2 Theories and causes of war

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

The question of what causes war has engaged scholars, journalists, public intellectuals and others for thousands of years. We have a variety of theories but no consensus as to what the causes of war are or how best to study them. There are enormous differences across different disciplines — philosophy, theology, literature, history, economics, political science, anthropology, sociology, psychology, mathematics, biology and primatology, to name a few — but substantial differences within disciplines as well, driven by different ontological and epistemological perspectives, theoretical preconceptions and methodological preferences.¹

Both the complexity of war and of the study of war complicates the task of writing a relatively short essay on the causes of war. I use this essay to place the chapters in this volume on the political economy of war and peace in the broader context of some of the leading theories in political science on the causes of war. Although it is clear that a complete understanding of the causes of war needs to draw on work in many disciplines, it is also clear that political science has a special place in the study of war. Leading scholars in several disciplines define war as large-scale organized violence between political organizations (Malinowski 1941; Vasquez 2009). Many also accept Clausewitz’ ([1832] 1976) argument that war is fundamentally political, a “continuation of politics by other means.” If war is an instrument of policy to advance the interests of a political organization, then an explanation of war requires an understanding of why the authorized decision-makers of political organizations choose to resort to military force rather than adopt another strategy for advancing their interests and resolving differences with their adversaries. It also requires an understanding of how the perceptions and behavior of adversarial political units interact to result in war. That is, war involves both decision-making by a political organization and strategic interaction between adversarial political organizations.

The primary focus of this essay is on the causes of interstate war, which has dominated the attention of most scholarship on war for hundreds of years. Although the frequency of interstate war, and particularly of great power war, has declined over time (Levy 1983), and although civil wars
have increased in frequency in the last half century (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld and Gurr 2010) and are likely to be the most frequent form of warfare for years to come, interstate war remains the most consequential form of warfare, both in terms of its human and economic destructiveness and its political impact on the international system.

I organize this review of the causes of war around a modified version of the “levels of analysis” framework, which has been quite influential in the study of international relations and foreign policy. After briefly summarizing the framework I turn to some conceptual issues. I then summarize some of the leading theories of war, classifying them in terms of the level of their primary causal variables.

2.2 PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Waltz (1959) suggested three “images” of war – the individual, the nation-state and the international system – and used these to categorize the causes of war. Singer (1961) referred to these as “levels of analysis.” The individual level focuses primarily on human nature and on individual political leaders and their belief systems, psychological processes, emotional states and personalities. The nation-state (or national) level includes factors such as the type of political system (authoritarian or democratic, and variations of each), the structure of the economy, the nature of the policymaking process, the role of public opinion and interest groups, ethnicity and nationalism, and political culture and ideology. The system level includes the anarchic structure of the international system, the distribution of military and economic power among the leading states in the system, patterns of military alliances and international trade, and other factors that constitute the external environment common to all states.

I modify this standard typology slightly by introducing a separate decision-making level (Jervis 1976, Chapter 1), which can be further decomposed into distinct individual and organizational levels. The former incorporates Waltz’ individual-level variables and the latter incorporates state-level factors like bureaucratic politics and organizational processes. At the system level, one could also distinguish between the global system, regional systems and the international environment of a particular state. The global system is the same for all states, but the regional system and particular external environment is not. I also add a distinct “dyadic” or “interactional” level, which reflects the influence of variables characterizing the relationship between two particular adversaries, including their history, their bargaining relationship and other factors.

Although the levels-of-analysis framework is commonly used to categorize the causal variables contributing to war (or to other foreign policy outcomes), it is sometimes used in a different way, to refer to the level of the dependent variable rather than the level of the independent variable. In this usage, we might want to explain the policy preferences of an individual decision-maker or of an organization, the foreign policy behavior of a state, or patterns of interactions within a pair of states or within the international system as a whole. That is, we might want to explain preferences, behavior or outcomes at the individual, organizational, state, dyadic or system level.

These distinctions among different levels of the dependent variable are important, because war-related patterns validated at one level may not necessarily hold for other levels. A more conciliatory foreign policy at the nation-state level does not necessarily result in a lower probability of war at the dyadic level, as Britain and France discovered in the aftermath of the 1938 Munich Conference. Similarly, a strong preponderance of power at the dyadic level may contribute to peace because the strong do not need to fight and the weak are unable to fight (Tammen et al. 2000), but a strong preponderance of power at the system level (at least in continental systems like Europe), where alliances are relevant, is likely to lead to a counterbalancing coalition and war, as balance of power theory suggests. To take a different example, the evidence is overwhelming that democratic states rarely if ever go to war with each other (a dyadic-level outcome), but most research suggests that democracies are just as warlike as are non-democracies in terms of how frequently they fight (Russett and Oneal 2001). In addition, since democratic–democratic dyads are the most peaceful while democratic–authoritarian dyads are the most warlike, the conversion of a state from an autocracy to a democracy will increase the probability of war in a system of few democracies but decrease the probability of war in a system of many democracies. Actions that might increase the probability of war at one “level” might not increase the probability of war at another level.

We can use causal variables at one level to explain outcomes at another level, but we have to be careful to specify the precise theoretical connections between variables at different levels, since there is no logical connection between relationships at different levels. An individual-level theory focusing on a leader’s beliefs, personality and policy preferences is logically insufficient to explain a state’s decision to use military force, which is a state-level outcome. We would need to explain how the leader’s preferences, along with the preferences of other decision-makers, are translated into a foreign policy decision for the state. Similarly, a national-level explanation of a state’s decision to use force does not constitute a logically
complete explanation for war defined as violence between political organizations. A monadic-level theory cannot explain a dyadic-level outcome. Dyadic and perhaps systemic variables must be included. This does not necessarily mean that dyadic- and system-level variables have a greater causal influence on war than do individual or domestic variables, only that the former cannot be logically excluded from the analysis. Similarly, state-level variables are necessary to explain foreign policy decisions, but that does not necessarily mean they carry greater causal weight than individual-level variables.

2.3 SYSTEM-LEVEL THEORIES

The study of the causes of war in political science has traditionally been dominated by "realist" theories, a family of theories that assume that sovereign states (or other territorially defined groups) act rationally to advance their security, power and wealth in an anarchic international system defined by the absence of a legitimate authority to regulate disputes and enforce agreements. Anarchy, in conjunction with uncertainties about the intentions of the adversary, creates a system of insecurity and competition that leads political leaders to focus on short-term security needs, worst-case outcomes and on their relative position in the system. They build up their military strength and use coercive threats to influence the adversary, maintain their reputations and advance their interests. Realists argue that the primary determinant of international outcomes is the distribution of power at the dyadic or systemic levels. As Thucydides' (1996, p. 352) argued in the Melian Dialogue, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

Most realists recognize that war can arise through both deliberate and inadvertent processes, though they disagree about which of these processes occurs most often. A state that perceives a direct conflict of interest with an adversary and is dissatisfied with the status quo may conclude that its interests would be best served by resorting to military force. Alternatively, two states that are each content with the status quo and more interested in maintaining their current position than in extending their influence may still end up in war as the result of a conflict driven by fear and uncertainty. Uncertainty about the adversary's intentions may lead a "security-seeking" (as opposed to predatory) state to increase its military power for purely defensive purposes, but these actions are often perceived as threatening by their adversary, which responds with defensive actions that are similarly perceived as threatening by the other. This can generate an action-reaction cycle and a conflict spiral that leaves all states worse off, that is difficult to reverse and that can sometimes escalate to war. This is the core of the security dilemma: actions that states take to increase their security often induce a response by adversaries that results in a decrease in their security (Jervis 1978). In the realist view, wars can arise either through predatory aggression or through a conflict spiral leading to an inadvertent war.

Realist theories give primary emphasis to the distribution of power. This is prominent in balance of power theories, which come in many variations but which generally posit the avoidance of hegemony as the primary goal of states and the maintenance of an equilibrium of power in the system as the primary instrumental goal (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). The theory predicts that states, and particularly great powers, will build up their arms and form alliances to balance against those who constitute the primary threats to their interests and particularly against any state that threatens to secure a hegemonic position over the system. Balance of power theorists argue that the balancing mechanism almost always works successfully to avoid hegemony, either because potential hegemons are deterred by their anticipation of a military coalition forming against them or because they are defeated in war after deterrence fails. Classic examples of high concentrations of power leading to counter-hegemonic coalitions and "hegemonic wars" are the two World Wars of the twentieth century against Germany and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815).

Although balance of power theorists agree that threats of hegemony generate counterbalancing coalitions that frequently lead to general wars, they disagree about the consequences of less extreme concentrations of power in the system, where a traditional rival or neighboring state rather than the strongest power in the system may constitute the greatest security threat to a state. There are long-standing debates about the relative war-proneness of "bipolar" systems characterized by the approximate parity of two great powers that stand far above the rest (like the Cold War system) and "multipolar" systems characterized by the dispersion of power among several great powers (nineteenth-century Europe, for example), but the arguments advanced in support of each are theoretically underspecified and the evidence is inconclusive (Levy and Thompson 2010, Chapter 2).

Balance of power propositions about counter-hegemonic balancing naturally lead to the "puzzle" of why no balancing coalition has formed against the United States after the end of the Cold War, given the historically unprecedented power of the US. Although some realists argue that it is just a matter of time before such a coalition arises, others argue that a balancing coalition will not arise, for several reasons: (1) the United States
is a benign hegemon that does not threaten most other states (Walt 2005); (2) offshore balancers like the US do not provoke balancing coalitions (Mearsheimer 2001); (3) the US is too strong and balancing is too risky (Brooks and Wohlfarth 2008); and (4) states balance against threats of land-based hegemonies in continental systems like Europe but not against threats of hegemony in the global maritime system (Levy and Thompson 2010: Chapter 2).

In contrast to balance of power theory, which predicts that high concentrations of power in the international system generate counterbalancing coalitions so that hegemonies never arise, power transition theory (Organski 1958; Tammen et al. 2000) posits that hegemony is common and that it is conducive to peace. The theory stipulates that differential rates of growth driven largely by industrialization lead to the rise and fall of dominant states. The probability of war peaks at the point at which the declining leader is overtaken by a rising challenger that is dissatisfied with the status quo. Power transition theorists argue that unipolarity under US leadership helps maintain the peace, but that the inevitable decline of US dominance and the rise of China or other great powers creates an increasing risk of great power war. The point of a Sino-American power transition, estimated to occur within a few decades, will be the point of maximum danger. Power transition theorists minimize the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons and argue that the key to peace will be whether or not China is satisfied with the existing status quo and with the global political economy, in particular.

Power transition theorists generally argue that a dissatisfied rising power is likely to initiate a war prior to the point of power transition with the dominant power in order to accelerate the transition and then reconstruct the international economic, political and legal system in a way that serves its own interests. This is a puzzling argument, because the rising state is likely to lose any war that occurs prior to the point of transition. The rising state's incentives are to delay, wait until it is stronger and exploit its greater strength to extract concessions from the former leader under the threat of war. Recognizing this danger, the declining leader may have an incentive to initiate or provoke a "preventive war" to defeat its rising adversary while the opportunity is still available (Levy 2008). Preventive logic, which is also invoked by balance of power theorists, applies not only to complete power transitions but also to situations in which a rising adversary threatens to cross a critical threshold of military capabilities. Preventive logic motivated the Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, and it was the public rationale for the US war against Iraq in 2003.

Most statistical studies have shown that balance of power theories and power transition theories, along with realist theories more generally, can explain only a limited amount of the variance of war and peace in the international system. These empirical limitations, along with questions about the logical coherence of each of these theories, have led international relations theorists to shift to the level of the dyadic interactions between states as the dependent variable or unit of analysis, in an attempt to provide a more complete explanation for war and peace.

2.4 DYADIC-LEVEL THEORIES

Quantitative researchers have been able to explain more of the variation in war and peace between states at the dyadic level than at the system level (of the dependent variable). The best known finding is that democratic states rarely if ever go to war with each other, which we discuss in the next section on state and societal causal variables. Researchers have also demonstrated that most wars are between contiguous states (Bremer 1992), that territorial disputes are far more likely to escalate to war than are disputes over other issues (Senese and Vasquez 2008), and that preponderance of power at the dyadic level (but not at the system level) is a strong predictor of peace (Tammen et al. 2000). A new line of research on international rivalries has demonstrated that the history of the interactions between pairs of states have an enormous impact on their behavior and on the likelihood of war between them (Diehl and Goertz 2000; Colaresi, Rasler and Thompson 2007). Combining dyadic-level rivalries and territorial disputes with variables traditionally associated with the realist paradigm (arms races, system-level alliances and crises), and conceiving of the later as the product of a realist culture, Senese and Vasquez (2008) have developed and tested a "steps to war" model that nicely captures conflict spiral dynamics. Scholars have also begun to conceptualize and model war as a bargaining breakdown between states. This "bargaining model of war" has been one of the most influential research programs in the international relations field during the last 15 years, and it deserves particular attention here.

2.4.1 The Bargaining Model of War

Economists are familiar with the logic underlying the bargaining model of war, an early form of which was introduced to the international relations field by Blainey (1988, Chapter 8), an economic historian. The model was then formalized by Fearon (1995) and further developed by others (Wagner 2000). The basic argument is that war is an inefficient means of
resolving conflicts of interests because it destroys resources that might otherwise be distributed among adversaries. There should in principle be some negotiated settlement that is mutually preferred to war. Any theory of war must be able to explain why states or other actors end up in war rather than with a negotiated settlement.

Fearon (1995) recognized that psychological variables might provide one answer to this question, and that the domestic political interests of political leaders might provide another. He narrowed the question and asked how rational unitary actors might end up in war despite the costs and inefficiency of war. He demonstrated that there are only three sets of conditions under which two rational unitary actors could end up in war with each other: private information and incentives to misrepresent that information, commitment problems and indivisible issues.

The private information path to war refines and formalizes Blainey’s (1988) argument that wars arise when (and only when) there are disagreements about relative power and hence about the likely outcome of war. If actors share similar expectations as to how war is likely to end, they should be able to reach a settlement based on those shared expectations, one that gives each party the same payoff that it expects to receive from war but without the economic and human costs of war. The presence of private information, however, can lead to different expectations about the likely outcome of war and consequently to different assessments of whether one can do better by fighting than by negotiating. If one (or both) actor(s) believes that its interests will be better served by war than by a negotiated settlement, taking into account the costs of war, then it will presumably demand more concessions and a better settlement, and it will fight if its demands are not met. Sharing information might narrow or eliminate the gap in expectations, but in the process it might alert the adversary to its weaknesses (or to its strengths) and give the adversary the opportunity to compensate for its weaknesses by building new weapons, securing allies, changing its strategy or initiating a preemptive strike. Thus sharing information is often not a viable strategy, so private information combined with incentives to misrepresent that information constitutes a path to war for rational unitary actors.

Scholars have applied the private information argument to the conduct and termination of war as well as to the outbreak of war, and in doing so develop Blainey’s (1988) argument that the conduct of war reveals information about relative military capabilities and about mutual resolve and hence the likely outcome of war. This contributes to a convergence of expectations about the consequences of future fighting, which increases the likelihood of the termination of war based on a negotiated settlement (Goemans 2000; Wagner 2000; Slantchev 2003).

The commitment problem is the source of a second rationalist path to war (Fearon 1995; Wagner 2000; Powell 2006). If the relative distribution of power between two states is shifting (more accurately, if one or both states perceive that it is likely to shift in the future), it may be difficult for actors to reach a settlement that is mutually preferred to war, even if actors have shared information and therefore shared expectations of the likely outcome of war. If the weaker actor is increasing in strength, and especially if it is expected to surpass the power of its adversary, it has incentives to reach a settlement – both because it is likely to lose any war fought now and also because it will have a stronger negotiating position later. The state in relative decline presumably would like to reach a settlement that freezes the status quo, but it is likely to be skeptical about whether any such settlement would last. It understands that the adversary would have incentives to initiate a new set of demands once power has shifted in its favor in the future, and to resort to force if those concessions are not granted.

The rising state might prefer to settle now, and might promise to honor the present settlement, but how credible is that promise once underlying conditions have changed and once the adversary has the coercive power to extract greater concessions and the military power to enforce those concessions? This is the commitment problem. The only concessions that would work to satisfy the declining power are those that would restrict the growth of the rising state and hence its future bargaining advantages, but the rising state is unlikely to accept such restrictions. This narrows the bargaining space and increases the probability of war.

The third path to war among rational unitary actors involves indivisible issues (Fearon 1995). Any mutually acceptable settlement requires a division of goods that is proportionate to the likely outcome of the war, which requires in principle that the issues in dispute be infinitely divisible. If issues are not divisible, it may not be possible to construct a settlement that each adversary prefers to war. Although material goods are often divisible, issues of principle, including many religious issues and some territorial issues, are often not divisible.

It might be possible to construct a mutually agreeable settlement if the difficult issue is linked to another issue (Morgan 1994) or if one side makes side payments to another. Moreover, the source of indivisibility is often a domestic pressure group with strong political influence, which means that we are no longer dealing with a unitary actor. These considerations lead Fearon (1995) to downplay the importance of the indivisibility of issues and emphasize the role of private information (and incentives to misrepresent that information) and commitment problems as the two primary rationalist paths to war.
2.5 STATE AND SOCIETAL-LEVEL THEORIES

Efforts to explain war as the product of causal factors internal to states has a long history in the study of international relations, going back to Kant's ([1795] 1949) arguments about the pacifying role of republican regimes, economic interdependence and international law and institutions. Marxist–Leninist theories (Lenin [1916] 1939) have had some influence in the international relations field (but probably more in revisionist history), with their more plausible elements being incorporated into liberal pressure-group explanations but without the philosophical foundations of Marxist theory. Given the declining influence of Marxist–Leninist theories since the early 1990s, however, I do not cover them here. It was about that time that scholars became convinced of the near absence of wars between democracies, launching the study of the democratic peace as a leading research program in international politics. We now turn to the democratic peace and its close cousin, the capitalist peace.  

2.5.1 The Democratic Peace

A substantial amount of empirical research demonstrates that democracies rarely if ever go to war with each other (Ray 1995; Doyle 1997). This argument is quite robust with respect to a wide range of definitions of democracy and of war, suggesting that even imperfect democracies almost never fight with each other. Scholars then demonstrated that this strong empirical regularity was not spurious—it could not be explained by the geographic separation of democratic states, by alliance patterns, by the suppression of potential conflicts between democracies in the period since World War II by American hegemonic power, or by other economic or geopolitical factors correlated with democracy (Maoz 1997; Russett and Oneal 2001).

The strong consensus that democracies rarely if ever fight each other is not matched by comparable agreement as to how to best explain this pattern, and the democratic peace remains a law-like empirical regularity in search of a theoretical explanation. One explanation is the “democratic culture and norms” model (Owen 1997; Russett and Oneal 2001), which emphasizes that democratic societies are inherently averse to war because of the nature of democratic political cultures and because (as Kant argued) citizens will not vote to send themselves off to war. Another line of argument is that the norms of political competition and peaceful resolution of disputes within democracies are extended to interactions with other democracies but not with non-democracies, in part because of democracies' fears of being exploited by the latter.

A closely related explanation for the dyadic democratic peace is the “institutional constraints model,” which emphasizes the electoral accountability to the public through regular elections and the dispersion of power within the government and checks and balances among governmental institutions. Political leaders are institutionally constrained from undertaking unilateral military action and are required to secure support from the public before authorizing the use of military force. In addition, the press in democratic states ensures a relatively open political debate (compared to that in authoritarian regimes) on issues of war and peace (Russett and Oneal 2001).

Both the democratic norms model and the institutional constraints model have problems explaining the fact that democratic states have frequently fought imperial wars and initiated wars against autocracies who do not pose imminent security threats (Reiter and Stam 2002). Some respond by emphasizing a shared identity among democratic states (Risse-Kappen 1995). Although this argument accounts for democratic hostility against non-democratic states, it fails to explain the fact that democracies occasionally engage in covert action and even low-level wars against each other (James and Mitchell 1995). Another limitation of the institutional model is that it generally assumes that leaders have more hawkish policy preferences than do their publics.

The relative inclination of leaders and publics to advocate the use of military force is an interesting empirical question. That issue has not been resolved, but it is easy to identify a number of cases in which political leaders are pushed into wars they would prefer to avoid by xenophobic publics (American behavior in the Spanish–American War, for example). More frequently, political leaders are tempted to use military force externally for the primary purpose of generating a “rally 'round the flag” effect that increases their domestic political support. This “diversionary theory of war” (Levy 1989) has led to a long line of empirical studies, which have generated mixed results. The gap between the mixed results of quantitative studies and the extensive evidence from historical case studies that the diversionary motivation has been quite important in a limited number of cases is a puzzle that researchers are currently attempting to answer.

Logical and empirical limitations of the democratic norms and institutional models led Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) to construct an alternative institutional explanation of the democratic peace that is more consistent with other dimensions of the war behavior of democracies. The model posits that the primary goal of political leaders is their own political survival. They theorize that political leaders with larger winning coalitions (usually characteristic of democracies) require successful public
policies to retain office, whereas political leaders with smaller winning coalitions (authoritarian states) require the satisfaction of key supporters through the distribution of private goods. The prediction is that democratic leaders’ tenure in office is more dependent upon the outcome of wars than is that of authoritarian leaders. In fact, unsuccessful wars (for the state) are more likely to lead to the removal from power of democratic leaders than of authoritarian leaders (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Consequently, democratic leaders initiate war only if they are confident of winning. In addition, in the wars that they do fight democratic leaders have political incentives to devote enormous resources to ensure a successful outcome. Autocratic leaders, whose political futures are less sensitive to the outcome of war and who need to conserve resources to distribute to their key supporters at home, devote fewer resources to the conduct of the war.

The model provides a nice explanation for the near absence of war between democracies. In any such war each side, understanding the stakes, would invest enormous resources, which would substantially increase the costs of war for both sides. Anticipating this outcome, democratic leaders try particularly hard to find a negotiated settlement that will avoid the costs of fighting. The model also accounts for the frequent war involvement of democratic states and other aspects of their war behavior that standard institutional and cultural models cannot explain.

Schultz (2001) provides still another institutional explanation of the democratic peace, one based on information, signaling, transparency and the office-seeking priorities of partisan political oppositions. Schultz argues that because the organized political opposition does not share the government’s incentives to bluff about the state’s military capabilities and resolve in a crisis, and because of the transparency of the democratic process reinforced by a free press, the behavior of the opposition sends a credible signal to the adversary of the government’s likely resolve in a crisis.

If the opposition does not support the government – either because it believes that the government is bluffing and lacks the capabilities or resolve to implement the threat, or because it believes that the war will be unpopular (or both) – then the government cannot stand firm in a crisis. Observing the opposition’s behavior and understanding its logic, the adversary adopts a harder line in crisis bargaining. Democratic leaders anticipate the adversary’s behavior and avoid getting involved in crises to begin with. If the domestic opposition supports the government, however, leaders are freer to initiate an interstate dispute, knowing that it will be able to stand firm in the face of adversary resistance. The adversary anticipates this and behaves more cautiously.

This logic suggests that democratic states and their adversaries are each less likely to misperceive each other’s resolve in a crisis, and so crises involving democratic states are less likely to escalate to war. Misperceptions are further reduced in crises involving two democracies, though it is not clear whether this reduction is substantial enough to account for the democratic peace. The importance of this argument is enhanced by the fact that misperceptions based on private information and incentives to misrepresent that information play a key role in the processes leading to war.

2.5.2 The Capitalist Peace

A second component of Kant’s “eternal peace” was economic interdependence, and the proposition that trade promotes peace became the cornerstone of nineteenth-century liberal international theory (Silberner [1946] 1972). Liberal theorists propose several interrelated theoretical mechanisms through which trade – or economic interdependence more generally – advances peace, but the primary argument emphasizes the economic opportunity costs of war. Trade generates economic benefits for both parties. The expectation that war will interfere with trade and consequently diminish or eliminate the gains from trade helps to deter political leaders from behavior that might risk war with important trading partners (Polachek 1980; Russel and Oneal 2001). Causal factors at the domestic level reinforce the trade-promotes-peace proposition. Liberals argue that trade enhances prosperity and that prosperity removes domestic conditions conducive to war. Economic stagnation can lead political elites to engage in the diversionary use of force to solidify their domestic political support, and it can also lead to pressures for protectionism that can lead to retaliatory actions that increase hostilities and possibly generate conflict spirals. In addition, prosperity helps to promote a culture of acquisitiveness. As Blaibey (1988, p. 10) summarized nineteenth-century liberal attitudes, “Men were too busy growing rich to have time for war.” Others argue that trade promotes prosperity, prosperity promotes democracy and democracy promotes peace (Weede 1995), a theme that has been developed further by those arguing that the capitalist peace trumps the democratic peace (Gartzke 2007). In addition, trade increases the influence of groups that benefit from trade and who consequently have an interest in maintaining a peaceful environment for trade (Rogowski 1989).

Some have questioned the theoretical logic underlying these arguments for the trade-promotes-peace proposition, and others question their empirical validity. Some realists minimize the causal weight of the deterrent effects of the economic opportunity costs of war, arguing that they are
small relative to the national security interests at stake. Others argue that economic interdependence, especially if it is asymmetrical, creates conditions that tempt one side to exploit its dominant position and coerce the other on security as well as economic issues, increasing the probability of militarized conflict (Hirschman [1945] 1980; Gowa 1994).

Many rationalists emphasize that state-level preferences for peace cannot explain war or peace as a dyadic outcome and criticize the economic opportunity cost model's neglect of a theory of bargaining. They argue that in the absence of more information about expectations regarding the economic benefits of trade, the impact of war on trade, and each side's risk orientation and domestic sensitivity to those costs, the impact of economic interdependence on peace within a dyad is theoretically indeterminate. This has led some to construct a signaling game model of economic interdependence and peace. Trade provides states with additional instruments that they can use to credibly signal commitment during a crisis (by threatening to cut off trade) and do so with less risk of escalation inherent in the use of military threats to signal resolve (Morrow 2003).

Another critique is that liberal scholars have misspecified the relationship between trade and peace. Some argue that the causal arrow is reversed and that it is peace that creates the conditions under which trade can flourish (Blainey 1988). Others claim that the inference that trade promotes peace is spurious, because states with common interests have tendencies to trade with each other and not to fight each other. In this model the commonality of interests is the key causal variable (Gartzke 2007).

The question of the relationship between economic interdependence and peace has also generated a sizeable empirical literature during the last 15 years. The majority view now holds that trade is associated with peace (Russett and Oneal 2001), but some find a positive correlation between trade and war (Barbieri 2002). Others are more cautious and argue that confidence in the capitalist peace needs to be tempered by a recognition that difficult endogeneity problems have yet to be solved, that analyses are sensitive to exactly how interdependence is operationally defined, that some evidence suggests that trade might be associated with a reduction in the frequency of militarized interstate disputes but with an increase in the frequency of war, and that some prominent historical cases (most notably World War I) appear to contradict the trade promotes peace proposition (Schneider, Barbieri and Gleditsch, 2003). For these reasons, current empirical support for the link between economic interdependence must be regarded as provisional, and research needs to focus not only on the aggregate relationship but also on the conditions under which economic interdependence promotes peace.

2.6 INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL THEORIES

Many attempts to explain the initiation of the American war against Iraq in 2003 give considerable weight to the role of US President George W. Bush. This is consistent with a long line of research that traces decisions for war or peace to the belief systems of key decision-makers, the psychological processes through which they acquire information and make decisions, and their personalities and emotional states. Political leaders vary along these dimensions because of political socialization, personality, education, formative experiences, and a range of other factors. These differences lead to variations across leaders in their conceptions of the national interest, the strategies best suited to advancing those interests, the time frame within which goals and threats are evaluated, the nature of the adversary, and other key elements of the state's decision-making calculus. As a result, different political leaders in the same situation will make different decisions. This has led a number of international relations scholars to develop individual-level explanations for foreign policy behavior (George 1969; Holsti and George 1975; Jervis 1976). These explanations are easier to apply to decision-making in individual wars than to generalize about all wars, but the implication is that attempts to construct a general theory of war are limited by the role of individual-level variables that are often difficult to operationalize across cases.

Covering the full range of individual-level theories relevant to war is impossible here, and I restrict my attention to the efforts of some international relations scholars to apply prospect theory to questions of war and peace.

2.6.1 Applications of Prospect Theory

Some international relations theorists, skeptical of the descriptive accuracy of expected utility theory, have explored the capacity of prospect theory to help explain foreign policy decisions on war and peace and other issues. Prospect theory, developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) to account for growing evidence that people systematically depart from the predictions of expected utility theory, posits that people are more sensitive to changes in assets than to levels of assets and that they "frame" choice problems around a reference point. People give more weight to losses from that reference point than to comparable gains beyond it (loss aversion). They are risk-averse in choices among gains and risk-acceptant in choices among losses. Individuals' strong aversion to losses, particularly "dead" (or certain) losses, leads them to accept significant risks in the hope of avoiding loss, even though the expected value of the gamble may be lower.
than the value of the certain loss. In addition, people value what they have more than comparable things not in their possession (the endowment effect), and as a result actual losses hurt more than foregone gains.

Reference dependence, loss aversion and variable risk propensities have important consequences, so how an individual identifies a reference point for a particular choice problem is critical. A change in reference point can lead to a change in preference (preference reversal) even if the values and probabilities associated with possible outcomes remain unchanged. Individuals who must make a decision about alternative medical treatments, for example, respond differently if they are informed that the survival rate of a particular treatment is 90 percent than if they are informed that the mortality rate is 10 percent, although the two are logically equivalent.

Although how individuals identify a reference point is critical, the process is subjective. Most experimental studies of framing, and almost all applications of the theory to international relations, focus on the effects of framing on choice rather than on the sources of framing. As a result, prospect theory remains "a reference-dependent theory without a theory of the reference point" (Levy 1997). Still, we can say a few things. People often (but not always) frame choice problems around the status quo. Sometimes, however, framing is influenced by expectation levels, aspiration levels and social comparisons. In addition, there is evidence that people "renormalize" their reference points after making gains much more quickly than they do after incurring losses. As a result, sunk costs often affect choice.\(^{19}\)

These basic prospect theory propositions lead to a number of predictions about state behavior on issues of war and peace. (1) States take far more risks to defend territory that they would to acquire that territory in the first place. More generally, state leaders take more risks to maintain their international positions, reputations, and domestic political support against potential losses than they do to enhance their positions. (2) Political leaders are punished more by domestic publics for incurring losses than for failing to make gains. (3) After suffering losses, political leaders, rather than adjusting to their losses, tend to take substantial risks to recover those losses.\(^{20}\) The adversary, after making gains, renormalizes its reference point and then takes substantial risks to defend the new status quo. As a result, both parties will take disproportionate risks in future bargaining over the disputed territory. (4) Political leaders are more likely to respond to failing military interventions by upping the ante in an attempt to recover their losses than by withdrawing in an attempt to cut their losses. (5) Attempts to deter an adversary from making gains tend to be more successful than attempts to deter an adversary from recovering losses or to compel him/her to accept losses.\(^{21}\) (6) States can more easily cooperate over the distribution of gains than over the distribution of losses. They will take more risks and bargain harder to minimize their share of the costs than to maximize their share of the gains (Levy 1997; McDermott 1998).

Many of these hypotheses come across as intuitively quite plausible. Validating them empirically in the ill-structured world of international relations, however, is far more difficult than in highly controlled laboratory conditions (Levy 1997). Since important variables like power, reputation, security and identity cannot easily be measured on an interval-level scale, it is often quite difficult to test a prospect theory explanation against an expected utility explanation. In addition, nearly all interesting problems in international relations involve choices under uncertainty, where probabilities are unknown, rather than choices under risk, where probabilities are known and where theory is less developed.\(^{22}\) A major task for international relations researchers is to construct research designs that facilitate the effective testing of prospect theoretic propositions about war and peace.

### 2.7 Conclusion

This admittedly brief survey of some of the leading theories of the causes of interstate war, while reinforcing the view that international relations theorists are as divided as ever as to what the causes of war are and how best to study those causes, suggests some points of convergence. Scholars have moved further away from the view that a single monicausal theory can provide an adequate explanation for war, and toward a growing acceptance of the belief that an adequate understanding of war must incorporate variables at several levels of analysis. They have begun to acknowledge that there may be multiple paths to war, though they have yet to define what that concept means or fully accept its methodological implications. There is also growing agreement that our confidence in theoretical propositions is enhanced if those propositions are subject to tests utilizing several different methodologies, and, in fact, the combination of formal, statistical and historical case-study approaches is becoming increasingly common in the field. This is particularly evident in the study of the democratic peace, but it is true in studies of the capitalist peace, the diversionary theory of war and other theories as well. This growing acceptance of methodological pluralism is one reason for optimism about the feasibility of continued progress in our efforts to understand the causes of war and the conditions for peace.
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NOTES

1. These within-discipline differences may be less pronounced for those like economists that share a common theoretical and methodological paradigm, but much greater for disciplines characterized by ongoing theoretical and particularly meta-theoretical debates.

2. For more detailed reviews of the causes of war see Vasquez (2009) and Levy and Thompson (2010), which also include useful bibliographies. For a good review of the statistical evidence see Bennett and Stam (2004).

3. The dual use of the levels of analysis concept makes it necessary for scholars to be clear about their own usage, and the common failure to do so is a source of confusion in the literature. For further discussion of levels of analysis see Jervis (1976, Chapter 1) and Levy and Thompson (2010, Chapter 1). The level of the dependent variable is sometimes referred to as the “unit” of analysis.

4. On the role of necessary conditions in causal analysis see Goertz and Levy (2007).

5. For an overview of different realist theories of war see Doyle (1997) and Walt (2002).

6. Conflict spirals are often exacerbated by non-rational psychological processes (Jervis 1976).

7. “Inadvertent wars” are inadvertent only in the sense that neither side wants or expects war in the early stage of a crisis. Inadvertent wars almost always begin with a calculated decision for war.

8. Power transition theorists share most realist assumptions but emphasize hierarchy and order rather than anarchy, and they generally do not self-identify as realists. Gilpin (1981) declares himself a realist and advances “hegemonic transition theory,” which is very similar.

9. The apparent contradiction between balance of power theory’s emphasis on the destabilizing effects of hegemonic concentrations of power and power transition theory’s emphasis on their stabilizing effects is only apparent, given the implicit scope conditions of the two theories. Balance of power theories implicitly focus on the historical European system, and power transition theory focuses on power and wealth in the global system (Levy and Thompson 2010). The most war-prone situation is one in which the concentration of power is increasing in the European system and decreasing in the global system (Rasler and Thompson 1994). The periods before the French Revolutionary Wars and World War I are good examples.

10. Scholars and statesmen often confuse a preventive strike, which aims to block a rising adversary from posing a future threat, from a preemptive strike, which anticipates an imminent attack by the adversary and which aims to gain a first-mover advantage.

11. Depending on one’s precise definition of rivalry, 50-75 percent of the interstate wars of the last two centuries have been between rivals.

12. A rational unitary actor is a value-maximizing actor with a consistent and transitive set of preferences.

13. The commitment problem is especially relevant to theories of power transition and preventive war. It has also been applied extensively to ethnic conflicts (Fearon, 1998).


15. The nature of this proposition might suggest that theories of economic interdependence and peace are best classified at the dyadic level. We treat these theories at the state-societal level because many variations have a strong domestic component and because they are closely linked to democratic peace theories.

16. Blaimey (1988) argues that prosperity enlarges the size of “war chests” and removes constraints on decisions for war.

17. On the empirical level, it is not clear how much war inhibits trade. Barbieri and Levy (1999) find that trade often continues between wartime adversaries, though the frequency, magnitude and political and economic consequences of trading with the enemy remains to be established.

18. On time horizons, inter-temporal tradeoffs, and behavioral deviations from standard exponential discounting models, see Streech and Levy (2007).

19. Prospect theory also posits that people generally underestimate probabilities (relative to utilities) but overweight small probabilities, generating a non-linear probability weighting function. Behavioral economists have given some attention to the implications of an expected value calculus.

20. By substantial (or disproportionate or excessive) risks, I mean relative to the predictions of an expected value calculus.

21. This is a slight reformation of Schelling’s (1966) observation that deterrence is easier than compellence.

22. One thing we do know, however, is that people are more averse to uncertainty than to risk. They prefer a choice involving a known probability p than one involving a probability distribution with a mean of p (Camerer 1995, p. 646). In terms of Donald Rumsfeld’s “famous distinction, people are more risk averse in response to ‘unknown unknowns’ than they are to ‘known unknowns.’

REFERENCES


Theories and causes of war


