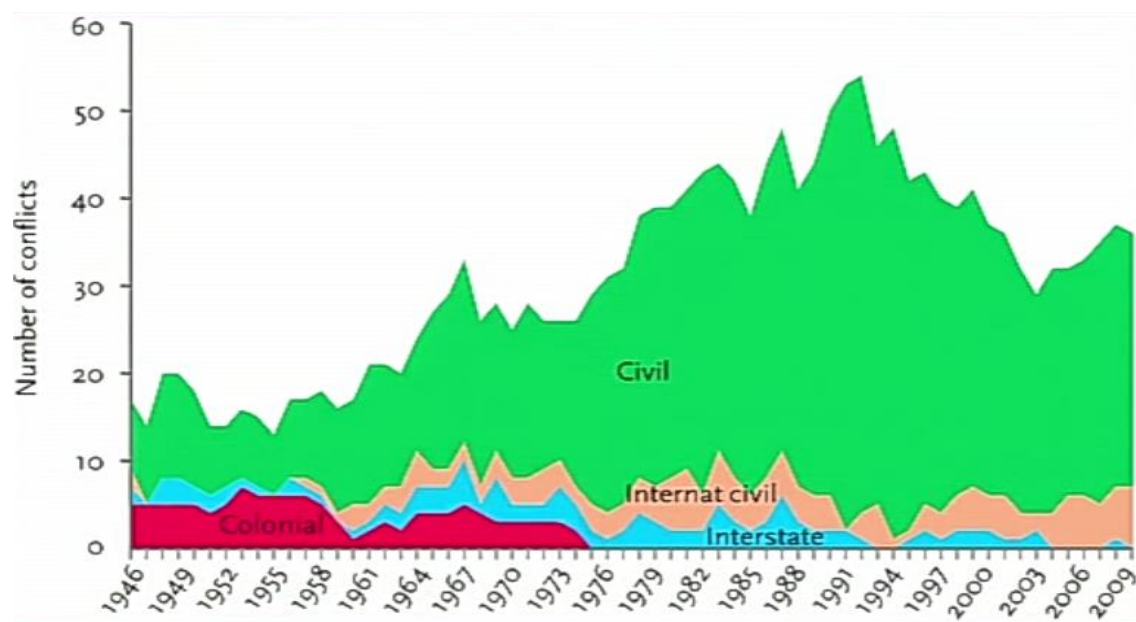
ever. Peace in the “post war” age seems only possible when the international community listens to the concerns and desires of both sides, not take Kissinger’s non appeasement stance towards conflict. As the Irish peace process shows, reason can lay a road map to resolution. Ensuring self-preservation whilst comprehending others’ individual reasoning allows two conflicting sides to attain peace. Those looking for peace in this age have achieved peace, once they start to listen and appease.

The human security report 2009/10 made two important conclusions about the phenomenal decline in international warfare. One being that indeed the jump in diplomatic intervention and global peacekeeping missions have aided prevention (HSRG, 2011) Additionally, economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler of Oxford university have proven interdependent economic growth tends to reduce the probability of conflict occurring. Peace is now more profitable than war. However, the research group, and most historians, are unable to forecast the onset of conflict. Remarkably, thus far, the world post 1945 has seen an era of astonishingly few international wars “during a period in which the number of entities capable of conducting them increased.” (Christopher, 2002) It is important to note that recent political events (Trump/Brexit) mean the structures in place now, could in 10 years’ time have completely crumbled. Our “quest” for peace may be further opening the gate for violence and warfare to reign once again. President Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has suggested “factors that make for international instability are gaining the historical upper hand over the forces at work for more organized cooperation” (McDougall, 2019). In the globalization process, peace, security and economic progress have become interdependent, a positive step in the achievement of peace. This unity on the other hand has allowed for more conflict over ideas, further worsened by the “profound instabilities, extreme inequalities and precariousness” transnational capitalism creates (Pijl, 2006). In a time of Brexit reopening old tribal wounds, and continued anxiety about rising superpowers dominating the globe, perhaps conflict is building up under our noses. The era of an “unending quest” for peace may be coming to an explosive close. In the near future Kissinger’s defeatist view on peace may prove to be irrefutable, but for now we should celebrate the historical achievements of humanity in the last 74 years and continue to endlessly to strive for “peace” as, thus far, it has not been a futile journey.

Deaths in War 1900-2005



Number of Wars 1946-2008



Source: UDCP/PRI0; Human Security Report Project (HSRG, 2011)

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