

The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth

by Michael Mandelbaum

A Review by *Anne Armstrong*

Anne Armstrong is pursuing a M.A. in Security Policy Studies at the Elliott School of International Affairs with specializations in Transnational Security and Conflict Resolution. Her primary academic interests lie in study of transnational organized crime groups and the utility of development and resilience efforts to counter them. While in D.C., Anne has worked at Women's Action for New Directions and interned for the Office of Policy at the Department of Homeland Security. She received her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University in 2017.

According to scholar Michael Mandelbaum, the 25-year period between the end of the Cold War and 2014 was one of the most peaceful in history. Aside from smaller regional conflicts, the world saw a brief pause in global conflict between superpowers. Mandelbaum credits benevolent U.S. hegemony, the spread of democracy, and regional economic interdependence for sustaining this deep peace. In *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth*, Mandelbaum explains how the revisionist goals of Russia, China, and Iran in their respective regions caused this period of peace to come to an end. Neatly sorted into sections on Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, Mandelbaum's latest book delves into the efforts by each of these autocracies to challenge the liberal world order in the face of their own economic uncertainty. Mandelbaum discusses the prospects for lasting peace in the book's final chapter, leaving the reader with some hope—albeit qualified—that another deep peace is possible.

Dr. Michael Mandelbaum is an academic with extensive foreign policy experience. Mandelbaum spent over two decades at the Council on Foreign Relations and is a prolific writer, having published sixteen books and countless articles on topics ranging from nuclear security, U.S.-Russia relations, and foreign policy in the Middle East. *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* manages to take on an immensely dense period of history in reasonably concise 156 pages.

Early in the book, Mandelbaum outlines three critical forces that were fundamental for the maintenance of the post-Cold War peace. The acceptance of U.S. hegemony, establishment of economic interdependence, and spread of democracy, the author claims, were the pillars upon which the 25-year peace

rested. Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East all manifested these in some form during this period until three critical outliers—Russia, China, and Iran—challenged one or more of these forces, disrupting both the deep peace and balance of power in their respective region.

Mandelbaum begins with the challenge to peace in Europe. In post-Cold War Europe, he argues, the former Soviet Union was averse to U.S. hegemony, economically isolated, and inexperienced with democratic governance. Mandelbaum points to the Clinton administration's exclusion of Russia from NATO's eastward expansion as a missed opportunity for bringing the former Soviet Union into the democratic fold and a critical factor for enabling the erosion of European peace. Paired with NATO expansion, the economic stagnation of Boris Yeltsin's tenure and his erratic nature fueled resentment among Russians, further alienating the country from democratic governance. Mandelbaum, however, overstates this connection, particularly because, as he himself points out, the country had little historical experience with critical democratic ideals that would set it up for success in the future. The failure of implementing democratic institutions and free market economics may have been more related to cultural and historical norms than Mandelbaum acknowledges.

The challenge to peace in East Asia, according to Mandelbaum, resulted from China's efforts to regain the primacy it enjoyed for much of history as one of the world's most ancient and powerful political communities. Mandelbaum rightly points out that any action to stunt China's economic successes in the post-Cold War era would have been politically and morally difficult—not to mention economically harmful to the global industries benefiting from them. His characterization of China's rapid growth elicits an important conclusion: Western democracies viewed China's economic expansion as an opportunity for democracy to develop. After all, according to a liberal theory of history, free markets produce democratic governance, and democracies very rarely fight each other. Mandelbaum qualifies this view, however, with an important caveat. China was not pursuing economic expansion in line with Western foreign policy ideals, but rather to regain its global status and avenge the defeats it suffered during and after its "century of humiliation" (pg. 56). China's actions over the past several decades, considered almost inconsequential to Western powers until relatively recently, were actually strategic actions taken to overturn the status quo. China leveraged its economic success and military buildup to challenge the status quo; China's growing presence in the South China Sea and its efforts to extend its sphere of influence through economic endeavors like the One Belt One Road initiative are key examples of this. Like Russia, Mandelbaum writes, China has taken steps to undermine Western—and particularly American—influence and increase its own power. As in Russia, Mandelbaum warns, China has increasingly shifted toward aggressive foreign

and military policies to counteract weakening popular support resulting from economic stagnation.

The final part of the triad challenging world peace, as Mandelbaum sees it, is Iran in the Middle East. Mandelbaum begins by clarifying that the challenge to peace in the Middle East differs slightly from Europe and Asia because its conflicts “arose independently of the Cold War and so outlived it” (pg. 97). In another difference from Europe and Asia, Mandelbaum correctly points out that the countries of the Middle East are primarily composed of distinct tribal and ethnic groups with borders invented by foreign powers. This fact precluded the region from developing true nation-states and, moreover, hindered the development of democracies among Arab nations. Combined with the absence of economic interdependence in the region, Mandelbaum concludes that the Middle East fundamentally lacks two of his three forces for peace. As for the end of the already shaky peace in the region, Mandelbaum writes that the weakening of the United States’ hegemonic presence alongside the deep-rooted revisionist goals of Iran were ultimately the causes. Mandelbaum asserts that, unlike Russia and China, Iran’s attachment to ideology allowed its leaders to care less about public support. Mandelbaum allows that Iran’s motives are deeply connected to its goals for Shia Islam and regional hegemony, but his discussion does not emphasize these cultural and ideological considerations enough.

However, the Middle East’s conflicts, unlike many in East Asia and Europe, have been fought by coalitions made up of multiple entities with distinct and often contradicting motives. Indeed, the United States itself has supported conflict parties with motives that directly contradict its democratic values. This reality suggests that the United States’ hegemonic presence was less firmly rooted than Mandelbaum seems to believe. He does point out the important fact that the United States’ support of these conflict parties often empowered Iran, directly or indirectly. Returning to his thesis, Mandelbaum argues that, like Russia and China in recent years, Iran has engaged in aggressive initiatives to extend its power in the region—particularly in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Mandelbaum concludes, dismally but rightly, that envisioning the establishment of peace in this region is more difficult than in the other two.

While Mandelbaum is correct to not underestimate Iran and its ambitions in the Middle East, this section of the book seems least aligned with his premise of a 25-year peace. After all, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were both fought during this period and had immense costs in terms of human life. Mandelbaum does qualify his inclusion of the Middle East in his thesis, saying that the region was admittedly not as peaceful as the others, but that it still experienced “modest tranquility” (pg. 132).

In the final section of the book, Mandelbaum considers the return of the post-Cold War peace. His belief in the three forces of peace – the benevolent

U.S. hegemony, spread of democracy, and regional economic interdependence – is encouraging, yet it is difficult to imagine any of these three forces balancing in the three regions anytime soon. Nevertheless, Mandelbaum’s characterization of China, Russia, and Iran as revisionist autocracies that violate recent norms as they attempt geographical and ideological expansion is intriguing and appealing. His birds-eye view offers a comprehensive and deep look at the forces underpinning the world’s peaceful moments. *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* invites discussion on the fundamental characteristics that are altering the current balance of power and forces the reader to reconsider the longevity of the liberal world order. In a time where the United States’ international role is being reassessed and global economics is evolving, each of these issues is worth considering for political scholars worldwide.

Michael Mandelbaum, *The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), ISBN 978-0-1909-3593-1.