

An assessment of Gaddis' suggestion that MAD secured a 'long peace'

Written by Seamus Peter Johnstone Macleod

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John Lewis Gaddis attributes the lack of pyrexia in the relations between the great powers in the post-war period to, among other factors, the fearsome and unprecedented destructive power each side had at its disposal. He attributes the "long peace" of the Cold War to the transparent balance of power created nuclear weapons. This essay will briefly examine the nature of this "long peace" since the latter half of the twentieth century cannot be said to have been without bloodshed. This will be followed by an appraisal of the effects – or lack thereof – of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) in sustaining "peace" and a re-evaluation of the supposed stabilising effect of bipolarity. Gaddis's emphasis on nuclear weapons and neorealist notions of a balance of power are shown to fail in explaining the temperature of relations between Moscow and Washington. This essay concludes that whilst the destructive power of the atom bomb is significant, its contribution to stability in the latter half of the twentieth century is not. Indeed, it seems more likely that the contribution of nuclear weapons was to make a "long peace" seem less inevitable than it in fact was.

How can this period of human history, which contained thirty interstate and extrasystemic wars and two hundred and fifty-one international crises (Brecher and Wilkenfield, 1991: 86), be described as a "long peace?" It is a description that Brecher and Wilkenfield treat vituperatively, stating that "hot" war directly between the USSR and the United States 'is the exclusive focus of the Gaddis analysis.' (1991: 88) This is a criticism that Gaddis would likely accept. Indeed, he himself poses the rhetorical question: 'That period... has seen... a whole series of protracted and devastating limited wars, an abundance of revolutionary, ethnic, religious, and civil violence, as well as some of the deepest and most intractable ideological rivalries in human experience... Is it not stretching things a bit... to... call it peace.' (Gaddis, 1987: 216) Of course, Gaddis's "long peace" refers to system stability rather than an absence of violence. Despite unequivocal ideological antipathy and the existence of greatest destructive devices man has ever known, the positions and forms of the great powers has remained largely unchanged since 1945. As Singer puts it: 'the big news is that the industrial and post-industrial nations have somehow managed to prepare for war with a dedication seldom seen in history, while nevertheless keeping the apocalyptic horsemen at bay.' (1991: 83-84) Gaddis's emphasis on structural stability rather than a more human-centric definition of peace is obvious.

The title of this essay equates Gaddis's "long peace" directly with the success of MAD. This – and indeed the "mutual" in MAD – is misleading. Implicit in this title is the notion that both the United States and the Soviets held each other back from the brink of a third world war through mutual deterrence. Brennan terms those in favour of such a policy "MADvocates." (1978) He describes these MADvocates – such as Robert McNamara – as the driving force behind domestic resistance to the development of active defences against ballistic missiles (ABMs) since such a technology would essentially disarm the USSR and render MAD defunct. (1978: 195) He argues vehemently that such American voices had no Soviet counterparts. Whilst 'there are many in Washington who are apprehensive that this parity will be upset by some successful effort on the *American* side... there are – so far as can be seen – none in Moscow apprehensive over the possibility that parity might be upset by some successful effort on the *Soviet* side.' (1978: 196) Robert Jervis supports this view, stating that 'MAD's credibility plummeted... as the Soviet military buildup convinced U.S. policy-makers that the U.S.S.R. did not believe in MAD and was seeking nuclear advantage,' and that 'the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and its African adventures revealed that MAD could not protect

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all U.S. interests.' (2002: 41) This appraisal of MAD is intended to clarify the question being answered rather than necessarily discredit Gaddis's explanation for the "long peace," however it also introduces the notion that if bipolarity ever truly existed it was not a balanced dyad.

How, then, does Gaddis explain a peace that was not peaceful if not with a policy of mutually assured destruction that was not mutual? He takes a structural view of international relations, embracing the neorealist interpretation of bipolarity as the most stable of all systems, stating that 'a bipolar structure of international relations... tends... to induce... a sense of caution and restraint, and to discourage irresponsibility.' (1987: 222) This view of the "long peace" as a product of a delicate balance of power is supported by Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer who writes that 'the Cold War, with two superpowers serving to anchor rival alliances of clearly inferior powers, is our model of bipolarity,' and that 'deductively, a bipolar system is more peaceful for the simple reason that under it only two major powers are in contention.' (1990: 2-3) Bipolarity is favoured by neorealists – in terms of the stability it provides, at least – because the unpredictability of the state of anarchy that defines their worldview is minimised when the number of independent actors is reduced. Nuclear weapons and other technological achievements of the Cold War are thought to contribute to this stability in a number of ways.

Gaddis attributes the "long peace" – in part – to nuclear weapons because their existence made producing 'the optimism that historical experience tells us prepares the way for war,' difficult for Soviet or US leaders to envisage. (1987: 231) As Mearsheimer puts it, 'deterrence is most likely to hold when the costs and risks of going to war are unambiguously stark. The more horrible the prospect of war, the less likely war is.' (1990: 4) The significance of nuclear weapons was that they 'forced national leaders, every day, to confront the reality of what war is really like, indeed to confront the prospect of their own mortality,' which Gaddis believes that 'for those who seek ways to avoid war, is no bad thing.' (1987: 232) This peace-inspiring pessimism in the nuclear age was balanced. Once both sides had the bomb and the means to use it differences in other capabilities became less crucial to the balance of power. Mearsheimer describes nuclear weapons as 'moving power relations among states towards equality,' thus alleviating 'the vexed problem of miscalculation by leaving little doubt about the relative power of states.' (1990: 4)

Perhaps equally crucial to Gaddis's account of the "long peace" is the tacit consent that the United States and the Soviet Union gave each other to scrutinize the other from above. Reconnaissance satellites allowed the Cold War superpowers 'to evaluate each other's *capabilities* to a degree that is totally unprecedented in the history of relations between great powers.' (1987: 234) Both powers – the US using Thor missiles and the Soviets using "killer" satellites – had the capability to blind their opponent to their own capabilities but chose not to. Gaddis posits that the Thor missiles 'were intended primarily as protection against an anticipated threat from Soviet orbital bombardment weapons,' and that the "Russians saw the need to have a capability in *wartime* to destroy American satellites whose functioning they were willing to tolerate as long as war did not occur.' (1987: 209-10) The contribution of effective surveillance to the creation of a stable balance of power is obvious. Indeed, Gaddis attributes almost as much importance to the 'custom that has evolved between the superpowers of allowing these objects to pass unhindered over their territories,' in securing global structural stability throughout the nuclear arms race. (1987: 234)

Gaddis argues that the ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was dulled by the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides and that 'without this moderation of ideological objectives, it is difficult to see how the stability that has characterised great power relations since the end of World War II could have been possible.' (1987: 235) Although Cold War rhetoric may have, at times, seemed unlikely to be conducive to peace Mearsheimer supports this mollifying interpretation of nuclear weapons. He identifies nationalism – particularly "hypernationalism" – as a phenomenon highly likely to lead to war and states that 'nuclear weapons work to dampen nationalism, because they shift the basis of military power away from mass armies and toward smaller, high-technology organisations.' (1990: 5) The psychologically stabilising effect of weapons of mass destruction is emphasised further when Gaddis attributes Khrushchev's 'proposition that the interests of the world revolution, as well as those of the Soviet state, would be better served by working within the existing international order than by trying to overthrow it,' to nuclear weapons. (1987: 235)

Though Gaddis's nuclear peace explanation draws upon neorealist notions of balance of power, neorealists themselves disagree on the impact of nuclear weapons in creating bipolar stability. Lebow argues that both Waltz

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and Hans Morgenthau believe that 'nuclear weapons are a symbol, not a cause of great power status,' and that 'countries that develop these weapons in the absence of similarly advanced industrial and scientific infrastructures do not become great powers.' (1994: 256) Even if the place of nuclear weapons in the balance of power was not contentious Woods points out that the Soviet Union did not produce an atomic bomb until 1949 and lacked a method for delivering this payload until 1957. He estimates that the USSR did not achieve 'actual military parity with the United States until 1970.' (1994: 82) Lebow observes that by traditional neorealist measurements the Soviet Union was more the equal of Great Britain than it was of the United States in the first years of the Cold War. Contrary to rivalling the US in conventional military power 'US estimates in the late 1940s depicted [the Red Army] as a poorly equipped, poorly trained, poorly led force without the logistical base to sustain a major offensive in Western Europe.' (Lebow, 1994: 257)

By the measure of the bomb or the battle readiness of the Soviet Union a balance of power was not universal from 1945 till the fall of the USSR. Russian power was no match for that of the United States by either measure during what Lebow describes as 'the tensest stage of the cold war – the years of the Czech coup, the first Berlin crisis and blockade, and the Korean War' – and therefore the "long peace" 'cannot be attributed to bipolarity.' (1994: 257) Even once the Soviet bomb was successfully tested 1949 this 'did less than one might have thought to shake American officials' faith in the weapon's wartime utility: that faith had never been robust to begin with.' (1987: 112) Though it emphasises the importance of the atomic bomb in maintaining a "long peace," Gaddis's account is more nuanced than a simple restating of the principles of balance of power theory. He recognises that 'at no point during the decade or more in which it could have used nuclear weapons with impunity did the United States actually do so.' (1987: 106) There appear to be two reasons for this. The first is that military applications and negotiating powers of the bomb did not equal its destructive magnitude. (Gaddis, 1987: 106-10) The second reason has little to do with military might.

Gaddis quotes President Truman as saying "this is isn't a military weapon... It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people... So we have got to treat this differently from rifles and cannons and ordinary things like that." (1987: 106) Although Eisenhower was publicly of the mind that "we have got to consider the atomic bomb as simply another weapon in our arsenal," (Quoted in Gaddis, 1987: 125) Gaddis opines that 'Eisenhower's only real departure from Truman's strategy on the use of nuclear weapons... was... one of appearances.' (1987: 141) American restraint in the early years of the Cold War is embodied by Truman's decision to keep control of the nuclear arsenal in civilian hands. Gaddis quotes him as saying that he did not want "some dashing young lieutenant colonel decide when would be the proper time to drop one." (1987: 107) Perhaps most telling is Eisenhower's concern that "we could not blind ourselves to the effects of such a move on our allies, which would be very serious since they feel they will be the battleground in an atomic war." (Quoted in Gaddis, 1987: 125)

Singer observes that hostilities – both nuclear and conventional – began to incur 'incurs unacceptably high costs at home and abroad, economically, politically, and psychologically.' (1991: 81) Not only was there little incentive to use the bomb but also it can be argued that its existence was tangential to US foreign policy aims. Eisenhower's concern regarding the reaction of the US's allies to the use of the bomb reveals not only a reason for it going unused but also the true aim of American foreign policy in the postwar period. From the end of the Second World War the United States had busied itself establishing what Lundestad (1986) calls an "empire by invitation." Cumings claims that Russia was 'a regional power of the second rank (except in regard to inherently unusable nuclear weapons), inflated out of all proportion by the hot air of Cold War ideology.' (1992: 89) Cumings believes that the bipolar Cold War was largely a fiction 'that could never stand the glare of realpolitik analysis,' and that the real goal of US foreign policy throughout the latter half of the twentieth century was to establish itself as the global hegemon through economic as well as military ties. (1992: 89-98) He supports this conclusion by attributing the disturbances in the "long peace" to 'this American hegemonic project' that aimed to revive 'the industrial economies,' and satisfy 'the American desire to police the lines of resource flow to the industrial states.' (1992: 88) The use of the atomic bomb, and the international horror provoked by such action, would have been detrimental to this hegemonic goal.

Hegemonic Stability theory – alluded to above – is discussed by Gaddis in a later work. He accepts hegemonic stability theory in as much as it 'reinforces... theories of nuclear peace and bipolarity,' (1991: 36) but Cumings argues that 'the real reason for the long European peace between the super-powers was that the Soviet Union shared the American perspective to a much greater degree than is generally realised.' The Soviets were as content

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with containment as the US was. (1992: 88) Crucial in explaining the "long peace" is the fact that 'neither side has felt so choked and frustrated that it would rather risk losing a total war... than go on with the status quo.' (Vasquez, 1991: 216) Blachman and Puchala support this assessment, stating that 'the US and USSR qualify as empires in the second half of the twentieth century,' empires that 'were continental in size and accordingly endowed in natural resources, very large in population, economically advanced, and readily capable of maintaining order within the societies they controlled.' (1991: 179) Further, they support the notion that much of the periphery conflict that is often interpreted as "proxy wars" between the two superpowers was in fact fictional. What were in fact 'exercises in putting down rebellions in the outlying provinces,' were – and still are – seen as wars caused by 'the provocations and machinations of their rivals.' (1991: 188)

And so we return to a bipolar – although not equal – international stage. Why did these two colossi, each with the ability to project 'awesome power beyond their borders,' (Blachman and Puchala, 1991: 179) fail to come to blows for half a century? Perhaps a more appropriate question to ask is why "hot" war considered inevitable or even likely? The great powers had been at war with one another in various permutations for centuries. Multipolarity on the European continent had resulted in two world wars that had served to expand the frontiers of conflict beyond the Eurasian landmass. After the second of the great wars there were left two giants, dividing the world between them. Their governing ideologies were fundamental opposites and so neorealists such as Waltz turned to the balance of power since it was in such balances and its failures that the fires of European wars had been born. (Waltz, 1988) Indeed, what other explanation could there be? The notion that war between developed nations had become obsolete was discredited by the fact that 'if any war could have persuaded Europeans to forswear conventional war, it should have been the First World War, with its vast casualties.' (Mearsheimer, 1990: 10) Waltz (1988: 624) and Gaddis (1987) to a lesser extent turn to nuclear weapons for their explanation but it seems that in turning to the bomb they – particularly Waltz – have been blinded by its destructive power.

Waltz is quick to scold proponents of a liberal peace through interdependence, stating that 'the fiercest civil wars and the bloodiest international ones have been fought within arenas populated by highly similar people whose affairs had become quite closely knit together,' (Waltz, 1970: 205) but apparently fails to recognise that one of the key reasons for the "long peace" was a lack of interdependence between the two superpowers; there was little reason for them to quarrel. The strength of the bipolar explanation rests on the assumption 'that postwar international relations should have evolved in ways characteristic of traditional *European* nation-state international relations where major-power warfare, via mass military border-crossing and direct assault, was almost incessant.' (Blachman and Puchala, 1991: 177) Had this been the case then it would be convincing that nuclear weaponry represented that revolutionary variable that prevented "hot" war. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, the mutual embracing of MAD by the two superpowers is highly dubious. Indeed, Vasquez states that 'the record offers no concrete evidence that the USSR has threatened nuclear war, and therefore it cannot be validly inferred that the US has deterred such a threat.' (1991: 209) Huth has shown that it was the strength of local conventional forces, not nuclear weapons, that was the key variable in determining the likelihood of aggression on the periphery. (1988: 428-38) Peace between the two superpowers is actually explained best by traditional realist principles rather than bipolarity or nuclear weapons. Though violently ideologically opposed 'the two societies are not natural enemies in the traditional sense,' sharing, as they do, no 'common border conflicts, no irredentist ethnic minorities, severe disputes over natural resources, no crusading religious or racial antagonisms.' (Johansen, 1991: 226)

Vasquez observes that it is territory that has historically 'been regarded within the global political culture as a vital issue for which the use of force is considered legitimate and usually worth the costs.' (1991: 215) In a study of international disputes between 1816 and 1980, Diehl (1985) found that twenty-five percent of "contiguous" disputes escalated into war whilst a mere two percent of "non-contiguous disputes" did so. Vasquez emphasises the importance of territorial disputes over nuclear aggression by highlighting that if 'Khrushchev had made a move on Berlin during the Cuban missile crisis, as Kennedy feared, then the probability of war, which was already high, would have increased dramatically.' (1991: 219) McNamara argues that American nuclear capability was the only reason 'Khrushchev... withdrew those weapons.' (Quoted in Trachtenberg, 1985: 141) Whilst a full exploration of the crisis is beyond the scope of this work, two refutations of this position are particularly relevant. Firstly, if viewed in isolation, a crisis caused by the positioning of nuclear weapons is almost certainly going to find that nuclear weapons played a crucial role in whatever conclusion emerged. Secondly, as Trachtenberg observes: 'the Soviets backed away from a

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strategy of bluff,' because their nuclear expedition was not accompanied by 'seriously preparing for [conventional] war.' (1985: 158-59) There is a strong case to be made that the political management of the Cold War also played a role. Lebow disputes Waltz's belief that 'the creators become the creatures of the market that their activity gave rise to.' (1979: 90) He argues that 'American and Soviet leaders gradually became convinced that their opposites were as anxious as they to avoid war,' and that 'human intellect and a mutual commitment to avoid war gave the superpowers and their allies the understanding and courage to escape from their security dilemma.' (Lebow, 1994: 28-9) Although Lebow is perhaps over optimistic in his assessment of the abilities of skilled politicians to transcend structural constraints, the separation of the two superpowers – both geographically and in terms of interests – may have created an international environment more conducive to the 'to escape from the deadly consequences of self help systems.' (Lebow, 1994: 28)

To Gaddis's credit he recognises these factors as important in his explanation of the "long peace." He recognises that 'stability in international systems is only partly a function of structure... it depends as well upon the conscious behaviour of the nations that make them up.' (1987: 229) He also rightly emphasises the importance of the distance and independence of the two superpowers, stating that 'the relative invulnerability of Russians and Americans to one another in the economic sphere may be frustrating to their respective policymakers, but it is probably fortunate, from the standpoint of international stability.' (1987: 225) The title of this essay unfairly associates Gaddis's explanation exclusively with MAD and one would be mistaken if one interpreted this work as a refutation of the validity of his analysis. Much of Gaddis's explanation is robust; it is only his – admittedly qualified – fixation with nuclear weapons that is a matter of contention.

It would seem that an explanation lies in the title Gaddis chose for his work. This essay has discussed the "long peace" and has shown that what is often perceived to be the miraculous result of deterrence was in fact closer to a forgone conclusion than a narrowly avoided disaster. The relative nature of the term "peace" is often discussed but equally relative is its length. Blachman and Puchala point out that 'in broad and analytically appropriate historical perspective, our long peace may be neither extraordinary in its occurrence or duration, not particularly difficult to fathom.' (1991: 177) Johansen agrees, stating that 'the international stability that the global system has experienced since 1945 is not an aberrant historical event but the normal peaceful phase that usually follows a period of global war and major readjustment.' (1991: 228) In an extensive evaluation of peace, its nature, and its duration throughout history Siverson and Ward also conclude that to believe that the "long peace" was 'either rare or ineluctable ignores a wide range of human experience,' and that 'historical periods of major power peace are frequently as long as forty-two years.' (2002: 12-13)

Gaddis's "long peace" seemed remarkable given that it followed two World Wars. To search for a remarkable explanation for it is understandable; what could be more remarkable than the greatest accumulation of destructive technology humanity has ever known during a period of international stability? Though it overemphasises the importance of nuclear deterrence Gaddis's account of the "long peace" is largely credible. The policy of MAD with which this essay question associates him is less so. Empirical evidence to suggest that weapons of mass destruction created peace is ephemeral at best. Balance of power theory that underwrites MAD is found equally lacking since if there ever was parity in strength between the United States and the Soviet Union it was fleeting in comparison to the decades of stability that characterised the Cold War. Like many scholars of the time it would appear that fear of World War III made it seem near inevitable in Gaddis's eyes. From the enviable position of hindsight this is clearly not the case.

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