Can We Diminish War?

“It is hard to deny that war is inherent in the very nature of the state. States historically identify themselves by their relationship to one another, asserting their existence and defining their boundaries by the use of force or the imminent threat of force; and for so long as the international community consists of sovereign states, war between them remains a possibility, of which all governments have to take reasonable account ... Who fights with Dragons, said Nietzsche, shall himself become a Dragon. [But] the other horn of the dilemma is: he who does not fight with Dragons may be devoured by them.”

This observation by the eminent historian of war, Michael Howard (The Causes of War and Other Essays, Harvard University Press, 1983) contains a large element of truth, but it is not the whole truth. War and even more so the preparation for war, the building and trading of armaments, is commonplace. Yet it is diminishing. The body count, to use that repugnant yet unforgettable term of the Vietnam War, may have increased with the world’s rapidly improving technological prowess, but the occasion of war has unquestionably diminished.

Indeed what we see today is the culmination of a long process. The decline in the amount of warfare in Europe, the epicentre of most wars on earth the last six hundred years, if not longer, has been in process for some 150 years.

Undoubtedly, the European Union’s great achievement has been to realize what in fact was its founders’ purpose – to cement the often warring nations of Western Europe into a peaceful whole. So easy to summarize the achievement. So easy too to underestimate the historical magnitude of this quite astonishing and unprecedented success story.

Moreover, for the first time in history, there are a not insignificant number of states that have been free from war for the best part of two centuries. In Europe there are Switzerland and Sweden, both despite a long tradition of warfare. In the latter’s case the pedigree of war stretches back to the Vikings and whose modern day emergence as a nation state owes much to the aggressive militaristic leadership of Vasa in the eighteenth century, who not content with putting the whole of Scandinavia under the Swedish yoke tried, with some
success at first, to extend Swedish power eastward over Russia and southward over Germany.

Latin America, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Brazil have now lived out a century, much longer in the latter’s case, without war.

Indeed, entire regions of our planet have long escaped internal war – North America most importantly. Neither Canada, nor Mexico, nor the United States maintains troops on each other’s borders. Likewise the South Pacific has long been peaceful, apart from a brief invasion by the Japanese in the Second World War and relatively small-scale conflicts in West Iranian and East Timor.

Today the largest economic power in Asia, Japan, formally abjures warfare, an undertaking written into its constitution, the consequence of the nuclear bombardment by the US of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and its subsequent defeat in the Second World War, which left great intellectual scars as well as the more obvious emotional ones.

In due course I will argue that there is enough evidence at hand to suggest this poorly reported balance of peaceful existence between neighbouring states not only belies Michael Howard’s summation, but could in fact be extended in our lifetime in a quite significant way.

But first there must be an accounting of Professor Howard’s view, not least because he speaks a lot of sense and there are a lot of rather high-powered thinkers who not only agree with him, but also believe the world must continue that way if it is to survive and prosper.

Arguably the greatest practitioner of the so-called “realist” thinking about war these days is Professor Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, who walks heavily in the footsteps of his intellectual mentor, former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the long and bitter Cold War in 1992, he wrote, in *Rethinking America’s Security: Beyond Cold War to New World Order*, in a perfect echo of Michael Howard, “With the Cold War now relegated to the dustbin of history ... optimists believe those changes can serve as the basis for a more peaceful world in the 21st century. In fact, however, there have been no fundamental changes in the nature of international politics since World War II. The state system is still alive and well and, although regrettable, military competition between sovereign states will remain the distinguishing feature of international politics for the foreseeable future.”

I don’t know if Professor Mearsheimer has ever read Nancy Mitford’s delightful biographical work, *Voltaire in Love*. Voltaire, the *eminence grise* of the Enlightenment, was a passionate pacifist (although not entirely a consistent one), a man so convinced of the argument against the deployment of state violence in any cause that his friendship with the young prince Frederick of Prussia developed into a litmus test of his ability to translate his beliefs into the actions of statecraft. In what over the years became a major intellectual effort to woo the man who was surely by inheritance eventually going to become the fulcrum that would lever war and peace in Europe, he appeared to have much success. Frederick became his disciple, writing a tract, *Anti-Machiavelli,*