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ON THE EVOLUTION OF MILITARIZED INTERSTATE CONFLICTS

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Much of the early quantitative empirical literature on international conflict focused on the relationship between structural characteristics of the international system and the outbreak of interstate war. This orientation was driven by the importance of systemic structures in the dominant realist paradigm; by the epistemological argument that in the context of analytical uncertainty about the primary causes of war the most efficient path to reasonably parsimonious theory was through a research program which began at the structural level; and by the construction of a superb data base (Singer and Small, 1972).

Over the last decade there has been a significant shift in the quantitative empirical study of international conflict, driven largely by the increasing recognition that structural systemic models are theoretically incomplete and empirically unable to account for much of the variance in the outbreak or expansion of international disputes or wars.¹ This shift includes a broadening of the conception of the sources of conflict to include an analysis of the role of national attributes and dyadic relationships as well as system structures. It also reflects the acknowledgment that wars are often preceded by serious disputes or crises, that not all disputes or crises result in war, and that in order to explain the outbreak of war we need to understand how disputes originate and why some disputes end up in war while others do not.

This recent research on interstate disputes and war builds on earlier correlates of war research and constitutes a progressive problem shift (Lakatos, 1978) in the quantitative empirical study of war. Most of these studies, how-

ever, involve the separate analyses of how international and (more recently) domestic conditions affect different phases of the conflict process, as Bremer suggests in his Figure 2. Though most of these empirical studies may have been conducted within an implicit "mental model" of a more dynamic evolution of international conflicts through several phases, Bremer is absolutely right to argue that scholars must begin to focus more explicitly on the dynamic processes through which international conflicts progress from one stage to the next. We need to direct more attention to the ways in which decisions and behavior at each stage of a dispute affect the range of options available at subsequent stages, and to the critical role of uncertainty in these processes. I also fully agree with Bremer that there are multiple paths to war and that this has serious implications both for conceptions of causality and for standard analytic procedures, including regression models.

In fact, I find little to disagree with in Bremer's conceptual framework (his Figure 3) for the analysis of the evolution of militarized interstate conflicts. That framework provides a useful way to organize earlier research on these questions and a vision of some of the most productive directions for future research, a vision which has begun to generate some consensus in the community of scholars engaged in the scientific study of war. At the same time, however, I think that there are some important dimensions in the evolution of conflicts which may be implicit in the framework but which need to be highlighted and clarified.

Bremer's conceptualization implies a direct link between underlying political, economic, and geographic conditions and the onset of a militarized interstate dispute (boxes 1 and 2 in Figure 3). In fact, there is a lot that happens in between—including ethnonationalistic/ideological/religious rivalries, economic competition and coercion, arms races, and other processes which do not involve military threats and which fall somewhere between the two boxes. The existence of one or more of these patterns can significantly influence the subsequent evolution of the conflict.²

Although these developments might be subsumed within the first box by expanding it to include underlying processes as well as conditions or contextual factors, it might be more useful to identify a separate phase in the genesis of militarized interstate conflicts. Let's call this the "rivalry" phase.³ An important research agenda might include the analysis of the underlying conditions and issues which are most likely to lead to a rivalry and the conditions, issues, and processes under which rivalries are most likely to lead to militarized disputes. The introduction of a rivalry phase in the causal chain between contextual conditions and militarized disputes would be comparable to the introduction of disputes between underlying conditions and war. Admittedly, rivalries might be somewhat more difficult to operationalize and

measure than militarized disputes, in part because they encompass a broader range of attitudes and behavior and because there may be no single action in a rivalry quite as salient as the initiation of a military threat, but they do occupy a central place in the causal chain from background conditions to the onset of militarized disputes.⁴

Another phase in the genesis of international conflict, which is currently subsumed within the evolution of war phase in the Bremer conceptualization but which deserves further emphasis, includes the termination of war and any peace settlement. After decades of neglect there is now increasing interest in the processes leading to the termination of war (Massoud, 1993; Licklider, 1993). Although the diplomatic and military conditions which largely influence the evolution of war also affect when and how the war will be terminated and the nature of the peace settlement that emerges, additional factors (especially domestic and bureaucratic politics) may also come into play, and the peace settlement itself can have a significant independent impact on the consequences of the war, both for the individual belligerent states and for the larger system. Thus the termination of war and the nature of the peace settlement require, at a minimum, greater attention within the evolution of war phase of the model.

Something else which is missing or only indirectly reflected in the Bremer framework is issues. Conflicts over some types of issues may be more likely to escalate to militarized disputes and wars than conflicts over other types of issues (Vasquez, 1993), and this may vary over historical periods and underlying domestic and international conditions (Luard, 1987; Holsti, 1991). Although territorial issues (Goertz and Diehl, 1992; Vasquez, 1993) may be partially captured by the proximity category under dyadic relationships, and ideological and religious issues (and perhaps those relating to ethnonationalism) may be subsumed under the cultural and ideological categories, the question of how issues fit into the framework needs more theoretical attention.

It is also important to note that there may be some significant variations in the presumed progression of interstate conflicts from background conditions to the onset of militarized disputes, the evolution of disputes, the onset of war, the evolution of war, the effects of war, and back to underlying conditions. This is implied by Bremer's emphasis on alternative causal paths, but it needs further emphasis.

First, not all interstate wars are preceded by militarized disputes which involve a prior threat of military force. A conflict may move directly from underlying conditions—or, more likely, from the rivalries or competitions which I suggested as intervening between background conditions and militarized disputes—to the outbreak of war. Although this pattern is undoubtedly

less common in the period since 1816 than in earlier eras, when states and empires often embarked on military expansion without first attempting to secure their objectives through coercive military threats, it is a possibility which needs to be acknowledged.

Even in more recent times, however, there are cases in which states seek to secure the first strike advantages of a surprise attack without coercive bargaining in a prolonged crisis. Historical examples include the cases of Japan in the Pacific War, Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War, and Argentina in the Malvinas War. Although in some or all of these cases there may have been an action prior to the surprise attack which exceeds the threshold for a militarized dispute (Gochman and Maoz, 1984), for all practical purposes the progression of the conflict moves directly from the rivalry phase to the war phase. There is also a larger set of conflicts which do involve serious military threats prior to war but which pass very quickly through the militarized dispute phase in the progression from rivalry to war. This is all quite consistent with Bremer's framework, but these patterns illustrate some of the variations in alternative paths to war.

These considerations have some bearing on questions of causal relationships. Bremer's conceptualization is a framework for analysis or a set of interrelated questions to guide research, but it is not in itself a model of causal relationships, and the chronological development of a dispute from one phase to the next is not necessarily congruent with causal relationships. It is certainly possible, for example, that the causal factors contributing to a particular war can be found entirely in background conditions which exist prior to the militarized dispute phase of the conflict. In Lebow's (1981) conception of a "justification of hostility" crisis, for example, a state which prefers war to likely adversary concessions but which wants to create a favorable diplomatic or domestic political climate for war might deliberately initiate or provoke a crisis. Whereas transition rules might explain how the conflict moves from background conditions to dispute and from dispute to war, there may be some causal paths to war which bypass the dispute phase entirely.

The fact that transition rules are not congruent with causal paths is also relevant to the question of the relationship between the outbreak of war and the expansion of war. The Bremer framework implies that the joint decisions which lead to the outbreak of war are temporally prior to decisions which lead to the expansion of war. This may be the common pattern, but it is possible to imagine a different scenario in which decisions to expand or escalate a war are made simultaneously with decisions to begin a war.

Consider the World War I case. Political decisionmakers generally shared (after the Austrian ultimatum) a conception of how explosive the crisis was and how any war was likely to expand once it began. They were generally

aware that military threats carried significant risks of counterthreats, escalation, and perhaps even mobilization; that decisions for mobilization were decisions for war; and that decisions for war carried a high risk of the intervention of other great powers. Once Austria-Hungary issued the ultimatum, the key choices made by each of the actors (with the possible exception of Britain) were fairly predictable. The conditional probability that war would expand once it began (and even that the war would occur given that the crisis occurred) was extraordinarily high, and decisions for a local war in the Balkans were for all practical purposes simultaneous with and indistinguishable from decisions for a continental war.⁵

I want to emphasize again, however, that I do not see patterns such as these as inconsistent with the Bremer framework. To the contrary, it is the framework's focus on phases of conflict and the transition rules between successive phases that lead us to explore these kinds of relationships.

Although nearly all of the contributors to this volume are primarily concerned with the quantitative-empirical study of militarized interstate conflicts, I want to emphasize that the utility of the conceptual framework which organizes this volume is not restricted to this one particular methodological approach. The framework lends itself nicely, for example, to a sequential game analysis of the interrelationship between decisions made at one stage of a dispute with decisions made at subsequent stages. The Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992) international interaction game, for example, is fully consistent with the Bremer framework. So is Smith's (1993) game-theoretic model of the relationship between decisions to form alliances and expectations of the likelihood of war and allied support in the event war occurs.

The framework may also have considerable utility for those who employ non-quantitative methodologies in the analysis of interstate conflicts. Many of the theoretical questions which Bremer articulates can be profitably explored through comparative case study as well as large-N research designs. In fact, the explicit use of the Bremer framework to structure case studies of international conflicts might very well make research from small-N research designs more cumulative than it has been in the past, and in the process perhaps contribute to greater communication among conflict analysts in different research communities.

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Notes

1. Studies by Bueno de Mesquita (1981), Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1988, 1992), and Morrow (1988) come to mind, but in fact there has been a cumulation of empirical studies which suggest that the empirical evidence regarding the impact of systemic-level variables on war is mixed at best (Levy, 1989; Vasquez, 1993). One promising area for future research, however, concerns the interaction effects among variables at the system, regional, and dyadic levels (Geller, 1992; Thompson, 1992).
2. I suspect that the "distance" between the first and second boxes in Bremer's conceptualization, in terms of the amount of variance in one box unexplained by conditions and processes in the previous box, is greater than that for any other pair of boxes in Figure 3.
3. This conception of rivalry differs from that of "enduring rivalry," as commonly defined in terms of the occurrence of a certain number of militarized disputes within a certain period of time (Goertz and Diehl, 1993). It is more like Vasquez's (1993:75-83) idea of a rivalry as a competitive relationship characterized by sustained hostile interaction.
4. The cost in time and resources to collect data on rivalries may be a good reason for bypassing this intervening rivalry stage thus far, but the conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of rivalries would make an important contribution to future research.
5. Consider the actual chronology of events in July 1914. Although Austria declared war on July 28 and began a bombardment of Belgrade the next day, the Austro-Serbian war did not actually begin until the invasion and engagement of forces on August 12. (Austrian mobilization plans delayed any invasion for nearly two weeks, and the timing of the early declaration of war was intended primarily to relieve German and domestic political pressure on Austrian leaders [Levy, 1990/91]). Meanwhile, the combination of interlocking alliance systems, beliefs in the cult of the offensive, and the requirements of the mobilization plans led the European great powers to begin military actions. Russia was the first to mobilize. Germany occupied Luxembourg on August 2 and invaded Belgium on August 3-4, a week before the Austrian and Serbian armies met. If we define war to require the joint engagement of military forces, then World War I expanded before the Austro-Serbian war began.

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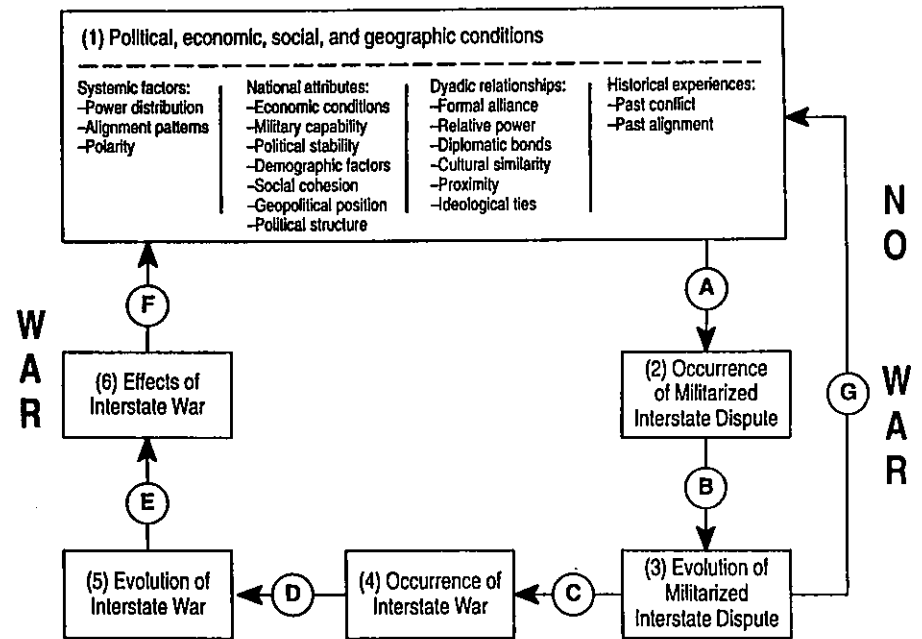


Figure 3. The Genesis of Militarized Disputes and Interstate Wars.