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THEORIES OF GENERAL WAR

By JACK S. LEVY*

THE phenomenon of general or hegemonic war has long been viewed as a distinctive kind of conflict, and one that has played a unique role in world history.¹ Robert Gilpin states:

The great turning points in world history have been provided by these hegemonic struggles among political rivals; these periodic conflicts have reordered the international system and propelled history in new and uncharted directions. They resolve the question of which state will govern the system, as well as what ideas and values will predominate, thereby determining the ethos of succeeding ages. The outcomes of these wars affect the economic, social, and ideological structures of individual societies as well as the structure of the larger international system.²

These wars have been the most destructive in history and account for a disproportionate fraction of the fatalities in international violence. In spite of the importance of this phenomenon, serious attempts to define and theorize about general war have been made only recently. Now the concept is central to the long cycle theory of Modelski and Thompson, the capitalist world-economy paradigm of Wallerstein and Chase-Dunn, the power transition theory of Organski and Kugler, Gilpin’s theory of hegemonic war and change, Doran’s power cycle theory, Väyrynen’s theory of economic cycles and the power transition, and Midlarsky’s theory of hierarchical equilibrium.³ These theories suggest different hypotheses relating to the causes and consequences of general war, cor-

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¹ The concept of general war has also been referred to as “global war,” “world war,” “extensive war,” “systemic war,” and “hyper war.” In spite of some differences, these concepts refer to the same basic phenomenon and will be used interchangeably here. My own preference is for the term “general war” because it carries the least amount of conceptual baggage and best serves as the lowest common denominator.


responding to the divergent theoretical assumptions upon which each of the theories is based. The competing hypotheses are very difficult to test, however. As I will demonstrate, most definitions of general war are defined in terms of the systemic consequences of those wars, so that some key causal relationships cannot be disentangled from definitions and therefore cannot be examined empirically. The task of testing these conflicting hypotheses is further complicated by the fact that each framework has produced a different list of general wars, reducing the likelihood of agreement regarding what evidence might be relevant for resolving the debate. Moreover, in spite of the traditional importance of “balance of power” and related *realpolitik* hypotheses in the study of international conflict, there is no explicitly “realist” theory of general war and no compilation of general wars based on realist assumptions. Although this does not in itself preclude a test of hypotheses on global war, it does preclude a series of critical tests against balance of power hypotheses, which have dominated the traditional and quantitative literature on international conflict.

In this study, I will first summarize the various theories of general war, and show that existing lists of general wars are not always consistent with their respective definitions. I will then offer an alternative definition of general war. After describing a modern great-power system based on a Eurocentric framework and traditional realist assumptions, I will suggest operational criteria for the identification of general wars during the five-century span of this system, and compare the resulting list of general wars with those of other frameworks.

**Theories of General War**

**Toynbee’s Balance of Power Theory**

The first major attempt to construct a theory of general war was Toynbee’s cyclical theory, based on a balance of power framework. It


holds that a bid for world domination by the leading power evokes an opposing coalition of all the other powers in the system and a “general war” to maintain the balance of power. It usually results in the defeat of the arch-aggressor and a “breathing space” of peace. This is an uneasy, transient, and “patched-up” peace because the arch-aggressor is only temporarily foiled, and the issues over which the general war was fought have not been settled and are not yet capable of resolution. A burst of short and relatively mild “supplemental wars” then follows, which resolves the outstanding issues and creates a tranquil and lasting “general peace.” Ultimately, the gradual buildup of new forces explodes into a new episode of general war as a new power seeks domination, and the cycle begins anew, approximately once every century.

Toynbee’s Modern Western System is Eurocentric; it began in 1494 and expanded into a global system by the 20th century. The aggressor power has invariably been a continental state in a central territory, and its aims have been continental hegemony. Toynbee identifies the following periods of general war: (1) 1494-1525, the Hapsburg-Valois struggle over Italy; (2) 1568-1609, when the revolt of the Netherlands against the Spanish Crown was transformed into a general war by the intervention of England; (3) 1672-1713, the wars of Louis XIV; (4) 1792-1815, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars; and (5) 1914-1918, World War I.

**Long Cycle Theory**

The most elaborate and influential theory of global war can be found in the long cycle theory of Modelski and Thompson, which defines a global political system originating around 1500. This system has been characterized by regular cycles of world leadership and system man-

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234-60, 322-23. Although Toynbee’s theory is not as well developed as several others that will be surveyed below, it has not received the attention it deserves in the literature on general war and systemic transformation.

5 Another interpretation of the modern European state system implicitly based on a balance of power framework can be found in Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). Dehio posits no regular cycle or subcyclical phases, however. He identifies six instances in which an expansionist power threatened to achieve a position of hegemony on the European continent. These bids for hegemony were made by the Hapsburgs under Charles V; Spain under Philip II; France under Louis XIV, and again under Napoleon; and Germany under the Kaiser and under Hitler. Each precipitated a major war involving nearly all the great powers in an attempt to maintain the European balance of power; hegemony was avoided only because of the intervention of an insular state (the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and the United States, successively).

6 Toynbee (fn. 4, 260-87) also applies his theory of general war to the post-Alexandrine Hellenic and post-Confucian Sinic international systems.

7 Toynbee (ibid., 255) classifies World War II as a “supplemental war,” but in a footnote refers to it as a “recedescent general war.”

8 Modelski (fn. 3, 1978); Thompson (fn. 3, “Uneven Economic Growth . . .” and Contending Approaches . . .).
agement over the last five centuries. A world power emerges from a
global war with monopoly control over military capabilities of global
reach and control over world trade, and hence with the ability to help
structure the new global political and economic systems and to maintain
order. This state's position of leadership gradually declines, with the
deconcentration of power in the system deriving from the high debt
burdens and overhead costs of the world power role, its reductions in
naval capabilities as cost-cutting measures, and the emergence of new
rivals. Thus, the system passes through phases of delegitimation and
deconcentration until a new struggle for world leadership again results
in a period of global war, and the cycle begins again. 10

Models and Thompson define global wars as conflicts that determine
the constitution or authority arrangement of the global political system. 11
They are succession struggles for leadership in this system, and are
precipitated by the rise of challengers that threaten to gain a position
of preeminence on the European continent. These wars tend to begin
as localized affairs and not as direct contests between the world power
and the challenger. 12 They expand into global wars when the world
power fears that this continental expansion will provide the power base
from which a truly global challenge might be initiated. The regional
challengers have always failed: because they did not augment their land
armies with military power of global reach; because they could not (at
least in earlier periods) match the successful maritime powers in ob-
taining inexpensive credit to meet their enormous military expenses; 13
because they embarked on expansion prematurely, before the power
transition had been completed; and because they underestimated the mag-
nitude of their threat to the global position of the world power, and
hence failed to anticipate the expansion of the war. 14

9 Models uses the term leadership rather than hegemony or dominance. See his "Long
Cycles of World Leadership," in Thompson (fn. 3, Contending Approaches . . .), chap. 5. The
use of the concept of hegemony by others is often so broad, however, that it is no more
demanding than Models' criteria for leadership—the possession of a monopoly of naval
power and world trade.

Cycle," World Politics 35 (July 1983), 489-516. The cycles of world leadership are not
necessarily of equal length, as emphasized by Thompson in "Cycles of General, Hegemonic,
and Global War" (paper presented at the conference on Dynamic Models of International

Models (fn. 3, 1984, 4-6) has recently expanded this definition to include criteria of duration,
scope, and cause, as well as consequences: global wars are long (25-30 years), global in scope,
and the result of a structural crisis in the system; they produce a new leadership structure
for the global system.

12 Thompson (fn. 3, "Uneven Economic Growth . . ."), 349.
13 Rasler and Thompson (fn. 10).
14 William R. Thompson, "Succession Crises in the Global Political System: A Test of
Modelski and Thompson identify the following periods of global wars and successor world powers: (1) 1494-1517—the Italian Wars, marking Portugal’s rise as the world power; (2) 1585-1609—the War of Dutch Independence, marking the succession of the United Provinces of the Netherlands; (3) 1689-1713—the wars of Louis XIV, ending in Britain’s rise as the world power; (4) 1792-1815—the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, marking the beginning of Britain’s second cycle as the world power; and (5) 1914-1918 and 1939-1945—World Wars I and II, leading to the succession of the United States as the world power after the failure of the German challenges.¹⁵

**World War in the Capitalist World Economy**

World war plays a role in Wallerstein’s capitalist world-economy paradigm, though it is clearly subordinated to economic processes and is less central than it is for Modelski and Thompson.¹⁶ Wallerstein offers two similar definitions of world war: “a land-based war that involves (not necessarily continuously) almost all the major military powers of the epoch in warfare that is very destructive of land and population”;¹⁷ and “a massive land-centered, highly destructive, thirty-year-long intermittent struggle involving all the major military powers of the time.”¹⁸ Although his definition is comparable to Toynbee’s, Wallerstein’s list of world wars differs from both Toynbee’s and Modelski’s. It includes the Thirty Years’ War, 1618-1648; the Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815; and the combined World Wars of 1914-1945.¹⁹

Each world war leads to the hegemony of a core state. Hegemony is defined as the ability of one power to impose its rules and wishes on the system by virtue of its simultaneous dominance in agricultural-industrial productivity, commerce, and finance in the world market.²⁰

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¹⁵ Modelski (fn. 3, 1978, 1984); Thompson (fn. 3, “Uneven Economic Growth . . .”), 347. Thompson recognizes Portugal as a world power, but begins the first long cycle in 1517, after the formative global conflict.


¹⁷ Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1984), 41.

¹⁸ Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1983), 58-59.

¹⁹ Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1984), 41; (fn. 16, 1983), 59.


Hegemony is a concept that is widely used, but it is rarely defined with any degree of precision. Bousquet uses a comparable definition, but explicitly adds that the hegemonic power must occupy a position of political leadership in addition to being supreme in production, commerce, and finance. See Nicole Bousquet, “From Hegemony to Competition:
Hegemony is rare and brief, and confined to the periods of Dutch, British, and American dominance after the three world wars. The hegemonic powers have been primarily maritime powers, but have become land powers in order to confront major land-based challengers (the Hapsburgs, France, and Germany, successively) who are attempting to transform the world economy into a world empire. This leads to a world war that results in a major restructuring of the world system in favor of the hegemonic power. The costs of leadership precipitate a decrease in agro-industrial productivity, hegemonic decline, and erosion of the hegemon's alliance network. Two powers usually emerge as "contenders for the succession" — the winner being the one who can successfully gain the support of the declining hegemon. Hegemonic powers need not fight in all wars, but must be prepared for the climactic world war. The outcome of the hegemonic struggle, however, is basically determined by economic rather than military factors.22


The definition of hegemony proposed by Keohane is similar. In his discussion of the theory of hegemonic stability, Keohane defines hegemony as "preponderance of material resources." "Hegemonic powers must have control over raw materials, control over sources of capital, control over markets, and competitive advantages in the production of highly valued goods." See Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 32. Keohane qualifies this definition in several ways. He argues that hegemony requires the motivation as well as the material strength to project power, and that the internal characteristics of a state have an important effect on motivation (pp. 34-45). He then refers to the earlier and more general definition by Keohane and Nye: a hegemonial system is one in which "one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so." See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Power and Interdependence (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), 44. In After Hegemony, Keohane adds a greater security component to this definition of "hegemony in the world political economy" by insisting that "[a] hegemonic state must possess enough military power to be able to protect the international political economy that it dominates from incursions by hostile states," though the hegemonic power "need not be militarily dominant world wide."

A more explicitly security-oriented definition is offered by Aron: hegemony is a situation in which other states are deprived of their autonomy or their capacity to make their own decisions freely. See Raymond Aron, Peace and War, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox, abr. Remy Ingles Hall (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 62. See also the different meanings of hegemony suggested by R. Harrison Wagner, "Basic Concepts in the Study of International Relations," mimeo (University of Texas at Austin), 1984.


22 Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1983), 59. In his analysis of the brief Dutch hegemony in the 17th century, Wallerstein suggests that Dutch hegemony was limited relative to the later British and American hegemonies "because it was least of all the military giant of its era." See
Chase-Dunn elaborates on Wallerstein’s world-economy paradigm and conceptualization of hegemony and world war. He states that “world wars and the rise and fall of hegemonic core powers ... can be understood as the violent reorganization of production relations on a world scale.” Each of the three attempts (after the Hapsburgs’ of the “long 16th century”) to impose a world-empire on the capitalist world-economy has led to a world war fought to monopolize trade relationships and to establish a new political framework consistent with a changing distribution of productive capabilities arising from uneven capitalist development. Chase-Dunn notes that the “second-runners” who fail in their bids for hegemony have always been “land-oriented political centralizers”; their failures resulted from the “weakness of the strategy of politicomilitary domination unaccompanied by a strategy of competitive production for sale on the market.” The “Venetian model” followed by the hegemonic core powers is more efficient because it allows a more decentralized political system to bear the costs of administration while surplus extraction is accomplished by trade.

In a later piece, Chase-Dunn and Sokolovsky expand the concept of world war to include “military engagements that involve rival coalitions of state forces where at least one core power is a member of each of the opposing alliances.” These wars do not necessarily involve attempts to seize control of the interstate system, and they do not necessarily determine who will be the leading power in the system. This broadening of the concept of world war represents a significant departure from the notion that there exists a small class of wars that are fundamentally distinct from others in terms of their characteristics or their consequences for the world system. As a result, a theory based on Chase-Dunn’s revised conception of world war cannot easily be compared to other theories of global or hegemonic war.

**Gilpin’s Theory of Hegemonic War and Change**

Hegemonic war plays an integral role in Gilpin’s theory of the evolution of a global system (and earlier international systems) governed

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23 Chase-Dunn (fn. 3), 23.


25 Christopher Chase-Dunn and Joan Sokolovsky, “Interstate Systems, World Empires, and the Capitalist World Economy: A Response to Thompson,” *International Studies Quarterly* 27 (September 1983), 364-66. No list of these wars is provided, but it would be considerably longer than Wallerstein’s and probably more comparable to an expanded list of European great power wars.
by a dominant power by virtue of its military and economic strength. Gilpin offers the most comprehensive definition of hegemonic war. (1) It involves “a direct contest between the dominant power or powers in an international system and the rising challenger or challengers,” and the “participation of all the major states and most of the minor states in the system.” (2) “The fundamental issue at stake is the nature and governance of the system”; hence, hegemonic wars are unlimited in their ends and in their political, economic, and ideological consequences. (3) Hegemonic wars are unlimited in their means as well as their ends, and expand to encompass the entire international system. A hegemonic war arises because of an increasing disequilibrium between the governance of the system and the actual distribution of power, determined largely by the law of uneven development. The dominant power finds that its expanded commitments and the costs of leadership cannot be supported by its eroding resource base. Gilpin argues that the dominant power generally tries, but fails, to reduce its commitments or expand its resource base. It still attempts to hold its dominant position, however, and may initiate a preventive war against a rising challenger.

Whether intended or not, a hegemonic war “determines who will govern the international system and whose interests will be primarily served by the new international order.” It leads to a redistribution of territory, a new set of rules, and a new international division of labor. The new political and economic order is not permanent, however, for the international distribution of power changes with the decline of the hegemonic power and the rise of new challengers. The dynamics of the system tend to favor states on the periphery because states directly involved in the hegemonic struggle tend to weaken each other and thus pave the way for conquest by a peripheral power. Gilpin gives greater emphasis to land-based power than do Modelski and Thompson, as indicated by his identification of France as the dominant power in the 18th century and Britain as the rising challenger.

Gilpin asserts that, for premodern times, the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and the Second Punic War between Car-

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26 Gilpin (fn. 2), 199-200. Gilpin’s definition builds upon an earlier one: Raymond Aron, speaking of World War I, describes a “war of hegemony” as one that “is characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit purposes than by its extent and the stakes involved. It affected all the political units inside one system. . . .” Hegemony is, “if not the conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or groups.” Aron does not systematically identify history’s hegemonic wars, but does fit World War I and the Peloponnesian War into this category. World War II, however, “was not essentially a war of hegemony.” See Aron, “War and Industrial Society,” in Leon Branson and George W. Goethals, eds., War (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 369.

27 Gilpin (fn. 2), 80.
thage and Rome satisfy his criteria for hegemonic war. In the modern period the following wars qualify: the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), the wars of Louis XIV (1667-1713), the French Revolutionary and Napoléonic Wars (1792-1814), and World Wars I and II (1914-1918; 1939-1945).28

**Doran’s Cycle of Relative Power**

Doran explains the evolution of the international system and the outbreak of “extensive war” in terms of the internal economic and political dynamics of the leading states of the system. The relative power of each of these states follows a regular cycle of ascendance, maturation, and decline, and this power cycle is largely a function of internal economic cycles. The nature of a state’s foreign policy is a function of its position on its power cycle. National expansion and bids for hegemony—and hence, extensive war and systemic instability—result from a major power’s inability to adjust to its new power position and role in the system. This is most likely to occur at the four critical points of the national power cycle (the points of maximum and minimum power and the two inflection points), where exaggerated fears, misperceptions, and overreaction are most intense.29

Extensive war is defined as one involving high casualties, long duration, and great magnitude. It is apparently equivalent to hegemonic war, which is “associated with the efforts of a single state to dominate the international system.” Although this nominal definition is not operationalized, Doran identifies five extensive wars since the origin of the modern state system: (1) the Spanish-Austrian Hapsburg attempt to dominate Europe; (2) the wars of Louis XIV; (3) the Napoleonic onslaught; (4) World War I; and (5) World War II.30

Each of the theories of hegemonic war surveyed above is applicable to the entire five-century span of the modern system. There are two

28 _Ibid._, 200.


30 Doran (fn. 3), 168, 178-79. Magnitude is defined by the number of belligerent states weighted by their status. The requirement that an extensive war have all of these characteristics, rather than just any of them, is an improvement over the earlier definition by Doran and Parsons (fn. 29), 958. It is not clear whether the Hapsburg bid for hegemony refers to the wars of Charles V, those of Philip II, or the Thirty Years’ War. From Doran’s earlier work, it appears that only the latter two qualify, but even that is somewhat ambiguous. See Doran, *The Politics of Assimilation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 65-66.
other theories that clearly contribute to the debate over war and systemic change in world politics, but that are best interpreted as being restricted to the era of industrial capitalism of the last two centuries. These are Organski’s theory of the power transition and Väyrynen’s theory of economic cycles, power transitions, and war.\footnote{Other attempts to identify general or hegemonic wars during the five-century span of the modern system have been made by R. B. Mowat, \textit{A History of European Diplomacy} (London: Edward Arnold, 1928); Quincy Wright, \textit{A Study of War}, 23 ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); and L. L. Farrar, Jr., \textit{Cycles of War: Historical Speculations on Future International Violence}, \textit{International Interactions} (No. 1, 1977), 161-79. These have not been discussed because none of them develops a theory of hegemonic war comparable to the others surveyed above, but their lists of hegemonic wars are relevant to our later comparisons and should be mentioned briefly.}

\section*{Power Transition Theory}

Organski’s concept of the power transition, and his thesis that the likelihood of a major war is greatest when the military capabilities of a dissatisfied challenger begin to approach those of a dominant power,

\footnote{Mowat speaks of “war on the grand scale” occurring in “great waves,” with thirty- to forty-year periods of relative peace between the waves (p. 1). After the end of the Hundred Years’ War between France and England in 1451, Mowat identifies the following wars on the “grand scale”: the Italian Wars (1494-1559), the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), the wars of Louis XIV (1672-1713), the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War (1740-63), the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1814), and World War I. In this 1928 study, Mowat’s treatment of the Crimean and Franco-Prussian Wars is somewhat ambiguous, but he does not appear to identify them as grand-scale wars.}

Wright appears to define “general wars” as “all wars with a great power on each side which lasted as long as two years.” With few exceptions, these wars have usually involved all of the great powers of the time (p. 649). Wright’s definition is too broad to constitute a distinctive set of general wars, and includes such cases as the Franco-Spanish War of 1638-59 (distinct from the Thirty Years’ War) and the War of the American Revolution. Elsewhere, however, Wright identifies oscillating “concentrations” of wars, which are comparable to others’ conceptions of hegemonic war: the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), the War of the Spanish Succession and the associated wars of Louis XIV, the Seven Years’ War (1756-63), the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War and the Wars of Italian and German nationalism of the late-19th century, and the two World Wars of this century (p. 227). Wright also suggests an even more restricted set of “great wars” which, along with the peace treaties that terminated them, have “dominated” the last five centuries of European politics (pp. 360-64): the Thirty Years’ War, the wars of Louis XIV (1688-1714), the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1789-1815), and World Wars I and II (1914-45). Thus, Wright recognizes the importance of a small set of distinctive wars having profound consequences for the system; but he neither defines them clearly nor produces an unambiguous list of such wars.

Farrar distinguishes hegemonic war from “probing war” and “adjusting war”; he defines hegemonic war as a war that involves “a high level of violence and seriously threatens or in fact alters the system fundamentally, usually as a result of one power’s attempt to dominate the system” (p. 163). Farrar identifies repeated cycles of war since 1494, and argues that war is functionally necessary for the system to accommodate changes in power among its members. Although Farrar’s precise identification of these historical periods needs further justification, and though the causal mechanism driving the cycles needs further theoretical development, his list of periods of hegemonic war (pp. 168-69) is comparable to those surveyed earlier: 1568-1588, 1688-1714, 1789-1815, 1914-1945. The inclusion of the first two decades
have had an enormous impact on more recent theories of global war and systemic change. The argument is that the rising challenger will initiate a war in order to gain political influence commensurate with its newly acquired power.\[32\] Organski and Kugler examine "major wars" whose "outcomes will affect the very structure and operation of the international system," but their conceptualization is of limited utility for a theory of general war. Their emphasis on industrialization as the primary source of changing power capabilities was a major step forward, but it restricts the direct applicability of the theory to the industrial era. Questions regarding major wars and power transitions in earlier times are left open, and too few cases are incorporated for an adequate empirical test of the theory. Organski and Kugler's set of major wars includes the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese Wars as well as the Napoleonic Wars and the two World Wars. The first two are not consistent with either their nominal or operational definitions, however, so that it is impossible to generalize from their empirical findings.\[33\] Moreover, unlike most other theories of general war, Organski and Kugler's does not develop the concepts of systemic structure, governance, and succession, and generally makes no claims to construct a more encompassing theory of global politics. The power transition theory could be generalized and tested, but in its present form it should not be treated as a theory of hegemonic war.\[34\]

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of the War of Dutch Independence but not the subsequent two decades involving the internationalization of the conflict is somewhat puzzling, however.

For further discussion of these conceptualizations, see Thompson's piece (fn. 10, 1984), which convinced me of the need to include discussions of Wright and Farrar in this study.


\[33\] Organski and Kugler (fn. 3), 45-46. Their operational criteria require major powers on each side of the conflict, an "all-out effort to win" by each (requiring the expected loss of territory or population by the loser), and a higher level of battle deaths than in any previous war. Not all of their wars necessarily affect the very structure and operation of the system (e.g., the Russo-Japanese War); in any case, their battle-death criterion is violated twice in these five cases. On the theoretical level, Organski and Kugler never make it clear exactly how these major wars affect the structure and operation of the system, since they argue that these wars have no long-term effects on the distribution of power (chap. 3). For a critique of their analysis and a different conclusion, see T. Clifton Morgan, "The Effects of War on the Economic Productivity of Nations in the Twentieth Century," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 24-27, 1982.

\[34\] See Thompson (fn. 14), for his test of the power transition thesis.
Väyrynen’s Theory of Economic Cycles, Power Transitions, and War

Väyrynen argues that the outbreak of major war can be explained by the interplay between long waves of economic development, economic power transitions among major powers, international political management by alliances, and domestic political pressures; he considers these variables, in turn, to be largely a function of internal economic and technological forces. He posits a cycle of hegemony involving ascendance, victory, maturity, and decline, with hegemony defined in terms of both economic predominance (particularly in production) and international political leadership. Instead of long cycles of global political leadership, Väyrynen sees shorter cycles of economic hegemony, along with rivalry. The crises triggered by the long wave of economic development do not inevitably lead to hegemonic rivalry and war because the pressures generated by economic cycles are only necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for war. He argues, however, that most major wars (seven out of nine since 1825) tend to occur during the upswing phase of the Kondratieff “long wave.”

As it stands, Väyrynen’s thesis cannot be treated as a complete theory of hegemonic war and compared directly with the others surveyed above. His definition of major war (a conflict between the great powers, involving at least ten nation-months of war and 10,000 battle deaths) is so broad that it includes the Austro-Prussian War, the internationalized Russian Civil War, and the Korean War. These are clearly in a different class from the general wars identified earlier, involving neither the widespread destructiveness nor the potential systemic consequences. Moreover, Väyrynen’s emphasis on the Kondratieff cycle may limit the applicability of his theory to the last two centuries only (his empirical analysis begins in 1825), for the first Kondratieff cycle begins in 1789.

Conceptions of General War: Critique and Discussion

The theories of general war proposed by Toynbee, Wallerstein, Modelski and Thompson, Doran, and Gilpin share several characteristics.

36 Väyrynen (fn. 3), 396-410.
37 Ibid., 410-11.
39 The other conceptualizations surveyed are either not fully developed, or, by defining the concept of general war too broadly, essentially deny the existence of a distinct class of general wars. In either case, I will not discuss them further.
They are all applied to the modern state system beginning in about 1500. They all refer to dominant powers and challengers, and see hegemonic war as confirming a new distribution of power in the system, establishing a new equilibrium, and serving as a major agent of system transformation. All but Toynbee’s hold that the changing distribution of power is the product of some version of the law of uneven development.40

The differences between these theories are more profound than their similarities, however. Each is subsumed under a more general paradigm of world politics. These paradigms begin with different assumptions and generate divergent propositions regarding the nature of international behavior and hegemonic war. The differences concern the relationship between the world’s political and economic systems and the relative importance of politics and economics; the geographical scope of the system and the relative importance of Europe; the definition of hegemony and the identification of the dominant power and challengers; the definition and identification of general wars;41 the causes of these wars; the questions of who initiates the war and why the challenger fails; and the systemic consequences of the war.

The theoretical development of these different frameworks has now progressed to the point where their conflicting propositions on global war can be subjected to systematic empirical tests, for their differences cannot be resolved by theoretical argument alone.42 These tests require that global wars be rigorously defined and systematically identified for each theory, but this has yet to be done.

The process by which each of these lists of general wars is compiled is not made explicit. There are no obvious attempts to construct operational indicators, and it is not clear how each list is generated from the corresponding nominal definition. As a result, there are several inconsistencies between each definition and its corresponding list of wars. Toynbee, for example, shares most of the basic assumptions of realist international theory, yet his list of “general wars to maintain the European balance of power” omits the Thirty Years’ War and World War

40 Long cycle theorists recognize the importance of uneven development, but are open to the possibility of other factors also driving the system. See W. R. Thompson, “Cycles, Capabilities, and War: An Ecumenical View,” in Thompson (fn. 3, Contending Approaches...), 143.

41 See Table 2, at the end of this article, for a comparison of the various lists of general wars.

42 Empirical work on global war within each framework has been done by Thompson (fn. 14 and 40), Väyrynen (fn. 3), Doran and Parsons (fn. 29), and Doran, “Power Cycle Theory and Systems Stability,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, March 27-31, 1984.
II, two conflicts that most realists would identify as wars for European hegemony.43

Similarly, it is not clear how Wallerstein’s exclusion of the wars of Louis XIV as well as the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War is consistent with his definition of world war as “a land-based war that involves (not necessarily continuously) almost all the major military powers of the epoch in warfare that is very destructive of land and population.” The three major wars of Louis XIV each involved at least five of the six or seven great powers of the time; together, they lasted forty years and resulted in enormous fatalities.44 These wars marked the end of Dutch and the beginning of British naval and commercial supremacy, and constituted a nearly successful attempt by France to secure hegemony over the European continent. A French victory in 1713 might have significantly changed the structure and governance of the system. These wars were global in scope and not confined to Europe and the Mediterranean. The War of the League of Augsburg merged with King William’s War in North America, and the War of the Spanish Succession merged with Queen Anne’s War.45 The two great wars of the mid-18th century also involved all of the major European land powers; together, they resulted in nearly one and a half million battle fatalities, and therefore appear to fit Wallerstein’s definition.

Although Modelski and Thompson are generally quite rigorous and systematic in their theoretical and empirical analysis of the long cycle of global politics, their identification of global wars does not appear to

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41 The Thirty Years’ War marked the end of Spain’s century-long role as the leading European power, and the succession of France. It also ended Spanish dominance in Italy and initiated the decline of Spain’s global empire. The war may have begun as a religious struggle, but nearly all “realists” would agree that, by 1635 at the latest, it was primarily a struggle for the European balance of power. See, for example, S. H. Steinberg, The Thirty Years’ War and the Conflict for European Hegemony, 1600-1660 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966); Gustav Droysen, “The Statesman of ‘Realpolitik,’” in Theodore K. Rabb, ed., 2d ed., The Thirty Years’ War (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1972), 89-92; Doran (fn. 30, 1971), chap. 6; John B. Wolf, Toward a European Balance of Power, 1620-1715 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968).

Perhaps an explanation (but hardly a justification) for the omission of World War II is that it does not fit conveniently into Toynbee’s cyclical pattern.

44 Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1984), 41. Fatalities for these three wars numbered about 2,400,000—more than those for the Thirty Years’ War and roughly equal to those for the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars combined. For data, see Jack S. Levy, War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), chap. 4.

be based explicitly on operational criteria. This results in some questionable omissions from their list. Most notable are the two great wars of the mid-18th century. Both the War of Jenkins’ Ear/Austrian Succession (1739-1748) and the Seven Years’ War (1755-1763) involved the extensive participation of all five of the global powers defined by Modelski and Thompson. Neither of these wars was merely regional in its geographical scope or its consequences. Both were fought not only in Europe and the Mediterranean, but also in India, the Philippines, the West Indies, and on the North American continent. They confirmed Britain’s mastery of the seas and secured her empire against all rivals. A decisive French victory at sea as well as on land would have had a profound effect on the European and global balance of power. It would have ended the era of Britain’s dominance and could have initiated a period of French hegemony, leading to a fundamental change in the structure and governance of the global system. The fact that the outcome of these wars confirmed British dominance in the global system—rather than initiating a fundamental change in the system—is not a sufficient reason for their exclusion; if it were, Modelski and Thompson would not have included the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Their treatment of other cases is more difficult to evaluate, but questions naturally arise in the absence of more explicit operational criteria. Modelski and Thompson exclude the Dutch War of Louis XIV in spite of the fact that it involved all the global powers on their list and was the war most immediately and directly concerned with global as opposed to continental military power. Finally, Modelski’s identification of the Italian Wars (1494-1517), but not the later wars of Charles V (1521-1559) or the Thirty Years’ War, as global war is hard to justify. The Italian Wars were primarily concerned with Italy and were indecisive;

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46 Modelski’s recent criteria of duration and scope are measurable, but those of cause and consequence are not yet operational (fn. 3, 1984).
47 Later I will argue that our focus should be on the potential consequences of the war for the system rather than on its actual consequences.
49 It is revealing that the Dutch War was the only one of Louis’s three major wars in which England was allied with France against Dutch naval and maritime power. In the two subsequent wars, France was such a military threat that she triggered an opposing coalition of nearly all the European great powers and secured no major allies of her own.
the later wars of Charles V were a struggle for dominance in Europe as well as Italy—they initiated repeated English intervention and resulted in a century of Spanish supremacy; and the Thirty Years’ War brought an end to Spanish dominance.49

Gilpin’s criteria for hegemonic war are the most explicit, but it is not clear whether he followed them faithfully in generating his list of wars. Again, the exclusion of the War of Jenkins’ Ear/Austrian Succession and the Seven Years’ War is most puzzling. Both involved all of the major states and were direct contests between the dominant power and the rising challengers in the system; they were at least as much concerned with the nature and governance of the global system as were the Thirty Years’ War and the wars of Louis XIV (which Gilpin includes); and they encompassed the entire international system.50

These inconsistencies between each of the nominal definitions of general or hegemonic war and its respective list of wars derives from a failure to construct explicit and rigorous operational definitions. In the absence of more systematic procedures for identifying general wars, the validity of any empirical generalizations based on existing lists of wars is open to question.51

There is another problem with these conceptualizations of general war. For most of the theoretical frameworks surveyed above, general war is nominally defined in terms of the systemic consequences of the war. The consequences of war are open to a wide variety of interpretations, however, and are difficult to define operationally. This helps explain the lack of rigorous and systematic procedures for identifying hegemonic wars. More important, the definition of general war in terms of its systemic consequences means that one of the key propositions in most of these theories—that the constitution or authority structure of the system is determined by general war—is established by definition and becomes impossible to investigate empirically. All general wars confirm the hypothesis by definition; if wars do not have the expected


50 Doran’s exclusion of these two mid-18th-century wars is also puzzling. The combined 1,400,000 fatalities, 17 years of fighting over 24 years, and 82 nation-years of war by the great powers (Levy, fn. 44, p. 90) would appear to satisfy the requirement of high casualties, long duration, and great magnitude. See Doran (fn. 3), 168, 179.

51 Doran (fn. 3) and Organski and Kugler (fn. 3) have attempted to construct operational definitions. But in neither case does it appear that the resulting list of major wars is fully consistent with those criteria. Modelski’s recent criteria (fn. 3, 1984) are only partly operational (see fn. 46).
consequences, they cannot be general wars and hence do not disconfirm the hypothesis. Unless general war (the predictor variable) is defined independently of its systemic consequences (the dependent variable), the empirical utility of the concept is greatly restricted. Moreover, the tendency to interpret the causes of general war in terms of the war’s functional consequences for the system generates the danger that the causes of war may also become difficult to test empirically. A similar problem arises with respect to the dispute between Modelski and others over the question whether global wars follow a regular cyclical pattern.52 This dispute cannot be resolved until operational indicators for the identification of global war are defined independently of the hypothesized cycles. Otherwise, it is impossible to determine whether particular wars (the two mid-18th-century wars, for example) do not fit the long cycle because they are not global wars, whether they are not global wars because they do not fit the cycle, or whether they are empirical anomalies in a cyclical theory of global war.

The tendency to define general wars in terms of their hypothesized consequences, together with the failure to construct rigorous operational criteria for the identification of these wars, reduces our ability to construct internally valid tests of these theories. The theory-specific definition of general war also complicates any attempt at external validity. If different theories identify different lists of wars, then their conflicting hypotheses cannot easily be tested, for there would be little agreement on the kind of evidence that would be accepted by all as satisfying a critical test.

I am not suggesting that the concept of general war should be “theory-free,” for I recognize that concepts have no meaning outside of their theoretical context. The problem with many of these definitions of general war is not just the fact that they are related to their respective theories; that is unavoidable. The problem lies in the fact that it is one of the central propositions of the theory—that general wars basically determine the structure and evolution of the system—that is used to define general war. This is too important a proposition simply to accept by definition and to leave immune to empirical investigation.

Definitions of general war based only on the criterion that they involve nearly all of the leading powers in the system, such as those offered by Osgood, Blainey, and others, don’t really solve the problem.53 The leading

52 Gilpin (fn. 2, p. 205), for example, rejects the idea of cycles of war and peace; he argues that no one has suggested a satisfactory theoretical explanation that could predict such cycles. See the discussion in Thompson (fn. 10).

53 Osgood refers to “general war involving several major powers.” Blainey first defines a general war as one in which “at least five powers, of which three are major powers,
powers cannot be defined and identified in the absence of assumptions regarding the nature of the system and the dimensions of power and hierarchy within that system. The leading actors in Wallerstein's system are different from those in Toynbee's, for example, and consequently their lists of wars involving all or almost all the major powers would probably be slightly different. The biases might be less blatant and perhaps less serious than they would be for lists of wars defined by their systemic consequences, but these biases cannot be ignored. Nor is a definition based only on other characteristics of the war fully satisfactory, for the theoretical importance of general war is not fully captured by these characteristics. A definition based on severity or battle deaths, for example, would have to include the Korean War before the War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada (1585-1609), the Dutch War of Louis XIV (1672-1678), the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-1697), or the War of Jenkins’ Ear/Austrian Succession (1739-1748). This would be true even if the fatality indicator was normalized for population.\(^{54}\) The theoretical importance of the Korean War was far less than that of the others, however.\(^{55}\) What is needed is a definition of general war that taps its theoretical importance for the system without defining away some of the theory’s central hypotheses.

Any such conception of general war would have to come to terms with several additional problems. All analysts who use the concepts of global or hegemonic war in the context of a theory of world politics accept the proposition that these wars have a profound impact on the structure of the system. One key question is whether the systemic consequences of the war are deliberately sought by any or all of its participants. Is a conscious bid for hegemony, or even leadership, a necessary condition for global or hegemonic war?

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\(^{54}\) The data are from Levy (fn. 44), 88-91. See also fn. 78.

\(^{55}\) The Korean War did contribute to the militarization and globalization of American containment policy and the reversal of an increasing American recognition of the distinctiveness of Chinese communism from that of the Soviet Union. See James A. Nathan and James K. Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy and World Order* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), chap. 5. The Korean War was indeed critical for the evolution of American foreign policy, but it was not comparable in its systemic consequences to the defeat of Spain in the early and mid-17th century or the defeat of France in the early and mid-18th century. The leadership role of the U.S. was not overturned as a result of the Korean War, or even as a result of America's later failure in Vietnam.
If so, any conflict that begins with limited aims on each side but nevertheless expands into a major war which threatens the stability of the system would be excluded from the class of hegemonic wars. Although the concept of "inadvertent war" is not well developed, the concepts of the security dilemma, cyclical-sequence escalation, and the spiral model help explain how such a war might come about; there are a number of historical cases that might possibly fit this general pattern. A related problem—that motivations can change over time—raises the question of how to classify wars that may be motivated by hegemonic ambitions at one time but not at others. In addition, hegemonic ambitions may be shared by some decision makers but not by others, raising the analytical problem of how to interpret the "motivations" of a divided collective decision-making unit. The methodological problems involved in determining with precision the actual goals of decision makers are also very serious, and complicate the problem of identifying historical cases of hegemonic wars based on the motivations of statesmen.

Problems of this kind have led most analysts to focus on the consequences of the war rather than on the motivations for it. Thus, Aron states that a hegemonic war is "characterized less by its immediate causes or its explicit purposes than by its extent, and the stakes involved"; hegemony is "if not the conscious motive, at any rate the inevitable consequence" of the war. Thompson notes that global war may begin

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Perhaps a better example would be the Seven Years' War (or at least its North American dimension). Smoke (p. 226) suggests that the escalation sequence between the British and the French "witnessed no offensive steps by any player at any time." The Peloponnesian War has also been interpreted in this general way; see Donald Kagan, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

57 Both of these points are relevant to the debate over whether Germany had hegemonic ambitions that led to World War I. Epstein and others have criticized Fischer (fn. 56) for minimizing the differences among the objectives of various German decision makers, and also for his assumption that German motivations were consistent over time: evidence of hegemonic ambitions during a war is not necessarily relevant to the question of motivations on the eve of war. See Klaus Epstein, "German War Aims in the First World War," *World Politics* 15 (October 1962), 163-85.
as localized conflicts that do not even involve the dominant global power, and that a major challenge to the system "may not have been fully intended." Gilpin argues that "men seldom determine or even anticipate the consequences of hegemonic war," that "they do not get the war they want or expect," and that "they fail to recognize the pent-up forces they are unleashing or the larger historical significance of the decisions they are making." Chase-Dunn concurs that "the real issue is not intentions but the structural consequences" of the war.⁵⁸

Of course, many threats to the structural stability of the system may in fact be deliberate. The point is that the question of the causes of general war is important enough that it should be open to empirical investigation and not simply defined away by incorporating the motivations or causes of general war into its definition.

Given our focus on the consequences of war, another question is whether a hegemonic war need necessarily end in dominance or even leadership by a single actor. Some of the theories surveyed earlier imply that it does. Gilpin concedes, however, that it is possible that none of the victorious states has the power to reorder the international system.⁵⁹ World War I is a good example, for no single state emerged with effective control or even leadership over the system; for this reason, it presents a problem for many of the theories of global war.⁶⁰ Balance of power

⁵⁸ Aron (fn. 26), 367; Thompson (fn. 3, "Uneven Economic Growth . . ."), 349; Gilpin (fn. 2), 202; Chase-Dunn (fn. 3), 36. Modelski (fn. 3, 1984), however, includes the causes of the war (but not necessarily statesmen's motivations) as a defining characteristic of global war.

⁵⁹ Gilpin qualifies this by saying: "Eventually, however, a new power or set of powers emerges to give governance to the international system" (fn. 2), 198. While not excluding the possibility that hegemonic war is a necessary condition for a new system of governance, this qualification suggests that it is not a sufficient condition. Note that Farrar includes threats to the system as well as actual alterations of the system (fn. 31), 163.

⁶⁰ Many of the theories attempt to get around this problem by defining the two World Wars of this century as a single hegemonic or global war, and identifying the U.S. as the emerging hegemonic power. See Wallerstein (fn. 16, 1984); Modelski (fn. 3, 1978); Thompson (fn. 3, "Uneven Economic Growth . . ."); Gilpin (fn. 2). This interpretation would be acceptable if it were based on a set of general procedures and explicit operational criteria that were applied systematically to all conceivable cases, but other apparently similar cases are treated differently. It is not clear what theoretical grounds are used for defining the World Wars of 1914-1945 as a single global war while defining others as separate.

The duration of the interval between the wars cannot be the criterion. Although two decades separated the two World Wars, even less time separated the Revolt of the Netherlands (1585-1609) from the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), and the final resolution of the latter (Treaty of the Pyrenees, 1659) from the hegemonic wars of Louis XIV (1672-1713); yet no two of these distinct conflicts are ever combined as a single hegemonic war. Nor can the role of World War II in accomplishing the final defeat of a dominant power or aspiring challenger be the criterion. Otherwise the Thirty Years' War, which was necessary for the final defeat of Spain, would have to be included with the earlier War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada. In addition, the Thirty Years' War lasted longer than the internationalized Dutch/Armada War and involved ten times the fatalities. The fatality data are from Pyrrhun A. Sorokin, Social and Cultural Dynamics, III: Fluctuation of Social Relationships, War and
theorists generally imply that most bids for hegemony rarely end in
hegemony because of the effective operation of the equilibrating mech-
anism. In addition, power transition theory recognizes that under certain
conditions the succession of one dominant power by another may be
accomplished peacefully. 61

For these reasons, neither the motivations for a war nor its more
general causes or its actual consequences should be defining criteria for
general or hegemonic war. Instead, a general war should be defined as
a war in which there is a reasonable probability of a decisive victory by
at least one side that could lead to the emergence of a new dominant
or leading power, and hence to the structural transformation of the
system. 62 This is implied by Aron’s argument that hegemony is “the
inevitable consequence of the victory of at least one of the states or
groups.” World War I was a hegemonic war, not because of the war
aims of the leading actors, and not because of its actual outcome, but
because a German victory was a distinct possibility and one that could
have given Germany the dominant position in the system. 63 World War
II was a hegemonic war for the same reason. 64 A conflict that may not
threaten to impose a new hegemony, but definitely threatens to over-
throw an existing one, also affects the constitution and governance of
the system and constitutes a hegemonic war.

Thus, a general war is defined as one in which the decisive victory
of at least one side is both a reasonable possibility and one that would

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Revolution (New York: American Book Co., 1937), 550-74. In view of the importance of
this war, it is interesting that in no single compilation are both the Dutch wars and the
Thirty Years’ War included as general wars with the uncertain exception of Doran (fn. 3),
179; also see fn. 30. For a summary of the various compilations of general wars, see Table
2.

Finally, the postwar emergence of a hegemonic or leadership power should not be the
criterion for combining the two wars, for that is precisely the hypothesis that needs to be
tested empirically.

61 See Edward Vose Gulick, Europe’s Classical Balance of Power (New York: Norton,
1955); Inis L. Claude, Jr., Power & International Relations (New York: Random House,
1962); Organski (fn. 3), 361-63.

62 That is, a general war requires that there be one side in the conflict, but not necessarily
both, for which a major victory is (1) a real possibility and (2) likely to result in its emergence
as a new leading power or (as I qualify it below) at least in the overthrow of the existing
leader.

63 Aron (fn. 26), 367-68. Aron is unreasonable in insisting that hegemony “inevitably”
follow from a mere “victory.”

64 This argument regarding World War II is clearly valid from a realist, Eurocentric
perspective. It would also be true from a global perspective if a German/Japanese victory
had weakened English and American naval power sufficiently for Germany to use her
European hegemony to become (perhaps in cooperation with Japan) the leading global
power as well. Note that Aron (fn. 26, p. 369) appears to violate his own criteria by excluding
World War II from the category of hegemonic wars; instead, he calls it an “ideological”
and “imperialist” war.
be likely to result in the leadership or dominance by a single state over the system—or at least in the overthrow of an existing leadership or hegemony. The question now becomes one of determining what wars have such potential consequences. Unless specific criteria can be stipulated, such wars cannot be objectively identified and key hypotheses cannot be tested empirically.

The following defining characteristics of general war are individually necessary and jointly sufficient. First, the conflict must at some point involve the leading power in the system. Hegemony or leadership over the system is conceivable only through a major victory by the leading power or its decisive defeat by a rising challenger. Second, the war must involve the active participation of most of the major powers in the system. The major powers—whether they be the great powers from a traditional realist/continental perspective, the global powers from the long cycle perspective, or core powers from a capitalist world-economy perspective—are distinguished from other actors in part by their systemic interests. The military involvement of most of these actors is an indicator that the conflict is likely to affect the general or systemic interests of all of them rather than the particular interests of individual powers. The non-involvement of most of the major powers would suggest that they did not perceive a threat to the stability of the existing system and to their strategic and economic interests in that system. General wars may involve most of the minor states in the system as well as most of the major powers, but that is an empirical question rather than a definitional requirement of general wars. A third criterion for general war is that it must be a substantial war involving intense combat. More limited wars do not have the potential of generating the decisive victory necessary to effect a major change in the distribution of power in the system and to establish a new hegemony or overturn an existing hegemony. The second and third criteria are related. Another reason why the active

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66 This is the missing link between those conceptualizations that define hegemonic war in terms of its systemic consequences and those that define it in terms of the participation of most of the major actors in the system (Osgood, Blainey, and others, fn. 53). The participation of nearly all the great powers is theoretically important because it is a good indicator of the perception of a serious threat to the stability of the system.

67 Midlarsky (fn. 3) argues that the involvement of minor powers is the critical factor that makes great power wars likely to escalate into “systemic wars.”
participation of most of the major powers is so important is that it increases the seriousness of the war, and hence the possibility of the decisive defeat of the leading power in a way that significantly reduces its relative military capabilities.

These criteria are general and are applicable to a variety of theoretical frameworks. However, neither the leading power nor the other major powers can be identified in the absence of a specific conception of the system and the basis of power in that system. The leading power and other major powers will vary for the long cycle, capitalist world-economy, and other frameworks surveyed above. Until these criteria are operationalized, hegemonic wars cannot be systematically identified and important hypotheses on global wars cannot be tested empirically in order to determine their validity.

**General War in the Modern Great Power System**

A complete theory of general war in the modern great power system has yet to be constructed. The assumptions underlying the conception of this system, however, are consistent with the assumptions of balance of power theory and other realpolitik hypotheses. They are also consistent with the assumptions underlying the theories of global war advanced by Doran, Organski, Midlarsky, and probably Gilpin. In order to permit the analysis of balance of power and related realpolitik hypotheses for the critical class of general wars, and to facilitate a comparison of the hegemonic wars associated with different theoretical frameworks, I shall construct a list of these wars for the modern great power system.68

While the concept of political realism is extremely broad and includes a variety of specific theoretical approaches, there is a relatively small set of basic assumptions that is shared by most “realists,” differentiating them from others. From these assumptions, it is possible to construct a system, define its leading actors, and identify a set of hegemonic wars.

The distinguishing characteristic of the world political system, according to realists, is its anarchic structure. Anarchy generates a high-threat environment, so that military security becomes the dominant issue and international politics becomes a struggle for power. Moreover, there is always the possibility that states may transform nonmilitary issues into military ones and attempt to resolve them through the use of force.69


The priority of military security leads to a hierarchy of actors defined primarily in terms of military power. The most powerful states determine the structure, major processes, and general evolution of the system. Because the great powers are the most powerful actors, they perceive each other as the most serious security threats and direct their primary attention toward each other. They constitute, therefore, an interdependent system of power and security relations, the great power system.\textsuperscript{70} 

In the modern era, most of the actors and all of the great powers have been territorial states. Because of the predominance of security interests, the fact that the primary security threats come from other great powers, and the fact that prior to the 20th century basically all the great powers were European, the great power system has been Eurocentric rather than global in orientation, and European security interests have always taken precedence over global political or economic interests whenever the two have been in conflict.\textsuperscript{71} The modern great power system originated in the late 15th century and only expanded into a global system in the 20th century.\textsuperscript{72} 

Thus, the realist great power framework is similar to the others in its emphasis on a small number of leading actors that have determined the structure and transformation of the system for the last five centuries. In the great power system, however, the dominant states are defined by their military power; the overriding issue is security; and the European system is the focus. In contrast with most theorists of hegemonic war, who emphasize the existence of a leading or dominant power and the

\textsuperscript{70} While few realists explicitly identify a great power system composed of the dominant actors in the system, they clearly recognize the leading role of the great powers; most of their theories are constructed with the great powers in mind. Waltz (fn. 69) only formalizes what most realists argue implicitly. Others may argue, however, that the general principles guiding the behavior of all states are the same, and that only the parameters of the power configurations are different.

\textsuperscript{71} While power and wealth are mutually reinforcing, they occasionally come into conflict, particularly in the short run. Whenever this conflict occurs, power takes precedence over wealth. Similarly, national political or economic interests always take precedence over private economic interests. (See Jacob Viner, “Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” World Politics 1 [October 1948], 1-29; Eugene Staley, War and the Private Investor [New York: Doubleday, 1935]; Stephen D. Krasner, Defending the National Interest [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978].) Great powers have rarely given priority to global interests unless they were free from direct security threats in Europe. This was possible only for certain states at certain times (Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, for example) because of their insular position and a dispersion of power on the continent. (Note that such states tend to be the world powers in long cycle theory.) For some of the better analyses of the reciprocal interaction between politics and economics in the world system, see Keohane (fn. 20), chap. 2; Gilpin (fn. 2); Gilpin, U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation (New York: Basic Books, 1975), chap. 1.

\textsuperscript{72} Levy (fn. 44), chap. 2.
importance of governance in the system, most realists emphasize the anarchic nature of the system, the absence of governance, and the importance of self-help, at least for the great powers. Whereas others identify historical cases of hegemony or leadership, most balance of power theorists would argue that hegemony is historically rare, and that the balance of power mechanism has usually functioned effectively to prevent any single state from achieving a dominant position.  

Let us now turn to the operational definition of general war in this Eurocentric, security-oriented great power system. I have identified the great powers elsewhere. The determination of the most powerful state

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23 Interesting differences among the paradigms can be found in their respective treatments of World War I. In a realist/continental perspective, Germany was the strongest power in the system prior to World War I, and also was perceived as the primary threat to the system in 1939. (See, for example, the argument and evidence presented by A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* [London: Oxford University Press, 1954], xxvii-xl; also Paul M. Kennedy, *The First World War and the International Power System,* *International Security* 9 [Summer 1984], 7-40. Note also that the 1872-1890 period is described as one of unipolarity under Germany by Richard N. Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in World Politics* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1963], 252.) This perspective should be contrasted with those in which there is a greater emphasis on economic and global dimensions of the system, and in which Britain and then the United States are identified as the leading powers in the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. Väyrynen, for example, finds it “a remarkable fact . . . that the two world wars were not initiated by the power which was challenging the leading power in economic terms . . .” He asks “why World War I was not waged between the United States and Great Britain and World War II from the beginning between Germany and the United States,” since they were the leading economic powers. In his explanation for this “anomaly” in his power transition theory, Väyrynen argues that “before World War I, geographical proximity made the economic and military surge of Germany much more threatening than the rapid economic growth of the United States on the other side of the Atlantic. The U.S. military capability was, furthermore, rather modest at the turn of the century in comparison with its economic power” (fn. 3), 412.

This, of course, is not all that remarkable, and the so-called “anomalies” are not confined to this century. It was French military power rather than Dutch maritime power that was perceived as the primary threat to the system in the last two decades of the 17th century, and it was France that was the target of two successive coalitions of nearly all the great powers. Similarly, it was Revolutionary France rather than Britain, the leading economic and naval power, that was perceived as the primary threat by the other great powers at the very end of the 18th century. The great powers have always feared their rivals’ military power more than their economic power, and the geographic proximity of continental powers has always caused them—and not the wealthy maritime powers removed from the continent—to be perceived as the greatest threats to the interests of the other great powers. These are basic assumptions of traditional balance of power theory and of the conception of a Eurocentric great power system. For this reason, a traditional *realpolitik* perspective provides a better explanation for the fundamental question of who fights whom in general wars than do other perspectives based on economic or global assumptions.

This argument is not necessarily inconsistent with long cycle theory. Whereas the leading state in a realist/continental system has usually been a land power and therefore threatening to other great powers, Modelski’s world power is a sea power that is less threatening, but plays the central role in system management. The different functional roles of the lead actors in these divergent theories emphasizes the difficulty of constructing critical empirical tests.

24 The great powers in this system are identified in Levy (fn. 44), chap. 2. The list includes France, 1495- ; England/Great Britain, 1495- ; Austrian Hapsburgs/Austria, 1495-1519 and 1556-1918; Spain, 1495-1519 and 1556-1808; the Ottoman Empire, 1495-1699; United Haps-
in the system must ultimately be based on systematically generated data on military capabilities; in the absence of such data for the entire span of the system it will be necessary for now to make qualitative judgments based on the arguments of historical literature and on scattered data on army size from Sorokin and others. Since most historians share a Eurocentric and military security orientation, this method will not introduce a serious bias.

The requirement of the active participation of most of the great powers in the war raises the question of what minimum threshold should be used. This is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but it seems reasonable to require that at least half of the powers perceive a significant threat and fight to block it. The minimum number of belligerent powers should then be one plus half of the remaining powers, or \( 1 + (n - 1)/2 = (n + 1)/2 \), or a minimum ratio of \( (n + 1)/2n \), where \( n \) is the number of powers in the system.\(^{76}\)

The requirement of a “substantial” conflict must also be quantified. The best and most widely used measure of the seriousness of war is battle deaths.\(^{77}\) Since both the number of casualties and their impact on

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75 Sorokin (fn. 60), 547-77. Models and Thompson have a more fully operational definition of the world power in long cycle theory—a state that possesses over fifty percent of global seapower over sustained periods. They systematically identify these world powers from Thompson’s data on seapower. See William R. Thompson, “Seapower in Global Politics, 1500-1945: Problems of Data Collection and Analysis,” paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association—West, Los Angeles, March 19-22, 1980; see also Models and Thompson, Seapower in Global Politics, 1494-1983 (forthcoming).

76 This criterion assumes that there is a single threat to impose hegemony over the system. That is a useful simplification, for there is no simple solution where there are multiple threats to dominate the system. If there were, presumably they could hold each other in check.

Note (Table 1) that this operational criterion for the minimum ratio of great powers that must be involved is relatively robust. To require less than half the great powers would be unreasonable, given the theoretical concept it is designed to tap. To require more than 60% of the powers would exclude the War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada (but only because the Ottoman Empire is identified as a great power in spite of the fact that it participated in none of the four general wars during that period). No other general war would be excluded until the minimum ratio exceeded 5/7 (War of the League of Augsburg) and then 5/6 (War of the Spanish Succession), but those wars are included by all the frameworks except Wallerstein’s. Eight of the ten general wars involve over 80% of the great powers. My own two cases of general war that others are most likely to criticize—the two major conflicts of the mid-18th century—each involve all of the great powers in the system. It is also interesting to note that if the Ottoman Empire were excluded from the system, eight of my ten general wars would involve all of the powers in the system. For a defense of the inclusion of the Turks as a great power, see Levy (fn. 44), 35-37.

77 J. David Singer and Melvin Small, The Wages of War, 1816-1965 (New York: Wiley,
society are functions of population and army size, a measure of battle
deaths relative to population is used and defined as the intensity of war.
Because population data for all the individual states are not available
over the last five centuries, the population of Europe as a whole is used
as a benchmark. A lower limit of 1,000 battle deaths per one million
European population is used as the minimum required intensity for a
general war.\footnote{Procedures for the measurement of the intensity of war, along
with a justification for the use of the population of Europe as a baseline for comparison, can be found in Levy (fn. 4), chap. 4. Of the 64 wars between the great powers in the last five centuries, 22 exceed 1,000 in intensity. Of these, only ten qualify as hegemonic wars. This minimum intensity criterion is also reasonably robust. The War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada barely qualifies, but even a threefold increase in this threshold would exclude no other case (see Table 1). Additional wars that might qualify if this threshold were lowered (see Levy, fn. 44, pp. 88-91) would be the War of the Polish Succession, 1733-1738 (intensity of 836), though England’s nonparticipation might violate our first criterion; the Fourth War of Charles V (combined with the Siege of Boulogne), 1542-1546 (intensity of 736); and the Fifth War of Charles V, 1552-1556 (intensity of 668). None of these wars is included in any of the other prominent lists, however, and their exclusion does not appear to be a serious problem here. Note that the case most sensitive to both the minimum great power ratio and the minimum intensity ratio is the War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada, which is also identified as a hegemonic war by Toynbee, Modelski and Thompson, and Doran. This was a combination of several closely related wars involving a coalition of England, France, and the Dutch against Spain, and the future of Europe rested on the outcome. See Peter Geyl, The Revolt of the Netherlands, 1555-1609, 2d ed. (London: Ernest Benn, 1958); Garrett Mattingly, The Armada (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); J. H. Elliott, Europe Divided, 1559-1598 (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pt. IV; Hill (fn. 45), II, chap. 7.}

One final problem must be resolved before general wars in the modern
great power system can be identified. Does general war refer to an
\textit{individual war} or a \textit{period} of hegemonic conflict? While many of the
theories surveyed above speak in terms of individual wars, most lists of
global wars refer to periods of intensive warfare. Perhaps one reason
for the latter focus is that many theorists are more concerned with
building a theory of global politics than a theory of the causes of war.
One could argue that the question of the causes of general war is equally
important, however, and that for this purpose it is preferable to construct
a compilation of individual general wars. The causes of each of the wars
can then be investigated independently, without having been prejudged.
It is important, for example, that we remain open to the possibility that
the causes of World War II are different from those of World War I.
This focus on individual wars also allows for the analytic distinction
between hegemonic war and a series of distinct and more limited con-
licts, which together may affect the structure and evolution of the
system, but none of which by itself constitutes a threat of hegemony or
qualifies as a hegemonic war. It also facilitates the separate analysis of simultaneous but unrelated conflicts that are distinct from the hegemonic war (e.g., the Russo-Turkish War during the Napoleonic War).

Wars in the modern great power system which have involved the leading power in the system, most of the other great powers, and substantial conflict are presented in Table 1. The fraction of the participating great powers, intensity of the war, and total number of battle deaths (severity of the war) are included. A comparison of this compilation with others is provided in Table 2.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that one problem shared by several theories of general or hegemonic war concerns the definition of their central concept. Many lists of hegemonic wars are not fully consistent with their corresponding definitions, and hegemonic war is often defined in such a way that some of the central propositions in the theory are reduced to tautologies and rendered immune from empirical testing. Important theoretical questions raised by conflicting hypotheses on the causes and consequences of hegemonic war cannot be resolved until rigorous operational criteria for the systematic identification of these wars are devised.

A general war has been defined as one in which a decisive victory by at least one side is both a reasonable possibility and likely to result in the leadership or dominance by a single state over the system, or at least in the overthrow of an existing leadership or hegemony. This definition requires that a general war involve the leading power in the system, most of the other powers, and substantial conflict.

For the modern great power system, conceived in terms of a Eurocentric framework in which military security issues are given priority, general wars are those involving the leading great power in the system, at least half of the other great powers, and an intensity exceeding 1,000 battle deaths per one million European population. There have been ten such general wars during the five-century span of the modern system.

There are many points of disagreement among the different theories.

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79 This table is based on the data in Levy (fn. 44, chap. 4.) Most of these wars satisfy the definitional criteria by a considerable margin and should not generate much controversy. The more difficult cases include the two mid-18th-century wars and the War of Dutch Independence/Spanish Armada, which have been discussed above. Of the wars not included, only the Italian Wars (1494-1559) and the Crimean War present potential problems, and these are minor. I have dealt with each of these cases to some length in "The Definition and Identification of Hegemonic War," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, GA, March 27-31, 1984, pp. 24-26.

80 The substance of these comparisons was discussed earlier, in the criticism of the inconsistency between others' lists of hegemonic wars and their definitions of the concept.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Ratio of Powers Involved</th>
<th>Intensity a</th>
<th>Severity (battle deaths)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War of Dutch Independence/</td>
<td>1585-1609</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>1,060</td>
<td>190,000b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Armada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirty Years’ War</td>
<td>1618-1648</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch War of Louis XIV</td>
<td>1672-1678</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War of the League of Augsburg</td>
<td>1688-1697</td>
<td>5/7</td>
<td>6,900</td>
<td>700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War of the Spanish Succession</td>
<td>1701-1713</td>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>1,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War of Jenkins’ Ear/Austrian Succession</td>
<td>1739-1748</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>400,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seven Years’ War</td>
<td>1755-1763</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>9,100</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars</td>
<td>1792-1815</td>
<td>6/6</td>
<td>21,000</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War I</td>
<td>1914-1918</td>
<td>8/8</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>7,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>1939-1945</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>94,000</td>
<td>13,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Intensity is measured in terms of battle deaths per one million European population.
b Includes Spanish and Dutch casualties from the War of Dutch Independence beginning in 1568.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Levy</th>
<th>Toynbee</th>
<th>Models/Thompson</th>
<th>Wallerstein</th>
<th>Gilpin</th>
<th>Donat</th>
<th>Farrar</th>
<th>Mowat</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italian Wars</td>
<td>(1494-1525)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>War of Dutch Independence/</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish Armada</td>
<td>(1585-1609)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>(1618-1648)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>War of Jenkins' Ear/</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austrian Succession</td>
<td>(1739-1748)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seven Years' War</td>
<td>(1755-1763)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>French Revolutionary and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Napoleonic Wars</td>
<td>(1792-1815)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War I</td>
<td>(1914-1918)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>(1939-1945)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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a Wright is not included since he appears to suggest three different lists of general wars (see fn. 31).
b It is not clear which wars Doran includes in the “Hapsburg attempt to dominate Europe,” or which of Louis XIV’s wars he includes (see fn. 30).
c As ending dates, Toynbee uses 1525 while Modelski and Thompson use 1517. Mowat includes the wars of Charles V by identifying 1559 as the end of the war.
d Toynbee uses the opening date of 1568, Modelski 1579; Thompson and Levy each wait until the internationalization of the civil war in 1585. Farrar includes the period 1568-1588 as one of hegemonic war (see fn. 31).

general war” (fn. 4, p. 255). Modelski, Thompson, Wallerstein, Gilpin, and Farrar all treat the two World Wars of this century as a single global war. Mowat’s study was completed before World War II.
of hegemonic war and world politics. While these theories are based on
different assumptions and to a certain extent ask different questions,
they also provide different answers to some of the same questions. They
disagree over the relative importance of security interests as compared
to economic interests, and of European interests as compared to global
interests in the policies of leading states; over which states are perceived
as the primary threats to these interests; over the critical question of the
causes of hegemonic war; and over numerous other questions. Many of
these conflicting propositions are testable in principle, and in fact must
be tested if they are to be accepted as valid explanations for behavior
in the global system.

This discussion suggests some important tasks for future research on
hegemonic war. Since comparative tests of different theories are possible
only with respect to those questions for which the theories suggest
different answers, more attention needs to be directed to the identifi-
cation of the specific areas in which these theories overlap and conflict.
Though I have identified some of the areas in which critical tests might
be devised, further theoretical work is necessary to generate additional
testable and conflicting propositions from each of these frameworks. Of
particular value would be the construction of a theory of general war
associated with balance of power theory, for none presently exists.\textsuperscript{81} Since
balance of power and related realpolitik hypotheses have until recently
dominated the literature on international conflict, they might offer a
plausible alternative to existing theories of hegemonic war. Hypotheses
on general war should be constructed in a way that facilitates their
critical test against conflicting propositions from other frameworks. This
would contribute to the resolution of the debates about hegemonic war
and the structure and processes of the world system by empirical analysis
as well as by theoretical argument.

\textsuperscript{81} Even though no theory of general war in the modern great power system now exists,
the assumptions of the realist/continental framework are sufficiently clear to permit the
definition and identification of general wars in that system.