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MISPERCEPTION AND THE CAUSES OF WAR: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems

By JACK S. LEVY*

This study is addressed specifically to the relationship between misperception and the causes of war, a question that has received surprisingly little treatment in the theoretical literature. The aim is to provide a conceptualization of the forms of misperception and the theoretical linkages by which each may contribute to war under certain conditions. Considerable attention will be devoted to the conceptual and methodological problems confronting such an analysis.

I. The Literature

Although diplomatic historians have given considerable emphasis to the role of misperceptions in the processes leading to individual wars, political scientists have generally minimized the importance of this variable in their theories of the causes of war. A diversity of scholars, ranging from Thucydides to Morgenthau and Bueno de Mesquita, have instead constructed "rational" models of conflict based on the assumption that statesmen accurately perceive external threats and opportunities and select policies on the basis of a cost-benefit calculus in order to advance the national interest. These hypotheses are inconsistent with a growing body of theory, systematic empirical research, and historical case studies on decision making and crisis behavior. The resolution of this apparent

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inconsistency is particularly important because of the divergent implications of these frameworks for stability and policy in the nuclear age.\(^3\)

Misperceptions are a key variable in many "nonrational" perspectives on conflict, but the literature provides little guidance for those concerned with an empirical analysis of the impact of misperception on war. Theories of foreign policy and crisis decision-making provide a comprehensive analysis of the sources of misperception, but are generally not concerned with their consequences.\(^4\) The seminal work by Jervis\(^5\) is an exception, of course, and is indispensable for any analysis of misperception in international politics. More remains to be done, however. Jervis is not primarily concerned with the problem of war, and a conceptualization related specifically to this issue is needed. Furthermore, Jervis does not systematically identify different kinds of misperceptions, specify their consequences, or demonstrate what kinds of misperceptions have the greatest impact, under various conditions; neither does he show how they interact with institutional and systemic factors (the independent impact of which he minimizes). Similarly, the literature on intelligence failure provides excellent analyses of the causes and consequences of misperception in crisis, but these refer to only one type of misperception and are more concerned with the failure to recognize the imminence of war than with the actual causes of war.\(^6\)

There are a few studies that deal more directly with the question of misperceptions and the causes of war. White and Stoessinger identify certain forms of misperceptions contributing to war and attempt to

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\(^3\) For an interesting analysis of the conditions necessary for deterrence and stability from the perspectives of several different theoretical frameworks, see Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1977), chap. 3.


\(^5\) Jervis (fn. 2).

demonstrate their impact in a small number of cases. Their conceptualizations are weak, however, and they share none of Jervis’s sensitivity to the analytical problems involved in establishing a causal relationship between misperceptions and war. Somewhat more useful are the recent studies by Lebow and Stein. Lebow provides an excellent review of the sources of misperceptions and some evidence of their impact in several cases—though he too is somewhat insensitive to important conceptual and methodological problems. Stein undertakes a game-theoretic analysis of the conditions under which misperceptions of adversary preference orderings contribute to conflict. His analysis is not inconsistent with anything that will be said here, but his focus is somewhat limited. By considering only misperceptions of adversary preferences and 2 × 2 games, he excludes some important forms of misperceptions and types of empirical situations.

To summarize, we know much about the sources of misperception, but less about their consequences. Misperceptions are commonplace; but little attention has been given to the question of what kinds of misperceptions are most likely to lead to war, and to the specific theoretical linkages through which they operate. The aim of this article is to suggest such a conceptualization. A major concern is that this framework be useful for empirical research. It must be capable of generating testable hypotheses, sensitive to analytical and methodological problems, and reasonably parsimonious.

II. Forms of Misperception

Among the various studies of misperception, the only explicit efforts to identify different forms of misperception relevant to war are those by White and Stoessinger. White’s categories include the following: (1) diabolical enemy image; (2) virile self-image; (3) moral self-image; (4) selective inattention; (5) absence of empathy; and (6) military overconfidence. Stoessinger suggests a similar set of categories: (1) a leader’s perception of himself; (2) his perceptions of his adversary’s character;

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8 Lebow (fn. 2); Arthur A. Stein, “When Misperception Matters,” *World Politics* 34 (July 1982), 505–26. It should be noted that Stein is misleading in claiming to analyze misperception of intentions rather than capabilities. The payoff matrix deals only with outcomes and not with the determinants of those outcomes, so that it does not distinguish between intentions and capabilities. Payoffs and preference orderings are determined by both. Preferences for war, for example, cannot be evaluated apart from the capabilities that determine the probability of victory and the expected costs. In the present study, the distinction between capabilities and intentions is made explicit, so that their different theoretical linkages to war may be identified and analyzed.
(3) his perceptions of the adversary's intentions; (4) his perceptions of his adversary's power and capabilities; and (5) a leader's capacity for empathy with his counterplayer on the other side.  

The utility of these conceptualizations is limited by some rather serious analytical problems. First, they fail to differentiate between misperceptions themselves and the sources of misperception. For the purpose of a meaningful conceptualization, it is necessary to identify what it is that is misperceived, for it is through these phenomena that the linkages to war must be drawn. White's "selective inattention" is best conceptualized not as a misperception, but rather as a psychological process leading to misperception. Similarly, "images" of oneself or of an adversary's character are not themselves misperceptions, but instead a set of beliefs that may generate misperceptions, usually in interaction with selective inattention to information. This conceptualization is consistent with Holsti's analytical distinction between belief system or image on the one hand and perception on the other. It is possible to have both a "diabolical enemy image" and correct perceptions of an adversary's intentions or capabilities in a particular situation, since other sources of perception may dominate. If the concept of misperception is to be a useful one, it must be defined and operationalized independently from the factors from which it arises.

Another problem with this focus on images relates to the difficulty of determining the accuracy of perceptions, a point to which Jervis has given some attention. He suggests that an alternative approach (which he does not adopt exclusively, but which he finds "very valuable") is to ask, not "Was this perception correct?" but instead, "How was it derived from the available information?" My position here is that the concept of misperception is meaningful only if there exists in principle a correct perception. By avoiding the question of the accuracy of perceptions and by not isolating and operationalizing the concept of misperception, that concept is stripped of explanatory power. It then becomes impossible to construct testable "hypotheses on misperception."

Misperception involves a discrepancy between the psychological environment of the decision makers and the operational environment of the "real world." Decisions and actions may be determined by the former, but their effects or consequences are constrained by the latter.

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9 White (fn. 7), chap. 1; Stoessinger (fn. 7), chaps. 1 and 7.
11 Jervis (fn. 2), 7-8.
Specific forms of misperception must be defined in such a way that they can be differentiated, in principle at least, from correct perceptions. To a certain extent, this is also true for perceptions of capabilities, since war provides an objective test of actual capabilities. It is also possible in principle to identify misperceptions of intentions, though it is often difficult in practice to gain access to the information necessary to determine the intentions or motivations behind a particular action or statement. Images of character, on the other hand, cannot be falsified because they involve normative judgments for which there exist no empirical or logical standards for evaluation. For this reason, White’s concepts of “diabolical enemy image,” “virile self-image,” and “moral self-image” are excluded from this conceptualization of misperceptions. That is not to say, of course, that these images are unimportant for either international politics in general or war in particular—only that they should not be conceptualized as perceptions or misperceptions.

In narrowing the concept of misperception, I have identified capabilities and intentions as two central forms. These are the primary concerns in any intelligence analysis. Misperception of the adversary’s capabilities or intentions contributes to the processes leading to war through a variety of theoretical linkages (to be analyzed in the following section). Other forms of misperception may also contribute to war, but they do so almost exclusively through their effect on the perception of capabilities and intentions.

Among the most important of these secondary forms of misperception is the misperception of the perceptions of others. What is misperceived here are others’ perceptions of our capabilities and intentions, and also their broader definition of the situation and the nature of the threats it poses to their vital interests. Since an actor’s definition of the situation cannot be treated independently of his definition of his own interests, misperceptions of the latter are included here. Erroneous judgments regarding how the adversary defines his interests and perceives the threats to those interests—including our intentions and capabilities—bias our expectations regarding his future behavior and his response to our own behavior. These misperceptions of the adversary’s perceptions therefore lead directly to misperceptions of his intentions. They also distort our cost-benefit calculus and can lead to serious miscalculations of the consequences of our own actions. This category is related to the

13 White (fn. 1), 10-14. Note that White’s “virile self-image” goes beyond perceptions of actual strength and includes the preoccupation with prestige, resolve, and toughness. The belief that one should be strong is analytically distinct from perceptions of strength itself.

14 See, for example, Sherman Kent, Strategic Intelligence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).
concept of the "absence of empathy" discussed by White and by Stoesinger, although I differentiate between the misperception of intentions and of perceptions, and treat the latter as causes of the former.

Another important secondary form of misperception lies in the misunderstanding of the nature of the decision-making process of others. It may involve erroneous perceptions of centralized decision-making or the failure to comprehend the importance of certain variables. This common phenomenon contributes to the inability to understand the meaning behind the adversary's actions (or non-action) and the implications of those actions for future behavior. These misperceptions will be included in the category of misperception of the adversary's intentions.

A related variable of considerable importance is decision-makers' "field of expectations" about future reality. Smoke argues that expectations about future reality are as important in major wartime decisions as perceptions of present reality, and that the main significance of an escalation lies in its impact on the expectations of the leading actors. Although these expectations may turn out to be wrong, it is difficult to argue that there existed at the time a "correct" forecast against which all others can be judged. In addition to the innumerable and inherently unpredictable variables that might affect future reality, decision-makers' expectations themselves may turn out to have a self-fulfilling or self-denying impact because of the actions they induce. For these reasons, expectations about future reality are not really falsifiable in any meaningful sense (which Smoke seems to concede); they therefore will not be conceptualized as misperceptions. However, erroneous assumptions regarding the adversary's expectations about future reality are falsifiable in principle, and are therefore conceptualized as misperceptions and included in the category of the misperceptions of the perceptions of others.

Often neglected in studies of misperception—but important in the processes leading to war—are perceptions of the likely behavior and impact of third states as well as those of one's adversary. If Blainey, Bueno de Mesquita, Iklé, and others are correct that expectations of the behavior of third states are a central variable in the causes of war, it

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15 See Jervis (fn. 2), chap. 8.
17 *Ibid.*, 270. The exclusion of erroneous expectations about future reality from the category of misperceptions does not preclude the consideration of these expectations as an important variable in itself.
follows that misperceptions of the likelihood of third-state intervention and of the military or diplomatic impact of that intervention may also be critical variables. Thus, the misperception of the intentions and capabilities of third states are important categories, along with the misperception of the intentions and capabilities of the adversary. As in the case of the adversary, misperception of third-state perceptions is an important secondary form of misperception, contributing to an erroneous assessment of intentions.

This conceptualization provides the following primary forms of misperceptions: misperceptions of the adversary's capabilities and intentions, and misperceptions of third-state capabilities and intentions. These forms are analytically distinct, theoretically important, and amenable to empirical analysis. I shall now examine these different types of misperception in greater detail, indentifying the various linkages by which each might contribute to the outbreak of war.

III. The Linkages from Misperceptions to War

A. Misperceptions of the Adversary's Capabilities

White, Stoessinger, Lebow, and others identify military overconfidence deriving from underestimation of the adversary's capabilities or overestimation of one's own capabilities as an important form of misperception leading to war.¹⁹ Often neglected in the literature, but not unimportant, is military underconfidence which results from the exaggeration of the enemy's capabilities or underestimation of one's own capabilities. Before examining the theoretical linkages from these misperceptions to war, it is useful to consider briefly the elements of military power that are particularly susceptible to misperception.

In addition to tangible military, economic, and demographic dimensions of existing military power and military potential,²⁰ there are numerous intangibles that are particularly subject to misperception. In addition to such things as morale, leadership, and the quality of military intelligence, the nature of the adversary's military doctrine is especially important.²¹ Uncertainty or ignorance regarding the adversary's doctrine and its impact on the conduct and outcome of the war is a major source

¹⁹ White (fn. 7), chap. 1; Stoessinger (fn. 7), chap. 1; Lebow (fn. 2), 242-47. Since military capabilities are relative rather than absolute, with states evaluating their adversary's capabilities only with reference to their own and vice versa, it would be redundant to construct a separate category for perceptions of one's own capabilities.
of misperception of overall capabilities. Misperceptions of doctrine and other elements of military power may be compounded by exaggerated confidence in the ability of one's own military intelligence to provide an accurate assessment of the overall capabilities of the adversary.

While misperceptions of existing military capabilities are important because of the common expectation of a short, victorious war with minimum losses, misperceptions of military potential are also significant since they may determine the outcome of a protracted war. Particularly unpredictable are the development of new technologies and their application to warfare, the administrative skill determining the efficiency with which resources are transformed into effective military forces, and political considerations such as the will and the ability to divert national resources to the military sector.22 In both World Wars, for example, Germany underestimated the industrial capacity of the United States, and also its willingness to devote resources to the war.23 Also important are faulty expectations concerning the impact of the war on the cohesiveness and political support of the adversary’s population (or one’s own), for they can have a significant effect on the ability to conduct a war. There may be a tendency to assume, erroneously, that the adversary’s population is not hostile or is perhaps even sympathetic to one’s own cause—as suggested by White’s concept of a “black-top” enemy image.24 Hitler believed, for example, that the Russian people would embrace his National Socialist ideology.25 It is quite common to underestimate the difficulty of overcoming an aroused populace, especially if it is fighting on its own soil against what it regards as a foreign invasion—as was discovered by both Napoleon and Hitler in Russia, and by Iraq in Iran.

1. MILITARY OVERCONFIDENCE

Of all forms of misperceptions, the one most likely to play a critical role in the processes leading to war is the underestimation of the adversary’s capabilities relative to one’s own. As suggested by Blainey and Lebow in their historical surveys, it is very rare that a state will initiate a war it does not expect to win.26 If the expectation of victory was erroneous and a state loses the war it initiated, it may generally be

22 For a good analysis of the administrative and political dimensions of military power, see Knorr (fn. 20), chaps. 4-5.
24 White (fn. 7), 29-30, 312-13.
26 Blainey (fn. 18), chap. 3; Lebow (fn. 2), 242-47.
concluded that the underestimation of the adversary's capabilities relative to one's own played an important part in the decision to go to war. (This is a point to which I shall return.) There are innumerable examples of wars that were initiated on the erroneous expectation of victory. Some of the more dramatic examples, including the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, Hitler's war against Russia, and the Korean War, are well documented.  

Although the expectation of victory is generally a necessary condition for the initiation of war, it is not a sufficient condition. In addition to the tensions and conflicts of interest (and their underlying causes) that normally must be present to generate the context for war, a state's decision-makers usually expect not only victory, but also a relatively short war involving minimum costs. Examples are numerous—and shocking. A Russian general expected that the impending Russian war against Turkey in 1877 "will resolve itself into a mere military promenade." After the defeat of Poland, Hitler told his generals that "a campaign against Russia would be like a child's game in a sandbox by comparison." Kaiser Wilhelm expected that World War I would be over "before the leaves had fallen from the trees"; and, early in the Vietnam War, Defense Secretary McNamara was confident that the boys would be home before Christmas. Such optimism is rarely confined to only one party to the dispute. In 1914, the expectation of a short victorious war was prevalent in all European capitals. Similarly, the rest of Greece believed that Athens could not hold out for more than two or three years, while Athens herself probably expected a relatively short, victorious war—but the Peloponnesian War lasted over a quarter of a century. One interesting variation of the short-war illusion is the expectation that one's own stunning victories early in the war will lead to the internal collapse of the adversary's regime and the replacement of the enemy's war party by an elite willing to sue for peace. According to Kagan, that was Pericles' view of Sparta.

For misperception to constitute a cause of war, it must affect an actor's

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37 See ibid.; Stoessinger (fn. 7), chaps. 1-3; White (fn. 7), chap. 1; Blainey (fn. 18), chap. 3; Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August (New York: Dell, 1962), throughout.
38 Quoted in Blainey (fn. 18), 46.
40 Tuchman (fn. 27), 142.
41 Farrar (fn. 2), 3-7; Fritz Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War (New York: Norton, 1967), chap. 3.
43 Kagan (fn. 2), 340.
decisions as well as his expectations.\textsuperscript{34} False expectations of a short war can be considered a cause of war if the winner’s expected gains turn out to be less than the real costs of war had the latter been accurately perceived. It is this logic that leads Farrar to conclude that the assumption of a short war in 1914 “may have been essential to their decision for war. Few of them would have opted for war if they would have foreseen a protracted, revolutionary or unsuccessful conflict.” Similarly, Kagan concludes that this form of military overconfidence was a necessary cause of the Peloponnesian War: “All of the leading statesmen expected a short war. . . . They all failed to foresee the evil consequences that such a war would have. . . . Had they done so they would scarcely have risked a war for the relatively minor disputes that brought it on.”\textsuperscript{35}

It is now necessary to qualify my earlier statement that the expectation of victory is necessary for the initiation of war, and that therefore the defeat of the initiator implies that military overconfidence was one cause of the war. The assertion holds true if the initiator expects to win; but that is not always the case. If war is conceptualized in Clausewitzian terms as an instrument of state policy to further national political objectives, then conceivably decision-makers could expect gains even from a losing war if the political benefits exceeded the military costs (Egypt in 1973, for example). This is all the more true if we broaden the conception of national interests to include the domestic political and personal interests of the dominant decision-maker, for whom a scapegoat war might be useful in spite of its risks (for example, Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas and Idi Amin in his war against Tanzania in 1978). It is possible to go even further: not only is the expectation of victory not absolutely necessary for war, but, contrary to Bueno de Mesquita, even the expectation of positive utility is not a necessary condition for the rational initiation of war. The expected utility of any action cannot be considered apart from the utilities of all possible alternatives, and under certain conditions war may be seen as the rational means of minimizing costs (rather than maximizing gains), as implied by the logic of the security dilemma.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, even a weaker state that perceives war as the least favorable alternative may rationally choose to initiate war if it expects that a preemptive strike will minimize its costs in a war that it perceives to be inevitable.

Up to this point, the focus has been on the individual state (or its

\textsuperscript{34} For a similar argument based on an alternative conceptualization, see Stein (fn. 8), 506-10.

\textsuperscript{35} Farrar (fn. 2), 148; Kagan (fn. 2), 355.

\textsuperscript{36} On the concept of a scapegoat war, see Blaney (fn. 18), chap. 5. On the security dilemma, see Jervis (fn. 2), 62-76.
decision-makers) as the unit of analysis, so that the impact of misperceptions has been conceptualized in terms of the cost-benefit calculus of a single actor. If, instead, we focus on the dyad and adopt a bargaining framework, further linkages between the misperception of adversary capabilities and war can be identified. In a dispute between two states, one state will generally attempt to coerce the other into conceding on the issue in question rather than immediately resorting to force in order to achieve its objectives. The outcome of the ensuing bargaining game will be determined by the perceptions and actions of both states, not simply the one initiating the coercive move. There are two analytically distinct paths by which such a bargaining game can escalate into war. One is the deliberate escalation to war resulting from a miscalculation of the states’ relative capabilities or resolve. The other is escalation resulting from the decision-makers’ loss of control over the situation. The first is the classic “war by miscalculation.” It can occur if the two states disagree on the relative balance of military capabilities between them, and if either of them expects that the benefits from war will outweigh the costs, and believes that alternative means of achieving those goals are either not available or too costly.\(^37\) The other path of escalation to war involves loss of control over the situation by decision-makers. This generally occurs at the final stages of a conflict spiral that is driven by an action-reaction process and fueled by further misperceptions, including the perception of the inevitability of war.\(^38\)

2. MILITARY UNDERCONFIDENCE

Overestimation of the adversary’s capabilities may also lead to war, but through different theoretical linkages. The common tendency to-

\(^{37}\) This formulation differs somewhat from Blainey’s (fn. 18, 113-24). He argues that war can be conceptualized as an instrument for the measurement of power differences and that “wars usually begin when fighting nations disagree on their relative strength” (p. 122). Missing from this formulation is any consideration of the value of the interests at stake: if they are small, the costs of war may be too high to justify the gains. Also missing is any explicit consideration of alternative policy instruments, such as economic coercion, that might secure the objective with lower costs.

\(^{38}\) For an elaboration of the distinction between miscalculation and loss of control, see Glenn H. Snyder, “Crisis Bargaining,” in Hermann (fn. 2), chap. 10; also Phil Williams, Crisis Management (New York: Wiley, 1976), 94-96. Snyder refers to the risks of deliberate escalation as “bargaining risks,” and the risks of escalation due to loss of control as “autonomous risks” inherent in the nature of violence and the institutional and psychological context. The phenomenon of loss of control cannot be fully analyzed here, but its importance is widely recognized. It is the central concern of the crisis management literature and of recent studies of crisis behavior. See Williams (fn. 38); Lebow (fn. 2), chap. 8; Coral Bell, The Conventions of Crisis (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Alexander L. George, David K. Hall, and William R. Simons, The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), chap. 1; Holsti (fn. 2); Brecher (fn. 2); Oran R. Young, The Politics of Force (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), chap. 5.
ward worst-case analysis applies to the adversary’s capabilities as well as to his intentions, and often leads to a military buildup to rectify the dyadic balance of power. It contributes to the exaggeration of the hostility of the adversary’s intentions because of the inherent difficulty of estimating intentions and the common tendency to equate intentions with capabilities. In conjunction with other systemic and psychological factors (as well as institutional pressures for increased defense spending), this classic security dilemma generates further tensions, an arms race, and the well-known conflict spiral. This spiral can escalate into war because of further miscalculations, perceptions of hostility and the inevitability of war, temptations to preempt, and other instabilities of crisis situations. These processes have been analyzed in full in the literature on crisis behavior and need not be detailed here. Because the overestimation of adversary capabilities that triggered the spiral is rather remote from the decision for war, however, and because of the numerous intervening and antecedent variables, it would be misleading to impute much causal weight to these misperceptions relative to other variables.

Overestimation of the adversary’s capabilities relative to one’s own may also contribute to the processes leading to war at points less removed from the final decisions. Perceptions of the adversary’s strength are generally regarded as stabilizing because they induce caution and create incentives to compromise. The analyst should not ignore the opposite effect, however. Under certain conditions, a conciliatory policy may be destabilizing because it generates an image of weakness and expectations of future concessions, leading to further demands by the adversary, an escalation of the crisis, and perhaps a war by miscalculation. It is clear, for instance, that the Western policy of appeasement at Munich projected an image of weakness that led Hitler to miscalculate Western resolve over Poland and to precipitate a general war. In case of such a scenario, if there is good reason to believe that a policy of deterrence based on firmness would have discouraged aggression or future demands, one could conclude that the exaggeration of the adversary’s capabilities is a contributing cause of the war. Such a conclusion would require evidence of the adversary’s intended responses in various contingencies or a well-confirmed theory of the conditions sufficient for deterrence. Unfortunately, the latter does not exist and the former is often not available.

39 Jervis (fn. 2), chap. 3; Lebow (fn. 2), chaps. 3-4; Smoke (fn. 16), chaps. 9-10; Holsti (fn. 2); Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, Conflict Among Nations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), chap. III.

40 Most scholars, however, have concluded that Hitler was bent on a course that made a general war inevitable in spite of his miscalculations. See, for example, Alan Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny (New York: Bantam Books, 1961).
B. Misperceptions of the Adversary's Intentions

The perceived degree of hostility of the adversary's policies and of the motivations behind specific actions, as well as the perceived resolve of the adversary in a bargaining situation, are common forms of misperception because of the inherent difficulty of assessing intent. They are important because of their central role in decision-makers' definitions of threats to their vital interests.

I. Overestimation of the Adversary's Hostility

Exaggeration of the hostility of the adversary's intentions is the most common form of misperception. It derives from system-induced worst-case analysis, the tendency to define intentions in terms of available capabilities, diabolical images of the adversary, and psychological constraints on information processing. In the extreme case, perceptions of unmitigated hostility generate belief in the inevitability of war, possibly triggering a preemptive strike in a crisis situation in order to gain the benefits of the initiative. Even in the absence of a crisis, the perception of inevitability may be extremely destabilizing and may result in a preventive war, particularly if the long-term trends in relative economic and military capabilities appear to be disadvantageous to the threatened state. If such decisions for war are based primarily on erroneous perceptions of extreme or enduring hostility of the adversary, one may conclude that these misperceptions were an important cause of the war. Misperceptions of this kind are generally regarded as important in the decisions for war in 1914 by many of the European states, particularly Austria-Hungary.41

There is a less direct but more common route to war which also stems from exaggerated perceptions of the adversary's hostility. Frequently, the response to perceived hostility is to increase military capabilities in order to deter aggression and to prepare for war in case that deterrence fails. Such actions may initiate a conflict spiral that escalates toward war. The escalation of the conflict spiral is particularly likely if the initial perceptions of hostility are erroneous, because the adversary is then quite apt to see the escalation as an indicator of aggressive intentions,42 which leads to the compounding of misperceptions in a contagious process. Among the notable illustrations of this action-reaction cycle triggered by continuous misperceptions of the adversary's intentions is the Seven Years' War in North America, which

42 Jervis (fn. 2), 71.
Smoke describes as having "no offensive steps by any player at any time." Other illustrations include World War I, the Crimean War, the Peloponnesian War, and the War of 1812.43

2. UNDERESTIMATION OF THE ADVERSARY'S HOSTILITY

The underestimation of an adversary’s hostility can also lead to war, but by different paths than the exaggeration of hostile intent. Here it is useful to distinguish between general hostility and resolve in a crisis situation. Underestimation of the adversary's resolve in crisis is more common because of its tendency to be linked with (and generated by) military overconfidence, and its path to war is more direct. Such misperceptions may generate a refusal to compromise, an increase in one’s commitment, or the initiation of new coercive moves. This process may lead directly to war, or it may initiate a conflict spiral that results in a war by miscalculation or loss of control. An underestimation of the adversary’s hostility may also follow in a temporal sense after overestimation of hostility: the latter motivates coercive moves whose effectiveness is, in turn, exaggerated. Although it is difficult to conceptualize and measure the role of misperceptions under these conditions, one could argue that such misperceptions are a necessary cause of war because accurate perceptions of resolve would lead any set of rational actors to reach a negotiated settlement. In terms of bargaining theory, each would recognize that the credibility of the other’s firmness was higher than its own critical risk, thus leading to compromise.44

The underestimation of the hostility of the opponent’s intentions is recognized in the growing body of literature on intelligence failure, but the assumptions and focus are different. The tendency is to assume that war is inevitable, and the question is why one state fails to recognize this fact and is caught unprepared. This assumption is not always justified, however, and it may result in failure to recognize the role of misperceptions in contributing to the causes of war. The direct consequences of the underestimation of the adversary’s hostility are often complacency and a lack of preparedness. In the long term, states may fail to build up their military capabilities. In the short term, they may fail to take other steps to deter an impending war, either through their own actions or by securing allied support. In addition, the failure to perceive an impending war may contribute to military overconfidence because of the failure to anticipate the attenuating effects of a surprise

43 Smoke (fn. 16), chaps. 8 and 7; Fay (fn. 41); Kagan (fn. 2); Melvin Small, Was War Necessary? (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), chap. 1.
44 Snyder (fn. 38), 227.
attack on one's own military forces. The failure to recognize the threat and the consequent failure to attempt to deter aggression may be an important cause of war, particularly if the combatants are of comparable capabilities and if there is reason to believe that deterrence would have worked.

Contributing to the misperception of the adversary's intentions is the misperception of the adversary's conception of his vital interests and his perception of one's own capabilities and intentions, as well as the threat these pose to his interests. The most common result is the underestimation of the adversary's hostility and the miscalculation of the consequences of one's own actions. By failing to anticipate the strength of the adversary's response, a state may unintentionally initiate an escalation of the crisis or even provoke the adversary to undertake a preemptive action. This escalation may result from a direct threat to the adversary's vital interests or from a change in the adversary's perception of one's own hostility. The Korean War is a good example: because the United States failed to understand China's perception of the threat imposed by a unified Korean regime associated with the U.S., it failed to anticipate the Chinese intervention in response to the crossing of the 38th parallel. Since an accurate prediction of the consequences of that decision would almost certainly have precluded it, these miscalculations were an important cause of the expansion of the war. In a different scenario, both Britain and Russia thought that the 1756 Treaty of Westminster would pacify Europe and localize the war in North America; instead, it united Russia, France, and Austria against Prussia and precipitated the Seven Years' War in Europe. And neither Austria-Hungary nor Germany recognized the extent to which the Russian humiliation over the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 would make her unlikely to agree to further concessions in the Balkans.

Included in this category are not just erroneous assumptions about the adversary's perceptions and his definition of the current situation, but also misperceptions of the adversary's expectations regarding future reality, and the extent to which those expectations differ from one's own. Smoke presents convincing evidence of the importance of this factor in the Seven Years' War (North America), the Crimean War, and the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars. Particularly dangerous in this regard is the erroneous belief that the adversary perceives that war is inevitable, for this may generate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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46 Smoke (fn. 16), chaps. 5-8.
and preclude efforts at crisis management and conciliation. Also included in this category are misperceptions concerning the nature of the adversary’s decision-making process: on the eve of the Crimean War, Tsar Nicholas correctly perceived that Aberdeen preferred a peaceful solution, but assumed, incorrectly, that the Prime Minister would have his way over a hawkish cabinet.

C. MISPERCEPTIONS OF THIRD STATES

Since the probability of victory and the expected costs of the war are greatly affected by the likelihood of third states intervening on one side or the other and by the expected impact of that intervention on the course of the war, misperceptions of these variables may generate serious distortions in cost-benefit calculations and thereby contribute to war. Included in this category are misperceptions of the intentions and capabilities of both potential adversaries and potential allies.

The underestimation of the probability of other states intervening on the side of one’s adversary contributes to military overconfidence, which in turn may lead to war. It generates the false expectation that a contemplated war can be “localized” and will thus result in victory with minimum costs. The impact of these misperceptions is particularly great for small states in their calculation of the behavior of outside powers, since the capabilities of the latter are likely to be large compared to the dyadic power differentials between the primary adversaries. It is more difficult to be certain that great powers would have been deterred from wars against smaller states or other powers if they had correctly anticipated outside intervention, since the impact of that intervention would be proportionally less. The evidence is rather persuasive in many cases, however. Contributing to the outbreak of World War I was the belief of the Central Powers that an Austro-Hungarian war against Serbia could be “localized” without the intervention of other powers. Moreover, it is often argued that Germany’s underestimation of the probability of the likelihood of Britain’s entry into World War I was an important cause of the war, as evidenced by the Kaiser’s later statement, “If only someone had told me beforehand that England would take up arms against us!” Similarly, Corinth’s war against Corcyra was predicated on the erroneous assumption that Athens would not intervene. And Louis XIV was planning a “painless little war” against the German

47 Lebow (fn. 2), 121.
48 Tuchman (fn. 27), 143.
49 Kagan (fn. 2), 351; de Ste. Croix (fn. 32), 70-71.
princes in 1688 and did not anticipate its expansion into the nine-year War of the League of Augsburg.  

The misperception of the perceptions of third states that are potential adversaries is a major source of the misperception of their intentions. It may involve one's failure to understand that others may perceive that their interests would be adversely affected by a war in which they did not intervene. The result may be a serious miscalculation of their probable behavior as the crisis or war escalates, and therefore a serious miscalculation of the consequences of one's own actions. Thus, Germany's failure to anticipate British intervention in World War I derived largely from its failure to perceive the traditional British concern for Belgian neutrality and control over the Channel ports. Such miscalculations may also involve the impact of actions short of war that lead to a serious escalation of the crisis. Kagan, for example, argues that Pericles seriously underestimated the impact of the Megarian decrees on Sparta's perceptions of Athenian hostility, and the resulting gains by the war party in Sparta. A similar case is that of Ferdinand II, who failed to recognize that his Edict of Restitution would provoke Sweden's intervention in the Thirty Years' War. Mann argues that "Gustavus Adolphus would probably never have launched his invasion of Germany without the Restitution Edict." Even if the risk of outside intervention is recognized, there is a tendency to minimize its impact on the course of the war by underestimating the capabilities of potential adversaries—again resulting in military overconfidence and the increased likelihood of war. In both World Wars, Germany underestimated the effect as well as the likelihood of American intervention. Shirer, for example, notes Hitler's growing tendency to "disastrously underestimate the potential strength of the United States." Although estimates of capabilities are analytically distinct from estimates of the likelihood of intervention, there is a tendency for underestimates of capabilities to reduce estimates of the likelihood of intervention, compounding the resulting military overconfidence. General MacArthur's contempt for Chinese strength had considerable influence on his confidence that China would remain neutral in the Korean War.

Another factor contributing to a false sense of military confidence and war by miscalculation is the tendency to exaggerate the likelihood that potential friends will provide support in an impending war. Such misperceptions are exacerbated by the failure to understand a potential

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51 Kagan (fn. 2), 352-53.
53 Shirer (fn. 23), 1170.
ally's definition of the situation and his cost-benefit calculus. There is a tendency to believe that one's ally perceives the threat in the same way as one does oneself and has a comparably low estimation of the costs and risks of intervention. Maria Theresa's war against Prussia (after the 1740 invasion of Silesia) was based in part upon the erroneous assumption that France, England, and Russia would come to her aid.54

The likelihood and impact of economic or diplomatic support may also be misperceived. Both Corinth and Sparta, for example, mistakenly expected economic aid from their Peloponnesian allies and Sicily.55 Israel and her British and French allies would not have embarked on the 1956 invasion of Egypt if they had anticipated the diplomatic and economic opposition of the United States. (This case is interesting because the Israelis correctly perceived the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but erred in thinking that Eisenhower would agree.) Even if the expectation of support is an accurate one, the estimation of the effects of that support in the war effort may be misguided—again leading to a false sense of optimism. Whether such optimism has a significant effect on policy is a more difficult question, but one that can in many cases be answered by the available evidence. After the failure of the Spanish army and navy in the last two years of the Seven Years' War, the French war minister Choiseul conceded, "Had I known what I now know, I should have been very careful to cause to enter the war a power which by its feebleness can only ruin and destroy France."56 This example refers to the expansion of an ongoing war rather than to the initiation of a new one, but it constitutes the type of evidence to which I refer.

There are variations on these forms of misperceptions which may also be destabilizing, but they operate through other causal linkages occurring less frequently and with less overall impact. The emphasis in this study, however, is on forms of misperceptions that have the most direct and most common linkages to war.

IV. Conceptual and Methodological Problems

Conceptual and methodological problems involved in determining that misperceptions exist and that they have an impact on war may profoundly affect our ability to conduct empirical research; yet they have not received sufficient attention in the literature. Although a complete

56 Quoted in Dorn (fn. 45), 375.
analysis cannot be undertaken here, it is useful to develop some of the more important points.

A. Misperceptions of Capabilities

Methodological problems involved in the analysis of misperception of capabilities are generally manageable. Because of the magnitude of many of these misperceptions, they can easily be identified; in addition, war itself serves as an objective standard by which the accuracy of capability estimates can be determined (with qualifications to be noted later). Moreover, since it is rarely rational for a decision maker to initiate a war he expects to lose, military overconfidence can generally be attributed to an initiator who loses the war,57 unless there exists good evidence to the contrary.

If we go beyond minimum expectations of victory to expectations of a short, victorious war with minimum costs, some potential problems do arise; perceptions are more a matter of degree, and no minimum standard exists for comparison. One potential problem involves the decision-makers' distortion of capability estimates for domestic political and bureaucratic purposes. Such distortions are particularly common at early stages in the escalation process, where overestimates of the adversary's capabilities are used to secure domestic support for additional increases in armaments. Deliberate underestimates of the adversary's capabilities are more likely on the eve of war, as a means of enhancing military morale and public support. For this reason, caution must be exercised in the interpretation of public statements. It is important, of course, to recognize variations in relative capability estimates among different decision-makers. It is also necessary to determine the point in the escalation sequence at which certain misperceptions occur. There is a tendency for long-term underconfidence to give way to overconfidence as the crisis escalates, which in turn may give way to uncertainty and fear as war becomes imminent. Military overconfidence and underconfidence affect decisions for war through different theoretical linkages, and the evidence must be interpreted accordingly.

It is more difficult to attribute a causal impact to military overconfidence in a war won by the initiator, or in which there is no clear initiator. The fact that a war lasts longer or involves greater costs than expected does not prove that military overconfidence was a contributing factor. Rather, it is theoretically necessary to show that the real costs of

57 According to one study of interstate wars since 1816, the category of defeated initiators comprises 30-35 percent of all cases. J. David Singer and Melvin Small, The Wages of War, 1816-1965 (New York: Wiley, 1972), 367.
the war are greater than the expected benefits. Although evidence of these details of the cost-benefit calculus is often not available, in many wars the optimism is so exaggerated that causal inferences are reasonable; consideration must be given to the possibility, however, that this optimism is expressed partly for internal consumption. What is sought is evidence from the decision makers themselves to the effect that “had I known then what I know now, I would not have done what I did.”

Inferences that the overestimation of the adversary’s capabilities had a causal effect are even more difficult to confirm because their hypothesized impact takes place at a point much further removed from the decision for war. This problem also occurs with respect to the misperceptions of intentions, and will be analyzed in that context.

The use of the outcome of war as a standard for determining the accuracy of relative capability estimates is generally reasonable, but it does involve a difficult analytical problem. Clausewitz argues that “War is the province of uncertainty,” that “in War all is undetermined,” and that “the law of probability must . . . guide.” If the outcome of a war is determined by “chance” factors beyond the conceivable knowledge or control of statesmen, is it analytically useful to attribute an ill-fated decision for war to misperceptions, or a successful war to an astute calculation of the military balance? Is it meaningful to say that the Spanish misperceived the military balance in launching the Armada in 1588, when in fact unfavorable winds and storms had much to do with their defeat? Is it meaningful to say that William the Conqueror correctly perceived the military balance on the eve of his invasion of England, when in fact his victory at Hastings was assured largely by the weakening of Harold’s forces by the unexpected and unpredictable Norwegian invasion just weeks before? Diplomatic calculations of the intentions of third states are also relevant. Prussia was saved in the Seven Years’ War only by the death of Empress Elizabeth of Russia and the accession of Peter III, who withdrew from the anti-Prussian coalition because of his admiration for Frederick the Great. In view of the unpredictability of war, at what point do we make the analytic distinction between misperception and bad luck?

Although this problem may be critical in only a few cases, some general guidelines are necessary. Perceptions of relative capabilities and the expected outcome of war should be conceptualized as subjective probability estimates. Incorrect estimates do not necessarily imply misperceptions. The main criteria must be whether the probability estimates

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8 Clausewitz, (fn. 21), 140, 184, 162.
were reasonable, given the information available (or potentially available at reasonable cost), and whether decision-makers at least recognized the
type of the imponderables and attempted to incorporate them into
their probability estimates. A misperception can be said to occur if the
estimation of the military balance is incorrect and there is evidence that
(1) decision-makers were insensitive to the uncertainties and calculated
risks involved, making no attempt to evaluate them, or (2) nonrational
psychological, institutional, or cultural factors significantly distorted ca-
pability estimates, or (3) capability estimates and expected war outcomes
were grossly inaccurate, and the operation of chance factors does not
appear to have played a significant part. Calculated risks based on a
reasonable recognition of the uncertainties involved should not be clas-
sified as misperceptions if they go astray for various extraneous reasons.

B. MISPERCEPTIONS OF INTENTIONS

Statesmen have always recognized that intentions are more difficult
to assess than capabilities. Unless the analyst is able to determine the
accuracy of perceptions of intentions, however, the concept of misper-
ceptions cannot be a useful one for empirical research.

The accuracy or inaccuracy of some perceptions of intentions is fairly
easily ascertained. The inaccuracy of underestimations of the adversary’s
hostility or resolve would appear to be confirmed by his preemptive
strike or other strong coercive moves (though the latter may be a bluff).
More difficult to analyze are overestimations of hostility or resolve, since
there are no specific actions that even appear to disconfirm these hy-
potheses or misperceptions. This is the classic problem of deterrence.
Though certain actions are sufficient to prove that deterrence has failed,
one cannot determine by actions alone whether deterrence has succeeded.
Has the supposedly aggressive adversary failed to attack because he has
actually been deterred by one’s own signals or actions? Or did the
adversary have no intention of attacking to begin with? Evidence that
serves to discriminate between these alternatives requires, in principle,
data illuminating the decision-makers’ perceptions.59

59 A potential problem in both these cases is the danger of a self-fulfilling or self-denying
prophecy. A’s perceptions of B’s lack of hostility may be correct, but may either lead A to
fail to augment his capabilities, thus providing B with an unexpected opportunity for war
that he cannot resist, or may cause A to take coercive actions that generate an unexpected
conflict spiral leading to war. Alternatively, A’s incorrect perceptions of B’s peaceful inten-
tions may lead to a passivity that moderates B’s initial hostility. Underestimation of the
adversary’s hostility may induce conciliatory gestures that pacify an initially hostile adversary
through a downward action-reaction spiral. What is more common, overestimation of the
adversary’s hostility may result in an arms buildup that provokes a nonaggressive adversary
into a conflict spiral. All these, of course, are simply the “consequences” of the misperceptions
discussed earlier. The problem is that the same phenomena might be viewed either as the
This discussion leads to other problems which are perhaps more abstract and difficult but not insurmountable. The assertion that intentions can be objectively determined in principle requires that actions be purposive and that an actor plan to act in certain ways under a range of future contingencies.\textsuperscript{60} One of several difficult analytical problems regarding purposive behavior lies in the fact that even an individual decision-maker may not be certain of his own intentions. He may be undecided and, for a variety of reasons, postpone a final decision. These conditions do not necessarily preclude the possibility of an accurate perception of the adversary’s intentions. The correct perception would be the recognition that the intentions in question were “soft” or had not yet been formulated, while a misperception would be the assumption of a well-defined intent behind certain actions or statements. The misperception would generate the erroneous prediction that certain behavior will necessarily follow, while a correct perception would recognize the existence of uncertainty.

The problem of purposive behavior in individuals is compounded for collective decision-making bodies. Arrow has demonstrated that purposive behavior cannot be attributed to collective decisions without some rather restrictive assumptions.\textsuperscript{61} In the absence of a dominant decision-maker or of unanimity on a particular issue,\textsuperscript{62} an accurate perception would consist of the recognition that an adversary’s actions may not necessarily be purposive and that they do not necessarily imply that certain forms of behavior can be expected in the future. A misperception would be the attribution of purpose, or the assumption of a well-designed plan where none exists, or the belief that the adversary’s decision-making process is more centralized than it actually is. In any of these cases, the consequences are false expectations regarding future behavior. Hypotheses on these types of misperceptions are falsifiable in principle.

Once misperceptions of intentions are identified, the problem becomes one of assessing their actual causal effect on the decision for war. This is generally more difficult for misperceptions of intentions than of capabilities. First of all, there is no minimum standard by which to judge rational behavior which is comparable to the assumption that decision-

\textsuperscript{62} For a discussion of practical solutions to Arrow’s paradox and an argument for the assumption of a dominant decision maker, see Bueno de Mesquita (fn. 1), 11-18.}
makers do not initiate wars they expect to lose. Second, the impact of intentions generally occurs at points further removed from the actual decision for war, so that their effect is more difficult to establish and is more confounded by intervening variables. Hypotheses involving these linkages are rather demanding in terms of the kind of evidence needed to demonstrate some causal impact; they often require data regarding perceptions and intentions that may not be readily available.

Even if some kind of causal influence can be identified, there remains the problem of evaluating the importance of misperceptions relative to other factors in the processes leading to war. For misperceptions of intentions, as well as for many of the linkages involving capabilities, there exists no basis for assigning relative weights. The problem is as much conceptual as it is methodological. Misperceptions may initiate a process that culminates in war; they may intensify a conflict spiral already underway or provide the illusion of victory that is the immediate trigger for war. These different forms of misperceptions may occur at different points of the escalation sequence and interact with a variety of other variables in complex and poorly understood ways. In the absence of a more integrated theory of the causes of war, we lack the conceptual apparatus to suggest what it would mean to say that misperceptions are either more or less important than other variables. This theoretical limitation makes it extremely difficult to test the hypothesis that misperceptions are genuine causes of war against the alternative hypothesis that misperceptions affect only the timing of war, but that its actual occurrence is determined by underlying variables.

V. Conclusions

In this study I have identified various forms of misperceptions as well as the theoretical linkages by which they might lead to war under certain conditions. Although I have not yet undertaken a systematic empirical analysis of misperceptions leading to war, it is possible on the basis of the preceding conceptualization to identify certain forms of misperception that are more important than others. One of these is military overconfidence deriving from the underestimation of the adversary’s capabilities and from the underestimation of the likelihood of the in-

An exception is the case of preemptive strikes generated by overestimations of the adversary’s hostility. If these perceptions actually are erroneous, it might be concluded that misperceptions are a cause of the war. However, the misperceptions and the preemptive strike may both be the products of underlying forces which produce the crisis—in which case an inference of a causal relationship between misperception and war would be spurious.

An exception would be hypotheses suggesting that under certain conditions military overconfidence, and perhaps overestimation of the adversary’s hostility, may be necessary conditions of war.
tervention of additional adversaries and their potential impact on the outcome of war. In certain situations, this military overconfidence may be a necessary condition without which war will not occur, since it can be assumed, in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary, that states will not initiate a war they expect to lose. Another important form of misperception is the overestimation of the hostility of the adversary’s intentions, which in certain situations may lead to a preemptive strike. These general types of misperceptions are important because (1) their impact is felt immediately prior to decisions for war; (2) this impact is felt directly and is not extensively entangled with that of other variables; (3) in the absence of these misperceptions, it is often possible to infer that war would not occur; and (4) there are numerous historical cases to which these forms of misperception appear to apply.

Other forms of misperception with more complex theoretical linkages to war may also be important, but are more difficult to analyze conceptually or to verify empirically. Their impact occurs at more remote points in the causal processes leading to war and is intricately intertwined with that of antecedent and intervening variables. These misperceptions are sufficiently important, however, that the impact of other variables and the dynamic processes leading to war cannot be understood in their absence.

A number of historical case studies, as well as a growing body of literature on crisis decision-making, suggest the importance of misperceptions in the outbreak of particular wars. Among the tasks for further research is a more systematic study of misperceptions across a number of cases in an attempt to identify the specific types of misperceptions that occur repeatedly with significant effects. Admittedly, the incorporation of misperceptions into a general theory of conflict introduces further complexity and additional methodological problems, but it may contribute significantly to our theoretical understanding of the causes of war. Whether these increases in descriptive, explanatory, and predictive power are enough to justify the sacrifice of theoretical elegance and mathematical or methodological rigor can be determined only by further empirical analysis based on a theoretically sophisticated research design.

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65 This tentative conclusion that misperception is often an important cause of war is not necessarily inconsistent with Stein’s argument (fn. 8) that “misperception creates conflict only in a narrowly circumscribed range of situations.” Even if it were true that there are few empirical situations in which misperception contributes to conflict, Stein could not draw this inference from his study. He deals only with the theoretically defined conditions under which misperception matters, but not with the empirical question of how often these situations occur. It is entirely possible that misperception leads to war only under a narrow range of theoretical conditions, but that such conditions occur quite frequently.