

Opinion: Humanity fumbles its way toward a world without war

By Joshua S. Goldstein

“Peace on Earth.” It is each year’s Christmas wish and indeed the great wish of the world’s religions across history. Of course, any realist or cynic can tell you that this wish is an empty hope that will never come true.

Oddly, the idealists who march in the streets for peace seem to agree: Peace on earth seems further away than ever.

Except, actually, it isn’t. While TV images will always show us the most horrible parts of the human experience, the big picture has changed dramatically in our lifetimes. Worldwide, wars today are fewer, smaller, and more localized than at any time in living memory.

Start with the bloodiest form of violence in history – wars between the world’s regular national armies, head-to-head with tanks, artillery, airplanes, missiles, and currently 20 million soldiers worldwide. For centuries, these armies fought regularly, several times a year on average, and the worst of these wars killed millions at a time.

Today, nowhere in the world are these armies fighting each other – a historic development that has received almost no notice. Countries are still armed to the teeth and still have conflicts, but they don’t go to war to solve them, mostly because it’s insanely expensive and doesn’t work very well. Exhibit A is the recently ended U.S. war in Iraq.

In Europe, where major interstate wars followed one after another for centuries, a continent has become a Union where

(despite monetary troubles) fighting is unthinkable. China, wracked by wars and revolutions throughout history, has not fought a battle in 25 years. Its leadership derives legitimacy from trade-based prosperity, and follows a “peaceful rise” strategy in the world system. The U.S.-Soviet rivalry no longer exists, and the world’s arsenals of nuclear weapons have shrunk by three-quarters in the past 30 years, again with no hoopla.

Goldstein is professor emeritus of international relations at American University and author of “Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide”.

Read the whole story