



Hall Gardner. *IR Theory, Historical Analogy, and Major Power War.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 339 pp. \$84.99, ISBN 978-3-030-04635-4.

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How dangerous are current trends in international politics involving the United States, Russia, and China? Are we stumbling toward great power war? If so, how can it be prevented? Perhaps no other question, except for the environmental crisis, is as important to the future of humankind. And Hall Gardner is the latest among a number of international relations theorists to take it on.

What he finds is not reassuring. The great powers indeed seem to be heading toward a confrontation that may well result in a large-scale conflict, with its roots lying substantially in Washington's post-Cold War shortsightedness but also in Russian revanchism and Chinese assertion. But there is a way to prevent tragedy—renewed diplomacy.

If some of this seems not quite brand new—after all, Barry R. Posen (*Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* [2014]), John J. Mearsheimer (*The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* [2018]), and others have elegantly laid out the costly blunders of American overreach—the reader is invited to engage with what seem to be the volume's more promising contributions: analogy with deep history and what Gardner calls his framework of “alternative realism” as both an explanatory and normative approach to the central question posed at the outset. Gardner also reposes faith in diplo-

macy, but of the informal “contact group” kind rather than formal processes of the sort that place the UN Security Council at their core.

Gardner is at his strongest when he invokes rich historical detail to argue that the era we are entering is not so much a reprise of the Cold War than a return to some blend of pre-World War I and pre-World War II dispensations of power and purpose. To do so he takes issue with a number of understandings that international relations theorists have commonly invoked. A good example is Gardner's questioning of the standard interpretation of the Peace of Westphalia, the 1648 treaty that is widely seen to have inaugurated a new era in European and world affairs, by reifying state sovereignty as a global governing principle. Westphalian sovereignty, Gardner argues, is substantially a myth. While Westphalia did put aspects of state sovereignty in place, such as the right of almost three hundred German princes to be free of the control of the Holy Roman Empire, it also limited sovereignty in important ways, for instance, by “denying the doctrine of *cuius regio, eius religio* (the religion of the prince becomes the religion of the state) ... established by the 1555 Peace of Augsburg” (p. 118). Rather than a strict enshrining of the principle of noninterference, Westphalia legitimized “power sharing and joint sovereignty” by giving the new powers France

and Sweden the right to interfere in the affairs of the German Protestant princes (p. 117). Another example of power sharing was the recognition of Switzerland as a confederal state.

Gardner also takes on the traditional interpretation of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht as an early exemplar of the balance of power system as a means to limit or prevent war, as theorized by neorealists. The balance of power conceived by Utrecht was not a method to uphold stability and the status quo; rather, it was a “critical concept to undermine global hegemony” (p. 120). Others have argued cogently before that the Westphalian order is an ideal-type construct, but Gardner’s contribution is in linking reductionist interpretations of Westphalia to questions of great power tensions of the present.[1]

Historical analogy is another central thrust of this volume. The current tensions between the great powers parallel more closely the pre-World War I and II eras than the inauguration of a new cold war, asserts Gardner. The implication of this assertion is clear: we cannot expect this clash to be managed through such precepts as nuclear deterrence that neorealists believe kept the peace during the Cold War. The differences with the Cold War are due to a number of characteristics of our time not present till recently: the increasing conceptualization of tactical nuclear weapons as a means to terminate conventional conflict, the apparent acceptability of limited nuclear war as a realistic option, the increased autonomy of middle powers to initiate wars outside the control of great powers, and new planes of cyber and information warfare with their power of asymmetry. Thus, rather than a conflict turning into a military clash only at its fringes, a slide into great power war is a realistic risk under the current circumstances.

Rejecting the proposition that it was nuclear deterrence that largely kept the peace during the Cold War, Gardner points to the rivalry’s many collaborative elements as the more consequential

reason. Common interests between the United States and the Soviet Union to contain allies, such as Germany, Japan, and China, seen by the two superpowers as having potential to threaten their core interests, ensured such collaboration. The nuclear nonproliferation treaty was but one example of the two superpowers collaborating to restrain potential great powers, such as the above three. Thus, the Cold War was about each superpower not just containing its peer rival but also containing its own major allies—effectively, a “double containment.”

Gardner bemoans the frittering away of the opportunity presented by the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the United States myopically refusing to take Russian sensitivities into account in expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and launching a war of choice against Serbia over the fate of Kosovo. Centering NATO, rather than the Russia-inclusive Partnership for Peace, as the cornerstone of a new security dispensation in Europe was a mistake that provoked a nationalist backlash in Moscow.

An important contribution of the volume is its clear-eyed sense of the growing entente between Russia and China. This convergence has been frequently presented in the literature as being merely opportunistic—long on lofty rhetoric but short on common intent and a willingness to pool resources.[2] But Gardner assesses that the main driver of the Russian-Chinese entente is their common interest in their increasingly fraught rivalry with the United States, and the durability of this rivalry also implies the longevity of this convergence on most strategic matters. Both great powers (though Russia just about qualifies to be one) are playing the long game rather than just looking at their proximate and shorter-term interests. A simultaneous get-tough policy against Beijing and Moscow, as is currently underway in Washington, acts only to cement this convergence into a true (if informal) alliance.

Detailed historical analogies between today and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a key means for establishing Gardner's case. The crises of the contemporary Middle East are analogous to the Balkan and Moroccan conflicts prior to World War I, argues Gardner, while the emerging Moscow-Beijing entente parallels the Berlin-Tokyo axis prior to World War II and the 1922 Rapallo Pact between Weimar Germany and Russia. India is seen as a pivot power similar to Italy of the early twentieth century, whose loyalties were not a given with its switching of sides between the two world wars. The Two Plus Four Agreement reunifying Germany and finalizing the Oder-Neisse line as the German-Polish border is seen as analogous to the Locarno agreements that were aimed to end disputes of Germany with its western neighbors and bring the Weimar Republic into the core community of nations. And China's Belt and Road Initiative parallels similar hub projects of Japan's Co-prosperity Sphere and Wilhemine Germany's Berlin-Baghdad-Basra railway.

The fact that many of the multilateral efforts at solving disputes in the pre-World War II era cited by Gardner ultimately failed is not lost on the reader. This sense of pessimism is sharpened in the final two chapters, when Gardner argues that a bloc formation is steadily taking place with the United States and its allies on one side and the evolving China-Russia-Iran entente on the opposing side that could turn into a hard alliance. Turkey could also become a member of this entente if its current deterioration of ties with the United States (over US extraterritoriality on the S-400 acquisition from Russia and the issue of Kurdish rebels in Syria) reaches a point of no return. These emerging blocs, coupled with the volatile rivalries of middle powers in Asia and the Middle East, make great power war more plausible than it was at any other time since World War II.

With all this said, however, Gardner is no fatalist. Rejecting teleologically flavored predictions of conflict, such as the "Thucydides trap," he ar-

gues for "the transformative power of diplomacy" to settle the sharpening rivalry between the United States and Russia-China, with their central flashpoints as Ukraine and Taiwan (p. 114).[3] The means are to be "contact groups"—or, in other words, informal diplomatic clubs—bringing together key powers outside the formal rules of the United Nations and other similar forums to design a new security architecture for Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (p. 110).

Gardner even proposes some grand bargains that such contact groups could arrive at. For Ukraine, this means recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea but with Russian compensation paid to Kiev, a free-trade arrangement with Europe and the United States to give them a deep role in Crimea's economy, and a pathway to future shared sovereignty over the annexed territory. A similar joint sovereignty approach is recommended to resolve the multi-stakeholder South China Sea dispute. A contact group could also resolve the Syria dispute with a resultant coalition government comprising all Syrian combatants, including the current members of the Bashar al-Assad government, and the Yemen war with the Omani proposal as a starting point.

How could these grand bargains come about? This is where Gardner starts to slip. He claims this approach will work on the parties' realization "that political, economic, and technological cooperation will most likely bring benefits for all sides in the long term than perpetual conflict" (p. 110). The problem with this assumption is not that long-term win-wins do not rationally exist (they often do), but rather that in a time of acrimony, nationalism, and tendencies toward greater authoritarianism on all sides, such rationality could well be overwhelmed by other more potent rationalities of short-term aggrandizement and saving face.

Though the idea of an informal contact group has its advantages, Gardner's argument that a change of diplomatic format would do the trick is

less than credible. The Ukraine dispute, for example, has degenerated into bitter acrimony on both sides with an ongoing hot conflict. This is the case notwithstanding the work of the Trilateral Contact Group—precisely the sort of approach that Gardner recommends. But walking back from the mutual US-Russian antagonism will likely take more than the right negotiating format. There first must be a will to meet the adversary part of the way—a difficult challenge to overcome when the conflict is portrayed in starkly moralistic terms, particularly on the side of Washington. Gardner has no convincing practical proposition that addresses this challenge.

It is in his inability to adequately define his theoretical concept of “alternative realism,” however, where Gardner truly falls short. Alternative realism seems to be defined more by what it is not than what it is. Time and again (and convincingly on many occasions), Gardner rebuts many cherished axioms of neorealism. This includes the assurance of nuclear deterrence, state sovereignty, the concepts of polarity and balance of power, unitary states, and anarchy.[4] Alternative realism is equated with a constructivist critique of Hans Morgenthau and preventive diplomacy. William Fulbright’s quote “morality of decent instincts tempered by the knowledge of human imperfections” is also depicted as a guiding principle (p. 20).

Later in the text, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev is held up as a practitioner of alternative realism, with his revolutionary contributions to ending the Cold War, while at the same time developing good relations with China as a hedge against NATO. There is also a reference to alternative realism as a “critical comparative historical approach” (p. 26). All this, though useful, does not amount to a coherent theory with with clear and testable principles and demonstrated explanatory (far less predictive) power.

The elements that seem to constitute Gardner’s alternative realism—the centrality of histori-

cal influences, polycentrism as representing the world order, the importance of non-state actors, absolute gains trumping relative gains, and the promise of informal diplomacy—appear to come more out of various well-trod pathways of liberal and constructivist thinking than any brand new theoretical approach. But the reader is left even more confused at one point by an extensive taxonomy of states centered on space and power, apparently drawn from theoretician George Liska, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the early twentieth-century framework of geopolitics. Is “alternative realism” then simply a smorgasbord of various international relations frameworks, excluding neorealism? The reader is never provided a clear answer.

Historically, successful resolutions of some of the most bitter and intractable disputes—such as between Catholic and Protestant powers in Europe or due to anxieties provoked by the rise of Germany in the late nineteenth century—came only after genocidal wars had been waged, a fact that Gardner himself recognizes. Conventional safety valves of deterrence, compellence (short of war), and diplomacy may be insufficient to prevent another recurrence of our collective nightmare. And we seem to be yet far from the sort of out-of-the-box thinking required from international relations theorists and practitioners that could help prevent this march to folly.

Notes

[1]. Sebastian Schmidt, “To Order the Minds of Scholars: The Discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in International Relations Literature,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (September 2011): 601-23.

[2]. Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008); and Robert D. Kaplan, “The Quiet Rivalry between China and Russia,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2017.

[3]. Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

[4]. Though Gardner surprisingly fails to engage to any extent with a vital subfield within realism that speaks to historicity and domestic factors, that is, neoclassical realism. See, for instance, Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998), 144–72.

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