The Initiation and Spread of the First World War: Interdependent Decisions

Jack S. Levy
Rutgers University

The ConflictSpace framework begins with the assumption that the factors leading a war to spread are different from the factors leading to the initiation of war. I argue that the presumed analytic separation of the initiation and spread of war is misleading because leaders’ expectations of how a war might spread have a significant effect on their decisions to initiate war. I demonstrate this for the July 1914 crisis, and in the process I question Vasquez et al.’s argument that the key to the outbreak of the war lies in the Austro-Serbian relationship. I end by suggesting that the impact of the anticipated spread of war on the initiation of war probably varies across cases and constitutes an empirical question to investigate.

Historians and international relations scholars have each given far more attention to the initiation of war than to either the vertical escalation of war to higher levels of violence or the horizontal expansion of war to include additional states. This omission has impeded our understanding of the conditions under which and the processes through which bilateral wars become multilateral wars. Vasquez et al. (2011) construct an innovative framework for the analysis of the spread of war by integrating social network analysis, spatial analysis, and key variables from steps-to-war theory (Vasquez 2009). They make an important contribution by situating specific foreign policy decisions within a broader context of system structures and bilateral relationships and by demonstrating the utility of the ConflictSpace framework in explaining the spread of the First World War.

A central motivating factor underlying the ConflictSpace framework is the authors’ belief that “the factors that bring about a war in the first place are likely to be different from the factors that make it spread.” On one level, this is almost certainly true. As the other essays in the forum make abundantly clear, new states involve new causes. For both belligerents and other states, the initiation of war creates a new set of military threats and opportunities. The outbreak of war also creates new domestic environments, vested bureaucratic interests, and psychological mindsets and commitments. These new factors (and altered values of old factors) influence subsequent decisions of both belligerent and nonbelligerent states on whether to expand or join the ongoing war. Assessing the causal weight of these new factors—relative to that of pre-existing conditions, relationships, and processes contributing to the initiation of war—is an important task for research.

1 Vasquez et al. (2011) emphasize the behavior of potential war joiners. In doing so, they underestimate the importance of bargaining between current belligerents and potential joiners.
I am less interested in the “separate causes” question—which overlaps with but which is not identical to the question of whether we need different theories to explain big wars and little wars (Midlarsky 1990)—than in the presumed analytic separation of decisions leading to the initiation of war and decisions leading to the spread of war. My central argument is that the ConflictSpace framework exaggerates this separation and underestimates the extent to which the initiation and spread of war reflect interdependent decisions. Not only does the initiation of war have a causal impact on the spread of war by altering the internal and external environments of states, but—and this is my primary emphasis here—political leaders’ expectations about whether and how a war might spread have a profound impact on their decisions to initiate war in the first place.

Before I develop this argument and apply it to the July crisis, I want to note that both the “separate causes” and “separate theories” questions are somewhat ambiguous. One’s answer depends both on one’s definition of “cause” and of “theory” and also on the breadth of one’s theoretical categories and the level of generality of one’s theory. Most rational choice theorists would argue that both the onset and expansion of war can be explained by a single theory. Bueno de Mesquita (1990), for example, argues that both “big” wars and “little wars” can be explained by a single expected utility theory. Bargaining theorists argue that a single bargaining model of war can explain the onset, expansion, and termination of war (Fearon 1995). Similarly, many realists would argue that both the onset and expansion of war are driven by power, interest, and structural uncertainty.

These are pretty broad concepts, however, and a wide range of behavior might be consistent with each. If the onset of war is explained by one rationalist theory, and the expansion of war is explained by a separate rationalist theory (perhaps one emphasizing variables at a different level of analysis), do we have a single theory or separate theories? Although the general processes underlying both onset and expansion decisions are similar, the more specific factors shaping those calculations and the causal weights given to each of those factors may be different in the onset and expansion of war. It makes a difference, for example, if the expected utility calculations leading to war are based on the national interest or on the domestic political interests of state decision makers and on whether the national interest is defined in terms of power or ideology. Each constitutes a rationalist explanation, but it would not be particularly useful to conclude that the causes of war in the two instances are the same.

The ConflictSpace framework gives primary emphasis to the structural conditions and bilateral relationships that influence the propensity for wars to spread. It acknowledges in passing that the initiation of war itself might have an independent causal impact by generating a new set of threats and opportunities for other states. What the framework does not explicitly acknowledge is that the causal arrow might be reversed. Leaders’ decisions for war are generally based on some kind of cost–benefit calculations of the consequences of war, and those calculations are shaped by expectations as to whether third parties will intervene in the war, on whose side, and with what impact. In this way, decisions to initiate and expand a war may be made simultaneously. This is particularly clear in the case of offensive alliances, in which the initiation of war is contingent upon the prior agreement of allies to join the war, either simultaneously or sequentially.

In some cases, decisions to expand a war are made prior to the decision to initiate war. In 1756, Austria began negotiations with Russia and France for an offensive alliance and war against Prussia, but the decision for war was delayed

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2 The Sèvres agreement between Britain, France, and Israel, leading to the 1956 war against Egypt, is a good example.
until the following year. Frederick the Great, learning of these plans and anticipating a coalition against him, invaded Saxony in 1756, and France and Russia soon intervened.

These patterns are repeated in the First World War. Each of the key decisions in the processes leading to the declarations of war at the end of the July crisis was based on expectations of how the war might spread. Austria-Hungary’s ultimatum to Serbia and its eventual decision for war were each conditional upon unambiguous assurances from Germany (the “blank check”) that Germany would intervene against Russia if Russia intervened in an Austro-Serbian war. Without the German guarantee, Austro-Hungarian leaders almost certainly would not have moved against Serbia and the First World War would not have occurred, at least not in 1914 (Albertini 1952–1957:2/162; Fischer 1967:52; Ritter 1973:2/236; Williamson 1991:205; Stevenson 2004:13; Levy 1990–1991). Although the spread of war temporally followed the outbreak of war, in causal terms expectations about the spread of war influenced processes leading to the initiation of war.

The behavior of other states was driven by similar forward-looking logic. Serbia’s response to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum was based on its confidence in Russian support in the event of an Austro-Serbia war (Joll 1992, 15–16; Cornwall 1995; Hall 2003). Russia’s decision to enter the war was based on its confidence that France would intervene against Germany if Germany intervened against Russia (Keiger 1983; Lieven 1983; Rich 2003; Stevenson 2004:22–24). German leaders recognized that any Russo-German war would almost certainly be a two-front war for Germany, designed their war plan (the Schlieffen Plan) accordingly, and began their war against Russia with an invasion of Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.

German political leaders’ decisions throughout the July crisis were also influenced by their expectations about the likely behavior of Britain. As Fischer (1967, 1988) argues, the German assumption that Britain would not intervene early in a continental war was the “linchpin” of the entire crisis. German leaders preferred either a limited war in the Balkans or a continental war to a negotiated peace, but they did not want a world war (Levy 1990–1991:159–62). Consequently, if Germany had anticipated British intervention, they would not have given the blank check to Austria. Without the blank check, the entire causal chain leading to the outbreak and then spread of war would have unraveled back to the first step, and consequently, the First World War would not have occurred, at least not in 1914.

This account suggests that decisions leading to the outbreak of the First World War and to the spread of the First World War constituted a seamless web of interdependent decisions. Although the initiation and then the progressive spread of the war followed a clear temporal sequence, the causal sequences are much more difficult to disentangle. The critical decisions in several European
capitols leading to the initiation of war were all informed by expectations of how the war might spread, and decisions leading to each stage in the spread of war were informed by expectations of how the war might spread further. In this important sense, many of the key causes of the First World War are inseparable from the causes of the expansion of the First World War.

An interesting aspect of the First World War is the extent to which expectations of how the war might spread were shared in the capitols of European states. Given the structure of power, alliances, and rivalries in the European system, the interlocking mobilization plans, and the “unspoken assumptions” about the nature of war and the rules of the game (Joll 1992), decision makers in each of the leading states in 1914 had similar conceptions of how war might spread once it started, at least among the European great powers. Leaders might have attached different probabilities to different choices and outcomes, but they had a similar conception of the structure of choice in the July crisis. These shared images facilitate an analysis of the crisis in terms of a game tree.

The case of the First World War raises the question of whether leaders always look ahead to the end of the game, whether they share similar conceptions of the structure of the game, whether history unfolds roughly along the lines that they had anticipated, and whether the kind of rational-strategic analysis conducted here for the First World War can be replicated in other international crises.

I suspect that the answer is “sometimes.” The history of war is littered with misperceptions, one of the most consequential forms of which is exaggerated confidence that potential enemies will stay neutral and that potential friends will intervene (Blainey 1988). In addition, actors’ time horizons are notoriously short (Streich and Levy 2007), contingent events sometimes intervene,6 and leaders attempting to manage a crisis sometimes devise new strategic options that were not available at the onset of the crisis.7 As for shared images of the structure of choice, that is in part a function of the clarity of the situation and the extent to which it structures the available options of the major actors. The structure of power, alliances, and rivalries all contributed to the clarity of the situation in 1914, which suggests that the ConflictSpace framework might serve as a useful guide. But other crises might be different. Rather than simply assume that the structure of choice is clear, that decision makers look many moves ahead, and that expectations of future strategic behavior influence current choices, we should treat these as empirical questions.

Conclusion

I began by questioning the ConflictSpace assumption about the analytic separation between the initiation and the spread of war and arguing that decisions initiating war are often strongly influenced by leaders’ expectations about how the war might subsequently spread. This was confirmed by my brief investigation of the First World War case. I cautioned that the same pattern does not necessarily hold in other cases, and I argued that whether leaders’ decisions for war are informed by their expectations of the further spread of war are important empirical questions to be investigated.8

None of this is meant to suggest that the ConflictSpace framework is seriously flawed. Although the assumed analytic separation between the initiation and

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8 Similarly, I argued that whether we need separate theories to explain big wars and small wars is in part an empirical question (Levy 1990).
spread of war apparently motivated the development of the framework, the
framework is not dependent upon that assumption. Vasquez et al. (2011) are
correct in arguing that the factors contributing to spread of war go beyond those
contributing to the initiation of war, and they provide a useful framework for
analyzing the spread of war. But by neglecting the likely impact of expectations
of the spread of war on decisions to initiate war, Vasquez et al. (2011) under-
estimate the potential utility of their framework in facilitating the analysis of the
initiation of war as well as that of the spread of war. The scope of the Conflict-
Space framework is broader than its authors suggest.

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