

As risky as disagreeing with [Dan](#) always is, I'm not sure I accept the comparison between war and climate change — at least not in terms of the negotiations. I think that a better analogy is between climate change and trade.

Most succinctly, I believe this because in war, the *relative* gains of either side predominate. The issue in a war is not “who gains or loses” but rather “who gains or loses *more than the other side*.” The Union won the Civil War because it destroyed the power of the south to break the country apart: but in terms of the general welfare, obviously it worse that it was before the war. Similarly, France “won” World War I because it eliminated the German threat (at least for a while); but it was hardly in a better absolute position. If you count the Cold War as a war, then the United States clearly won it, but the decades of confrontation, brinkmanship, etc. didn't make the US absolutely better: it made it relatively better. Unless someone is an out-and-out militarist, you generally don't find them saying, “wow, fighting wars is just so great for a country!” That's why William James searched for the “moral equivalent of war”: he recognized that war may help facilitate a sense of common purpose, but even in victory the costs of war were simply devastating. One notable exception might be a war of liberation from a conqueror. But I think that the general point holds.

Now, think about climate change. If the world successfully defeats the climate change threat, then every nation is better off in an absolute sense; every nation avoids the severe health, economic and environmental impacts that climate change will bring. Similarly, at least the *theory* of free trade says that everybody wins if trade barriers are reduced. Of course, there are distributional questions in both issue areas: that's why both kinds of negotiations are extremely difficult and often fail.

What about arms control, which is what the New York Times compared with the climate negotiations? That depends upon the weapons involved. The SALT and START talks were a little more like climate, because the absolute gain of avoiding nuclear instability overwhelmed any possible relative gain for either side. Those relative gains were unclear in any event. As Henry Kissinger — not generally thought of as a touchy-feely left-winger — well put it: “What in God's name is strategic nuclear superiority? What do you do with it? How do you use it?”

Conventional weapons agreements, however, have been much more difficult to achieve because relative gains predominate over absolute ones, at least in an anarchical international system where nations are concerned about their sovereignty and where conventional weapons can be used to destroy that sovereignty. This is why, although powers have been often able to agree on nuclear force agreements (CTBT, SALT I, SALT II, START, NPT), they have hit walls with conventional arms reductions. Offhand, I can

think of only one major conventional weapons agreement that has succeeded: the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22. And even there, the naval powers did not reduce weapons, but simply agreed to freeze existing forces in place.

I must sharply take issue with the Times' comparison of climate and arms talks merely because both sides want to verify compliance: verification is virtually always an issue (not with CTBT, because nuclear tests produce easily verifiable fallout — another reason why that was the first nuclear treaty signed.). That's what makes international treaties hard to do.

These distinctions matter. They affect the strategies involved, and our sense of optimism about whether treaties can be concluded. While the Times doesn't have to introduce its readers to international relations theory (I certainly hope not!), I hope that its reporters are able in the future to see the underlying issues.