International Conflict: Explaining Interstate War

Explaining Conflict between States: Analyzing Wholes and Parts

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Multilevel Explanations of War: Using Caution When Comparing Levels of Analysis

Summary

Key Terms
War is a pervasive part of global politics and has been the central topic of study for scholars of international relations. It has been suggested that since 3600 B.C.E., there have been only 292 years without war, and each decade since 1816 has averaged twenty-two wars.\(^1\) It is estimated that more than 150 million people have died from war-related deaths since 3000 B.C.E.\(^2\) As Figure 6.1 graphically indicates, the destruction of war has worsened across time. “Each of the centuries prior to the sixteenth accounted for less than 1 percent of all war deaths. In fact all of them added together accounted for little more than 4 percent of these deaths, while almost 96 percent of war deaths were estimated to occur in the modern period of history, 1500–2000.”\(^3\) “Seventy-three percent of all war-related deaths since 3000 B.C.E. have occurred in the twentieth century A.D.”\(^4\) Civilian deaths have been a large part of the increase in war deaths. According to the United Nations, “In recent decades, the proportion of civilian casualties in armed conflicts has increased dramatically and is now estimated at more than 90 percent. About half the victims are children.” Indeed, the UN estimates that more than 2 million children have died from armed conflict in the last decade.\(^5\)

Most of the wars throughout history have occurred in the past two centuries. “Since the end of World War II, 236 conflicts have been active in 150 locations, including 124 conflicts in 80 locations after 1988.”\(^6\) Indeed, “the 1990s will likely win the dubious distinction of being one of the two most war-prone decades [along with the 1970s] since the Congress of Vienna.”\(^7\)
About the only positive trends in warfare to report are that wars have generally become shorter since 1945, the frequency of wars between great powers has declined, and “the overall trend since the early 1990s has been that of a marked, steep decline. However, this decline has not been constant: The number of conflicts increased marginally in 1996, 1999, and again in 2004.”

The year 2007 saw the fewest number of wars since 1957. Still, one of the most recent wars, between Russia and Georgia in 2008, killed hundreds, created many refugees, and created friction between Russia and the United States, even if it only lasted a few days.

International conflict can generally be divided into two categories: **interstate wars** (wars between states) and **internal wars** (civil wars within states). In this chapter, we take a look at the causes of interstate wars. In the next chapter, we will consider ethnic conflicts as one type of internal war, as well as transnational terrorism, another source of international violence. We will use three wars—World War I, World War II, and the Cold War—as applications of the various causes of interstate war. We organize our discussion of the complexities of war by classifying causes at different levels of analysis.
Explaining Conflict between States: Analyzing Wholes and Parts

Some of the most vigorous and mystifying debates over how best to analyze politics focus on the relationship between entire social systems and their components. Some analysts believe passionately that all valid explanations of political behavior must ultimately deal with individuals. These individualists “insist that no social laws operate independently of human understanding; all explanations can be reduced to the level of the individual and couched in terms of the nature and intentions of these actors.” The alternative viewpoint is that explanations of human behavior, and of problems such as war, must focus not on individuals or human nature but on the social structures, or social systems, that emerge as people interact with each other.

The various causes of wars that have been proposed over the centuries have been cast in this debate over the relationship between structures and their components and can be categorized into levels of analysis. Level of analysis concerns whether one focuses “upon the parts or upon the whole, upon the components, or upon the system.” That is, the level of an analysis is determined by the type of social entity (individual states, for example, or the whole international system) whose behavior or operation the analyst seeks to explain. In other words, levels of analysis have to do with what kinds of questions are posed. One can ask, for example, why some states are more war prone than other states or why individual states are more war prone at some times than at other times. These questions pertain to the national level of analysis. Or one can ask why the international system was less war prone in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth century. Are bipolar international systems more or less war prone than multipolar systems? These questions pertain to the international system level of analysis.

Levels of analysis have to do not only with the types of questions that are asked but also with the answers that are given—in other words, with the type of factors relied on to explain foreign policy decisions or political events. Can war be attributed, for example, to the type of state, certain relationships between states, or the characteristics of the international system? In this way, the level of analysis deals not only with which units one asks questions about but also with which units or social entities should be observed to find out why actors behave as they do.

For example, one school of thought suggests, following the individualist logic, that understanding international war is not difficult: Wars occur because human beings are evil. Our miseries are ineluctably the product of our natures. The root of all evil lies with humans, and thus we are ourselves the root of the specific evil of war. Yet human evil is not a very satisfactory answer for a number of reasons. If people were more
consistently self-centered and lacking in altruism, international wars might occur considerably less often than they actually do. In a more evil world, nobody could be found to engage in that brave, self-sacrificing behavior that soldiers characteristically exhibit on the battlefield, usually for very little in terms of personal gain and often at the cost of their lives. War might be at least as much a function of humankind’s virtues as of its vices. Even more important from a theoretical viewpoint, humankind’s propensity for evil does not vary, at least not much, and only then over eons. Logically, this means that the evil nature of human beings cannot account for variations in international war over time and across space. For example, the international system was relatively peaceful in 1910 but engulfed in war in 1914. What accounts for this difference in the war proneness of the system in those two different years? Surely humankind was not significantly more or less evil in 1910 than in 1914, so the passage of time could not account for the onset of the First World War (or any other war).

Those who have attempted to explain international conflict focus on other explanations. Rather than explaining war in terms of all humans, some theories of war causation point to particular humans: leaders who are charged with making the decision of whether their state goes to war. Others focus on types of states: states with capitalist economies or states with little internal legitimacy, for example. One of the most persistent versions of this idea asserts that dictatorships are bad states. Still others focus on the war proneness of pairs of states. They ask questions such as, Are pairs of democracies less war prone than pairs of nondemocracies? Are certain pairs of states destined to be military rivals? These questions that focus on the characteristics of dyads of states reside at the dyadic level of analysis.

According to structuralists, the blame for war should be placed not on the internal structure of some states (be they dictatorships or capitalistic) or on relationships between certain types of states, but on the structure of the international system in which all states and dyads must operate. We now turn to the various causes of war between states proposed at the structural, state, dyadic, and decision-making levels of analysis.

**Systemic Explanations of Interstate War**

The system, or structural, level of analysis points to characteristics of the international system as the root of war between states. Systemic explanations of war posit that international structures can create consequences that are not intended by any of their constituent actors. In other words, states may go to war because of the nature of the international system, not because they themselves are warlike. International structures as an explanation of war are particularly important in realism and liberalism (see Chapter 1 for the general descriptions of these theories and definitions of their key concepts).
Anarchy

For realism, the primary characteristic of the international system is anarchy. Because the system is anarchic—there is no overarching government—each state must look out for itself or risk losing out in the war of “all against all.” In such a system, “it is not only that a state, becoming too fond of peace, may thereby perish; but also that the seeming somnolence of one state may invite a war of aggression that a more aggressive pose by the peace-loving state might have avoided altogether.”  

Because, given the nature of the international system, even peace-loving states need to strike aggressive poses for their own protection, all states are aggressive (or strive to appear so). What results is the **security dilemma**. When one state takes an aggressive action purely for defensive reasons to increase its security, this automatically decreases the security of other states, which then must also undertake aggressive actions for defensive reasons. In such a situation, no state is acting with intentional hostility, but because of the anarchic structure of the international system, one must assume the worst intentions and react accordingly. Under these conditions, wars are bound to break out periodically, and it is the anarchic structure of the international system that is the root cause of those wars. Anarchy, of course, cannot explain why one war occurs while another is averted, since all states face the same anarchic condition, but it does, according to realists, explain the pervasiveness of war generally.

Distribution of Power

In addition to anarchy, realists point to the distribution of power in the international system as another structure-level factor that affects the likelihood of war between states. The distribution of power in the international system can be described in terms of **polarity**—the number of independent power centers, or poles, in the world. If there are several powers that are roughly equal in power, the system is said to be multipolar. If most of the power in the international system is divided between two states, the system is bipolar. If one state holds a preponderance of power, the international system is unipolar, or **hegemonic**. As discussed in Chapter 4, a state’s power can be derived from a variety of types of sources and measured in a variety of ways. For realists, however, the determination of power in the international system is largely based on military capabilities.

Although realists agree that the distribution of power is an important factor in the likelihood of war in the international system, they do not agree on which type of system is likely to be most conflictual. For some, multipolar systems, like the one that operated in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, are the most stable and least likely to produce major power wars. This particular multipolar system is known as the classical *balance-of-power* system. The most basic rule that was
consciously adhered to by culturally homogeneous European elites dedicated to the preservation of the system was that power ought to be distributed throughout the community of states in such a way that no single state would ever become strong enough to dominate all the rest.16

Preserving such a distribution of power meant first that the states supporting the classical balance of power needed to be watching and evaluating one another constantly. Thus, exchanging ambassadors became standard practice. The key type of information on which ambassadors (and spies) concentrated had to do with the power of the other states in the system. Obviously, if the independence of states was to be ensured by preventing any single state in the system from becoming powerful enough to dominate it, each state needed to monitor continually the power of others that threatened to become dominating, as well as the power of those states seeking to counterbalance that threat. States could help themselves by increasing their own power through internal means by, for example, increasing military budgets or the size of their armies, or by augmenting industrial capacity and encouraging population growth. But the most rapid and flexible means of manipulating power within the system of the classical balance of power was the formation of alliances. To maintain the balance of power required flexibility of alliances. Every member of the international system had to be prepared to cooperate with any other member, as circumstances demanded. Ultimately, if one state, or coalition of states, threatened the entire system, a grand alliance involving all the rest could be formed, preserving the equilibrium and the independence of each member state.17

Classical balance-of-power theorists also commonly assumed that it was important for one state, the so-called “holder of the balance,” to keep a watchful eye on the rest of the system and to step in at the appropriate moment to ally with a weaker coalition about to be crushed by a too-powerful state or coalition. In Europe, Great Britain usually played the role of holder of the balance. Finally, players in this game of classical balance of power typically felt it was important to be moderate in victory; losers of wars, at least on most occasions, would not be humiliated or eliminated. In Europe, “wars . . . were ended by treaties which more often than not, represented a compromise, and in their forms studiously respected the dignity of the defeated party.”18

Some realists point to this era of classical balance of power in Europe as a notable success and an example of a stable multipolar system. In the period from 1648 to 1792, there were generally no great territorial changes in continental Europe.19 For a system whose basic purpose was the preservation of the states within it, this period of 144 years with virtually no important changes in boundaries should not pass unnoticed. Perhaps even more important was the absence of system-shattering wars throughout the nineteenth century [after 1815]. From the viewpoint of the twentieth century, with its two world wars, the nineteenth century looks almost idyllic, even though there were several rather extensive conflicts, especially in the latter half.20
Many argue that the relative peace during the Concert of Europe was due to the balance of power in a multipolar system. Conflict is much more likely in a bipolar system, the argument goes, in which there are only two really important actors. If those two disagree on every important issue, and virtually every other state in the system lines up with one of the two poles, conflict within the international system is bound to be exacerbated. But if there are several important actors in the system, no single issue will be likely to divide the system into two groups of states unremittingly hostile to each other, because some states on one side of one issue will agree with a number of states on the opposing side when another issue arises. Advocates of multipolarity also argue that states must devote considerable attention to one another before they become hostile enough to start a war. In a bipolar system, this is likely to happen. In a multipolar system, no state can devote full energy to concentrating on the dastardly deeds of any other single state, because every state must also worry about several other potential enemies.21

Others disagree, arguing that a bipolar international system is more stable and a multipolar system more warlike—for example:

In a world of three or more powers the possibility of making and breaking alliances exists. . . . Flexibility of alignment then makes for rigidity of national strategies: a state’s strategy must satisfy its partner lest that partner defect from the alliance. . . . The alliance diplomacy of Europe in the years before the First World War is rich in examples of this. Because the defection or defeat of a major state would have shaken the balance of power, each state was constrained to adjust its strategy, and the deployment of its forces to the aims and fears of its partners.22

In short, the multipolar system of the early 1900s may have contributed to the First World War because the major powers were inflexible in defense of their allies. The bipolar system of the Cold War, in contrast, was relatively stable following the Second World War because the superpowers could afford to lose allies (they both “lost” China, for example) without feeling that a war was necessary to prevent such a loss.

The alert reader might have noticed that this point about the superior stability of bipolarity is made with the benefit of a type of levels-of-analysis switch. It is true that if we focus on the relationship among states, the international system before the First World War was multipolar. But if we focus instead on the relationship between coalitions of states, then it was bipolar, with two major alliances confronting each other. Thus, the First World War can be attributed to bipolarity or multipolarity, depending on which kind of social entity or actor one chooses to concentrate on.

Consider Table 6.1, which shows two imaginary international systems, with the states assigned power scores similar to those discussed in Chapter 4. In System 1, power is very unevenly distributed. State A possesses 80 percent of the military-industrial capabilities. The occurrence
of war in such a system would seem to indicate that power disparity is likely to lead to war. But what if the war breaks out between States B and D, which are evenly matched in power, in spite of the unequal distribution of power in the entire system?

In that situation, we can see that the co-occurrence of high power concentration and war in the system presents a misleading picture of the relationship between the distribution of power within the system and the war proneness of states. In System 2, in a similar fashion, the co-occurrence of low power concentration and war in the system creates the misleading impression that equality between states leads to war, when in fact the opponents in the war were two very unequally matched coalitions of states.

At issue here is whether balance contributes to peace. If states are unlikely to go to war unless they have a good chance of winning, a balance of power can be dangerous. Others counter that, on the contrary, as long as a balance is maintained, no state will feel confident that it can win a war, and so all states will be reluctant to start one.23 Both arguments are reasonable, and researchers have attempted to find evidence to support them. One study collected information on the power of all the major powers in the international system from 1820 to 1965 and assessed the extent to which power or military-industrial capability was unequally distributed at five-year intervals.24 The measure of concentration was used to predict the amount of war experienced by the major powers in the five-year

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**TABLE 6.1**

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<th>Relationship Between (1) Equality and Disparity in Power and (2) the Incidence of War in Imaginary International Systems</th>
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<td><strong>System 2: Power Concentration Is Low</strong></td>
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periods following each observation. This study found that, generally, the impact of the distribution of power in the international system on the war proneness of the system is minimal, although this was not true across different time periods. In the nineteenth century but not in the twentieth, greater amounts of war were more likely when power concentration was high; that is, when the distribution of power was unequal.

It is possible that balance worked at preventing major wars in the nineteenth century but not in the twentieth. The leaders of the pre–First World War, European-dominated system shared not only a conscious commitment to the balance of power but also a certain amount of cultural homogeneity. “Europe was an in-group of states which excluded non-European countries. . . . [This] homogeneity was a necessary condition of the balance-of-power system.”

But after the First World War, and particularly after the Second World War, the globe came to be dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, joined eventually by such important non-European states as China and Japan. The elites in these states had distinct worldviews, reinforced (especially in the cases of the United States and the Soviet Union) by opposing ideological principles to which they zealously adhered. Also, in the nineteenth century, there was a relative lack of democratic pressure on foreign policy elites, which [along with the cultural homogeneity] allowed them to pursue flexible balance-of-power policies unencumbered by the necessity to explain them to the people. That democratic pressure, combined with the ideological fervor of the Cold War, robbed [in theory, anyway] the elites in the major powers of the contemporary international system of the ability to arrange and rearrange alliances as necessary to maintain the balance-of-power system. So, in light of all these differences between the twentieth-century system and that of Europe before the First World War, it is not surprising that when the authors of this study analyzed the nineteenth and twentieth centuries separately, they found different relationships.

One recent study, however, found support for the notion that power imbalance is related to conflict across time: “Out of all the arguments we look at, the most powerful predictors of war are primarily associated with the concentration of power in the international system.” This is a particularly relevant finding for global politics today. By most measures, power in the international system is highly concentrated, with the United States in a preeminent position. Indeed, according to one analyst, the post–Cold War world became America’s “unipolar moment.” What should we expect in a unipolar system in which a hegemonic state has a preponderance of power? In this situation, too, realists agree that such a distribution of power is an important systemic factor and argue that a high imbalance of power produces stability. States are unlikely to go to war unless they have a good chance of winning, and this opportunity is unlikely to arise unless there is relative equality, that is, a balance of power between the prospective opponents. Unipolar systems lack such a balance and therefore are more stable. This idea is known as
hegemonic stability theory A very powerful hegemon in a sense counters the anarchy in the international system in that it can play the role of an overarching authority: It can enforce rules.

Is this the role the United States is playing today? Some argue that despite the relative preponderance of power that the United States holds, the system is not completely unipolar. According to Samuel Huntington,

> There is now only one superpower. But that does not mean that the world is unipolar. A unipolar system would have one superpower, no significant major powers, and many minor powers... Contemporary international politics... is instead a strange hybrid, a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers. The settlement of key international issues requires action by the single superpower but always with some combination of other major states; the single superpower can, however, veto action on key issues by combinations of other states.

While the major powers in today’s international system cannot seriously challenge the United States, Huntington argues, they would prefer a multilateral system and resent the unconstrained unilateralism of the United States. Josef Joffe agrees on the point that recent U.S. foreign policies have alienated much of the rest of the world. And although many states see the benefits that come with the United States’ preeminent position in the world, there is more tension between the United States and the rest of the world than some variants of hegemonic stability theory would expect.

Even if the United States is in a unipolar position, realists warn that unipolar systems are eventually inherently unstable and dangerous. Hegemons do not last. Either they spread their resources too thin to maintain their hegemonic power, or the capabilities that contribute to power transform, allowing new states to catch up to the hegemon’s level. According to power transition theory, conflicts are more likely when power transitions are underway. At the core of such shifts are simultaneous increases in productivity linked to industrialization, increased manpower due to demographic growth, and an increase in the capacity of political elites to mobilize natural resources. Sudden changes in national capabilities upset the previous distribution of power. Specifically, major wars are asserted to be most likely when the challenger catches up to the dominant state, impelling a kind of “rear-end” collision.

Closing in on the hegemon, the challenging state may attack in a bid for power. Seeing a rising challenger, the hegemon may initiate a preemptive war. Thus, while unipolar systems can be quite stable for a long time, they have a built-in dynamic for major war. These ideas certainly hold implications for conflict and cooperation today and in the near future. Power transition theorists point to rising Chinese power and U.S.-Sino relations.

Should China surpass the United States as the world’s most powerful state while having no substantial demands for change...
to the international system’s organizing principles, power transition theory postulates that catastrophic war likely will be averted. In this case, China will emerge as a “satisfied” preeminent power, much as did the United States when the mantle of international leadership passed from the British. In contrast, should China challenge the United States in the mid twenty-first century, holding deep-seated grievances against the West, its culture, and its imposed international rules and norms, then the probability of war rises dramatically.37

Interdependence

While realism focuses on anarchy and the distribution of power as the most important characteristics of the international system, liberalism focuses on how interdependent the system is. How would the degree of complex interdependence affect the likelihood of war? Liberalism argues that multiple channels across states facilitated by international organizations, transnational links among nonstate actors, and the varied non-military issues in which states and other actors have interests means that war becomes more costly and states are constrained from using war as a policy tool.38 In relationships that are characterized by a high degree of interdependence, the effects of an anarchical system that realists would expect are simply not seen.

Particularly among industrialized, pluralist countries, the perceived margin of safety has widened: Fears of attack in general have declined, and fears of attacks by one another are virtually nonexistent. . . . Canada’s last war plans for fighting the United States were abandoned half a century ago. Britain and Germany no longer feel threatened by each other. Intense relationships of mutual influence exist between these countries, but in most of them force is irrelevant or unimportant as an instrument of policy.39

Even in relationships in which force might be contemplated, it is not as effective as it once was, according to liberalism, because of changes in the international system:

The limited usefulness of conventional force to control socially mobilized populations has been shown by the United States failure in Vietnam as well as by the rapid decline of colonialism in Africa. Furthermore, employing force on one issue against an independent state with which one has a variety of relationships is likely to rupture mutually profitable relations on other issues. In other words, the use of force often has costly effects on nonsecurity goals. And finally, in Western democracies, popular opposition to prolonged military conflicts is very high.40
Thus, interdependence, especially when combined with democratic governments, is a system-level factor affecting war, according to liberalism.41

Systemic Explanations of Three Wars

Various systemic-level explanations have been advanced to explain the three major conflicts of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War (for a review of the historical background and major events of these conflicts, refer to Chapters 2 and 3).

The systemic-level explanations of World War I have already been alluded to. Realists point to the distribution of power as a major cause of the war, although they disagree on the nature of that distribution. Those who see the system as multipolar point to the dangers of alliances like those operating in the classic balance-of-power system. The system worked well as long as Britain was dominant, but when Germany's power increased and threatened the multipolar balance, Britain had to abandon its role as balancer and form an alliance with France and then Russia [the Triple Entente] against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy [the Triple Alliance]. This rigidity in alliances and “the keen competition between the two camps meant that although any country could commit its associates, no one country on either side could exercise control. If Austria-Hungary marched, Germany had to follow; it could not be left alone in Central Europe. If France marched, Russia had to follow; a defeat by Germany would be a defeat for Russia.”42 Thus, the argument goes, the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia was transformed into a major conflagration by the complex interlocking system of alliances built up by the major powers in this multipolar distribution of power. Others contend that World War I points to the dangers of bipolarity. When the two coalitions formed, they argue, the system ceased to be multipolar. Whether the system was bipolar or multipolar, realists agree that the anarchic nature of the international system and the rise of German power that upset the distribution of power were key system-level factors that contributed to World War I.

The system-level explanation of World War II also features the distribution of power. After World War I, no meaningful balance of power emerged. In particular, World War I had failed to resolve the problem of Germany as a rising power. The postwar settlements had weakened Germany, and without a strong, central power on the continent, a balance could not be maintained. Furthermore, when Germany began to regain its power, there was no check against it. Britain had weakened and could no longer play the balancer role to keep the peace, and the two emerging world powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, withdrew from European international politics for domestic political reasons. Liberals also offer a system-level explanation for World War II, focusing on interdependence. Although the economies of the major powers were fairly integrated by the 1920s, the economic depression that began in
the United States with the 1929 stock market crash led many countries to cut their economic ties to each other. Indeed, a series of protectionist policies made the world less interdependent by the mid-1930s. Isolated economies arguably exacerbated the effects of the worldwide depression. Not only did the poor economic conditions in Germany play a key role in Hitler’s rise to power, but the lack of connections between countries made war a less costly decision for all. Thus, many countries pursued more interdependence between countries, especially Germany and France, after World War II as a way to bind the fates of countries together, thus changing the nature of the international system in an effort to avoid war.

The Cold War is used in system-level explanations to point out the inevitability of competition in a bipolar world and the stability that a bipolar distribution of power can create. At the end of World War II, the only remaining state with any considerable power was the United States. The British, French, and Germans were exhausted by the two world wars and were clearly not going to be the world powers they once were. The Soviet Union was also devastated by its participation in World War II, but compared to the other European states, it had the size and resources necessary to make a bid for superpower status. By 1949, with the Soviet Union’s test of its first atomic weapon, the world had transformed into a bipolar system. The systemic explanation for the onset of the Cold War argues that a high level of hostility was inevitable in such a system. Like two big bullies on the same block, the two superpowers were destined to compete against each other in world politics. The competition for territory, alliances, and allegiances had all the trappings of a war, although the two main belligerents never directly fought each other. This remarkable outcome, often referred to as “the long peace,” has also been attributed to the bipolar nature of the Cold War. The overwhelming power that divided the world into two blocs, the argument goes, combined with the specter of nuclear war, made direct conflict too costly, perhaps even unthinkable. Thus, bipolarity, it is said, explains both the rise of the Cold War and the sustenance of “the long peace.”

State- and Dyadic-Level Explanations of Wars

Just as some people may be more accident prone than others, some types of states may be more war prone than others. In other words, certain characteristics of states may make them more likely to become involved in wars. In particular, the nature of a state’s economy, the domestic political opposition that a state faces, and the nature of its political system are all featured in prominent state-level explanations of war. When we consider the interaction of the characteristics of two states, we move to the dyadic level for explaining war. Democratic dyads, or pairs of states with democratic governments, seem to be exceptionally capable at avoiding wars.
Type of Economy

The traditional Marxist theory of war argues that states with capitalist economies will be inherently war prone.\textsuperscript{44} First, the argument goes, capitalist states often seek to address economic problems that occur at home within their own economy—problems such as overproduction, surplus capital, and unequal distribution of wealth—by engaging in imperialism. Conquering other lands secures new markets, cheap labor, and access to raw materials. Second, while imperialism itself involves military intervention, Marxists expect additional military conflict between capitalist states.

In a world of many capitalist countries imperialism means economic competition between rival states. Each state strives to gain exclusive control over markets, raw materials, sources of cheap labor, naval bases, and investment opportunities. At some point, these can be gained only at the expense of other capitalist states. Economic conflict eventually leads to military conflict.\textsuperscript{45}

Lenin himself argued in his book \textit{Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism}, written in 1916,\textsuperscript{46} that imperialism and eventual military conflict among capitalist states was the inevitable destiny of capitalist states.

There have been many criticisms of this Marxist-Leninist theory of war. One group of arguments focuses on the Marxist assumptions for why capitalist states must engage in imperialism, pointing out, for example, that not all capitalist states were experiencing economic problems at home when they engaged in imperialism and that they often did not secure the benefits of imperialism. Another group of criticisms focuses on the historical record, pointing out that not all capitalist states have engaged in imperialism, that not all conflicts between capitalist states ended in war, that war has been around longer than capitalist economic systems, that wars between capitalist states were not necessarily fought for economic reasons, and that states with socialist or centrally planned economies have often been engaged in conflict, even with each other. To be even-handed, we should entertain the idea that states with centrally planned economies may be more warlike since they are often isolated economically and thus war will not hurt their economy as much as war can dampen profits for capitalist states. Yet this general proposition also fails on historical grounds. States with both types of economies have been involved in major military conflicts.

Even if we accept the criticisms of these theories that capitalist or centrally planned states are inherently more war prone than the other, we are not obliged to reject the idea that economic conditions or forces may indeed provide an explanation for some wars. Conquering others’ resources in order to address economic problems may indeed be a major motivation for some states to initiate wars. There is more evidence, however, that good economic conditions may be related to war because that is when states can afford military adventures. War also benefits the
economic interests of some groups in a society. Weapons makers, for example, have been accused of advocating high levels of defense spending and even war to turn a profit. Furthermore, the proposition of a military-industrial complex (discussed in Chapter 5) focuses on the relationship among the military, the bureaucracy, and the defense industry as a coalition of economic and political interests that benefit from international conflict. Such coalitions of economic and bureaucratic groups can often logroll their narrow interests to promote over-expansion and empire building, even to the detriment of the country.47

Types of Governments and Domestic Opposition

In addition to the systemic-level characteristic of interdependence, liberal explanations of international conflict include the type of political system that states have. Specifically, liberalism expects states with democratic systems to be less war prone than nondemocratic states because of the constraints that are built in to democratic structures and the cultural values of peaceful resolution of conflicts that are related to democratic processes.48 As discussed in Chapter 5, there is substantial criticism of these reasons behind the liberal expectation of peace-loving democracies, and the evidence supporting this position has been more controversial.

At the heart of the notion that political systems play a role in state choices for war is the presence of domestic opposition. Democracies, liberals argue, are supposedly constrained from choosing war because of an opposition that sees war as violating democratic cultural values or jeopardizing economic benefits that come from peaceful trading relations. Leaders of democratic states can be held accountable through elections if their war policies create significant domestic opposition. Leaders in nondemocratic states can also face opposition to aggressive policies and can sometimes be held accountable by means other than elections, as discussed in Chapter 5 (see the section “What Is the Role of Military and Political Opposition Groups in Nondemocracies?”). Furthermore, states with serious domestic opposition may not be able to mobilize enough of the population and resources to wage war. All of these ideas point to the extent and nature of domestic political opposition as a state-level factor and to the way opposition at home can constrain states from military adventures abroad.49

Internal opposition may also push states into going to war. As discussed in Chapter 5 (see the section “What Effects Does Political Opposition Have on Foreign Policy?”), leaders of democracies and nondemocracies may use external conflict to placate domestic opponents or divert attention away from internal conflict. Known as the diversionary, or scapegoat, theory of war, it is believed that when states are beset with deteriorating economic conditions, ethnic divisions, increasing political opposition, or civil strife and rebellion, their leaders will seek to end
these internal woes by initiating conflict with an external foe. Presumably, war is undertaken in the belief that it will rally the masses around the globe in the face of a “foreign threat,” and that a healthy dose of patriotism is the best medicine for the internal problems facing the government. The external foe, then, becomes a scapegoat. Internal problems are either blamed (unjustly) on the external opponent and victory over the scapegoat is touted as essential to reverse the wretched internal situation, or the war is simply used by the government to divert the attention of citizens from the internal situation.50

While there is some evidence that questions a general relationship between the level of internal conflict and the level of external conflict for all states, the diversionary and scapegoat propositions persist and are quite convincing for particular conflicts, including the three great conflicts in the early part of the twentieth century.51

Democratic Dyads

Although democratic states are just as likely to go to war as nondemocratic states, research suggests that democratic states are less likely to become involved in wars against each other. The evidence for the democratic peace proposition—that democratic states will not war against each other—is, on the surface at least, convincing and simple. “Even though liberal states have become involved in numerous wars with nonliberal states, constitutionally secure states have yet to engage in war with each other.”52 In other words, these democratic dyads are conflict free. One evaluation of the proposition that democratic states do not fight international wars against each other concludes that “the evidence is conclusive that . . . there is one aspect of the military behavior of democratic states . . . that is clearly distinguished from that of nondemocratic states: . . . democratic states do not fight each other.”53 Perhaps the most profound implication of the democratic peace proposition is that a world full of democratic states would be substantially less prone to war. “The increasing number of liberal states announces the possibility of global peace this side of the grave or world conquest.”54 Other implications of the democratic peace proposition are debated in the Policy Choices box on whether states should intervene in other states to promote democratization.

It is true, of course, that the validity of this proposition is heavily dependent on the definitions of democracy and war that one adopts. It is easy to discredit the idea by adopting very broad definitions; it would be equally easy to make the proposition invulnerable to contrary evidence, but also empirically meaningless, by adopting a definition of democracy that is so strict as to eliminate virtually every state that has ever existed. Yet,

- if democracy is defined as a type of political system in which the identities of the leaders of the executive branch and the
ISSUE: Given the findings from research that democratic dyads are not likely to fight each other, many scholars and policymakers have advocated that the promotion of democracy should be a major foreign policy goal of states and is in the interests of the international community at large. At times, advocates argue that intervention in states’ affairs, including military intervention, is necessary to bring about democratization and encourage long-term peaceful relations with other democracies. This was, for example, one of the justifications offered for military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003.

Option #1: States should actively intervene and support democratization in other states.

Arguments: (a) Scientific evidence and historical experiences suggest that democracies rarely fight each other. A more democratic world would be a more secure, peaceful world. (b) Democratization is a moral imperative as it enhances basic fundamental human rights and political freedom. (c) Military intervention is necessary when autocratic leaders prevent reform and democratic changes.

Counterarguments: (a) It is not yet clear what causes peace between democracies and whether this finding will continue to hold true in the future, with many more democratic states in the world. Furthermore, democratic states are still as conflictual as nondemocratic states. (b) Undemocratic regimes are only one source of human rights violations. Addressing root causes such as poverty will do more to improve people’s lives than will regime change. (c) Military intervention itself is a threat to security and often produces long-lasting, destabilizing consequences. Other means, such as economic and political sanctions, can be effective and allow for internal, rather than imposed democratization.

Option #2: Democratization should not be a primary foreign policy goal of states.

Arguments: (a) Countries in transition may be particularly susceptible to internal and external conflict. (b) Imposed democracies usually fail, sometimes leading to more repressive regimes. Indigenous democracy is lasting democracy. (c) Militant democracies bent on enforcing their will around the world may actually risk becoming less free and democratic. Wartime environments often stifle dissent and the exercise of basic political freedoms.

Counterarguments: (a) Transitions, even if difficult and bloody, are ultimately more desirable than organized conflict between well-armed belligerent states, as occurs between nondemocratic dyads. (b) Post-World War II Germany and Japan are examples of how the imposition of democracy can be quite successful, with enough political will and international pressure. (c) Stifling political freedoms is neither necessary nor permanent. Any infringement of liberties caused by military actions abroad will ultimately be corrected.
established by historical precedent, then . . . none of those [controversial] cases is appropriately categorized as an international war between democratic states.\textsuperscript{55}

The absence of wars between democratic states is interesting, but it is not conclusive enough to prove that democratic states are unusually peaceful in their relationships with one another because they are democratic. It may be that something else (that is, not the nature of the democratic political system) is contributing to peace. Some critics argue that although democracy may correlate with peace, this is largely because peaceful conditions produce democratic states rather than the other way around.\textsuperscript{56} Other critics focus on the number of opportunities that all states have had to fight wars against each other. In recent years, there have been about 190 states in the global political system. This means that there are roughly 17,955 pairs of states in the system (190 times 189 divided by 2). In earlier years, when the number of states was lower (about 50), the number of pairs of states was of course also lower, but it was still quite large. And the number of democratic states has (until quite recently, at least) been relatively small, so that the proportion of pairs made up of democratic states has always been quite small. In short, this means that the fact that democratic states have not fought each other in war may not be as remarkable as it seems at first, because the mathematical probability that they would do so is not very large. The lack of wars between democratic states may in fact be no more remarkable than the absence of wars over the same period between two states whose names both begin with the letter Z. This has been one of the more prominent criticisms of the democratic peace proposition.\textsuperscript{57} Given the recent expansion of democratic states, however, for at least the last couple of decades, the statistical chances for two democratic states to get involved in wars with each other have not been trivial.

Others argue that the reason that war between democracies has not occurred may be that modern democratic states are relatively wealthy, that they trade a lot with each other, that they have been unified by common interests created by the threat of a common enemy (the Communist states),\textsuperscript{58} or that all democratic states have been under the influence of U.S. hegemony. But European states, for example, have been among the wealthiest and most trade oriented in the world for most of this century, and that did not, before they turned uniformly democratic, prevent them from continually fighting wars against one another. In general, a review of wars in the past century and a half reveals that “of the ten bloodiest interstate wars, every one of them grew out of conflicts between countries that either directly adjoined one another, or were involved actively in trade with one another.”\textsuperscript{59} In terms of those criteria, Europe should still be a war-prone continent, but for some reason it clearly is not. In addition, some recent research indicates that under certain conditions, international trade can exacerbate, rather than reduce, conflict.\textsuperscript{60}
If having a common enemy is a key to peace, why did the opposition of capitalist states, with their many anti-Communist alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), not prevent wars (and other lower-level military conflicts) among socialist states, such as those between the Soviet Union and Hungary; Czechoslovakia, China, and Afghanistan; China and Vietnam; and Vietnam and Cambodia? Meanwhile, relationships among states on the U.S. side of the Cold War were not always entirely tranquil either. El Salvador fought a war against Honduras in 1969, Turkey and Greece became involved in a war over Cyprus in 1974, and Great Britain fought with Argentina over the Falkland (or Malvinas) Islands in 1982. It is no accident, from the point of view of democratic peace theorists, that all of these wars on the non-Communist side of the Cold War involved at least one undemocratic state, and that clearly common viewpoints on the Cold War involved at least one undemocratic state, and that clearly common viewpoints on the Cold War were no guarantee of peaceful relationships.61

In recent years, there has been an impressive accumulation of evidence supporting the idea that democratic states avoid wars with each other because they are democratic, not because of these other factors.62 Statistical analyses of data on regime types and the incidence of wars between states, from 1816 to the modern era, suggest that this situation is unlikely to have occurred by chance or to be spurious, that is, brought about by some third factor.63 In addition, sweeping historical studies of republics, for example, in ancient Greece, among Italian city-states, and among the cantons of historical Switzerland,64 ethnographic and anthropological studies of territorially based societies,65 and experiments in social-psychological laboratories66 all support the democratic peace proposition.

What remains a puzzle is why democracies do not fight each other, especially if they are as war prone as nondemocratic states. To address this puzzle, analysts have primarily focused on two possible theoretical explanations.67 One is a cultural explanation emphasizing that decision makers in democracies have cultural expectations about how conflicts can be resolved in a peaceful manner, based on compromise instead of violence, which will carry over from their domestic political experiences into international politics, particularly when they are involved in conflicts with other democratic states.68 A second type of explanation focuses on structural constraints that make it difficult or unlikely for decision makers in democracies to fight wars against each other.69 This explanation proposes that when democratic governments bargain with each other, they both observe the democratic institutions in their counterparts and infer that opposition to government policies will exist. The constraints that this opposition puts on both governments when two democratic states become involved in a conflict with each other make them much more likely to settle disputes by negotiation rather than through warfare.70

These explanations, however, are not without criticism.71 The cultural explanation, for example, posits that citizens and leaders in
democracies are generally more peace loving and deviate from that cultural tendency only when they encounter nondemocracies. Yet it is not clear why they deviate at all from norms and values that are presumably so engraved in their culture. Furthermore,

while it may be safe to assume that leaders and constituents who share democratic norms will be more tolerant of others who do so also, less certain is whether democratic leaders [and citizens] indeed perceive another country as a democracy or whether they believe that they know how specific leaders of other democratic countries will act, and therefore, whether they can count on these leaders to resolved disputes peacefully. It is an empirical question whether or not leaders of democracies embrace the same values and perceive each other to be ideologically committed to the liberal prohibition against the use of force to settle disputes and on these bases decide not to go to war.72

The structural constraint explanation has received the most critical attention. Critics argue that it is based on the assumption that the public does influence foreign policy in democratic systems. As the discussion in Chapter 5 on public opinion demonstrated, it is not at all clear that this is the case, given citizens’ lack of knowledge of foreign affairs, the manipulation of public opinion by elites, and the numerous examples of leaders who made foreign policy decisions, including decisions to engage in conflict, without input or against the wishes of the public and who were apparently not held accountable. The structural explanation also assumes that all democracies have structures that give citizens the opportunity to influence foreign policy and that this influence occurs across all democracies, at least in comparison to nondemocracies.73 Yet, as discussed in Chapter 5, there are important differences, even among democratic states, in the ability of public opinion to have an impact on foreign policy, and public support and opinion can be critical in nondemocracies that suffer from a deficit of legitimacy.

Critical to the notion of the democratic peace, and any other dyadic-level explanation of war, is the interaction of two states. State A must act differently because of the characteristics of state B and vice versa. In the cultural explanation, the pair must see each other as sharing democratic values, as being part of an in-group, so that it can trust it to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner.74 In the institutional explanation, because leaders of a democracy have to satisfy the broader public in order to get reelected, they will be more careful about going to war, will put more effort into winning a war, and will more carefully anticipate what effort the other side will put forward.

Fearing public policy failure, democrats try to avoid contests they do not think they can win. Since two democrats in a dispute both try hard, both can anticipate that, if they go to war,
each will spend lots of resources in a risky situation in which neither is disproportionately advantaged by greater effort. Therefore, democrats are generally inclined to negotiate with one another rather than fight.\textsuperscript{75}

This anticipation of what the other side will do is important not only for calculations of war, but also for state decisions regarding alliances, arms buildups, and bargaining strategies, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.

### State- and Dyadic-Level Explanations of Three Wars

State-level explanations of World War I have been popular. One such explanation was provided by Lenin himself in 1917. Lenin viewed World War I as the inevitable outcome of capitalist development. As the capitalist states had succeeded by 1914 in carving up much of the world into territories to satisfy their economic needs, they were destined to come into conflict with each other in their competition for more resources, labor, and markets. According to this view, the spat between Austria-Hungary and Serbia served as an excuse to engage in a battle that the major capitalist powers were intent on for more important reasons having to do with the nature of their economic systems. Economic interests of the United States, and key groups within the country, figure prominently in another explanation of World War I. Many charged munitions makers and banks, labeled “merchants of death,” with maneuvering the United States into war for profit. World War I is also used as an example of the diversionary and scapegoat propositions. Many of the states involved in the war were experiencing opposition at home: The Austro-Hungarian empire was facing the demands of nationalist groups such as the Serbs; Russia’s internal turmoil may have prompted the leaders to go to war rather than admit weakness that might further stimulate opposition to the government; and the controlling groups in Germany may have been looking for ways to put off calls for social reforms. War, then, may have looked like an attractive strategy to weak states facing considerable opposition at home.

At the dyadic level, World War I is only one example of democracies (such as the United States and Great Britain) fighting nondemocracies (such as Austria-Hungary and Germany), but not each other.

State-level explanations have also been applied to World War II. Given the worldwide depression and the burdens of war reparations imposed on it in the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was economically devastated. Hitler’s scapegoating economic troubles on to internal groups and external enemies helped him secure power and pursue aggressive policies. Another state-level factor points to the nature of the political systems of the actors involved. The two aggressors in the war, Germany and Japan, were fascist dictatorships with little domestic constraint on their decisions. The domestic constraints on the democracies, moreover, may have made them slow to respond. Isolationist opinion in the United States, for
example, meant that it was impossible for President Roosevelt to mobilize the country for war until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

In democratic Britain, the Depression had driven a Labour government out of power in 1931, and it was replaced by a national coalition consisting of the three major parties in Britain: the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Party. The coalition fell apart when the Labour Party, torn by internal dissension, left the government. The Conservatives effectively ruled the country in the remaining prewar years, and the leaders of the Conservative Party adopted an unwavering policy of appeasement. Neville Chamberlain is most clearly associated with the policy, but it should be remembered that he had great popular support in Britain and it is unlikely that any prime minister who had adopted a much different policy would have lasted very long. Chamberlain became prime minister in 1937. In 1938, Germany's military expenditures were roughly five times larger than Britain's. Chamberlain's deal with Hitler at Munich won for him a tumultuous hero's welcome when he returned to Great Britain. As late as April 1939, both the Labour and the Liberal parties voted against the introduction of conscription, thus reflecting the determination of many Britons to avoid war at any cost.

While World War II looks, in general, like another case of democracies waging war against nondemocracies, it is also an example of some of the debate that scholars have about how to assess the democratic peace proposition. The debate in this case centers on Finland's role in the war. Contrary to the idea that democratic dyads do not go to war against each other, Finland was basically on the side of the Germans; Finnish troops served under German command; German troops served under Finnish command; Finnish citizens were directly recruited into German armed forces; Britain launched an air attack on Finnish territory in 1941; Britain and the United States broke off economic and diplomatic relations with Finland, and Britain, Canada, Australia; and New Zealand declared war on Finland. Nevertheless, consistent with the democratic peace idea, Finland was not a formal ally of Germany; Finland refused to participate in key German offensives in the Soviet Union; the United States never declared war on Finland and never actually fought Finland; and no combat casualties were recorded between Finland and any other democracy. After a careful analysis of the decision-making process on all sides, Elman concludes that “Finland's involvement in World War II is partially consistent with the democratic peace theory” and that the Finnish case suggests that the democratic peace proposition may be less applicable to small states facing severe external threats and to democracies that have highly centralized institutions.

Political systems are also factors in explanations of the rise of the Cold War. Those who point to the Soviet Union's behaviors in Eastern Europe as the origins of Cold War hostilities focus on the nature of a Communist dictatorship: Stalin had little, if any, domestic opposition constraining him, and the isolation of the Soviet economy meant that aggressive
policies cost it little in trade. Others who point to behaviors of the United States in Western Europe as the source of Cold War tensions focus on the nature of the U.S. capitalist economy: U.S. economic interests needed to create and dominate a market in Western Europe in which to make profits. Furthermore, in order to address domestic opposition to a U.S. military presence in Europe, U.S. leaders had to exaggerate the Soviet threat and put the struggle in moral terms of good versus evil, which would resonate with the U.S. public. The lineup of mostly (but not all) democratic states in the NATO alliance against the nondemocratic states in the Warsaw Pact is also consistent with the democratic peace proposition.

Decision-Making-Level Explanations of Wars

The cause of international conflict may also be located within states at the decision-making level of analysis. This level focuses on policymaking processes and how characteristics of those processes lead countries down paths that they may not have intended, or at least did not clearly think through according to traditional standards of rational actors and rationality. Recall from Chapter 5 that the foreign policy approach to international politics rejects many of the assumptions of system-level theories, such as realism and liberalism. Specifically, foreign policy analysts believe that treating the state as a unitary actor ignores the divisions that occur within states. These domestic sources of foreign policy may at times propel states to war. Furthermore, the psychological approach believes that how leaders define the situation is key to an understanding of the choices they make. What leaders believe about their domestic and international constraints and what images they hold of other countries can provide clues about their choices for conflict.

Bureaucratic Politics and Standard Procedures

At the decision-making level of analysis, many point to the way in which bureaucracies are organized. As discussed in Chapter 5, governments are divided up into several bureaucratic agencies responsible for gathering information, providing advice, and implementing policies in their jurisdictions. One consequence of this bureaucratic organization is that the numerous agencies tend to see decisions, including decisions about war, differently based on their organizational roles. Bureaucratic units, such as those representing military interests, may search for information and advocate policies that are more aggressive given that their job is to emphasize and protect the country from threats and such threats justify their existence, and budgets. In the decision to begin aerial bombing in Vietnam, the air force was the prime supporter:

The air force, like no other advocate, was fighting for the credibility of a part of its organizational identity and the preservation
of primary missions by arguing that bombing would “work” in Viet-Nam before it was begun, maintaining that it was effective after it was started, and protesting that it could not produce victory unless it was conducted with more vigor after it appeared to fail.79

Another consequence of bureaucratic decision making is that bureaucracies tend to rely on prearranged standard operating procedures. Standard operating procedures are typically functional but may be misapplied in a particular situation and tend to be inflexible once they are put into action:

The key intervening variable between military plans and the outbreak of war is the inflexible implementation of an existing plan (under conditions where it is no longer optimal). This can increase the likelihood of war by requiring an early mobilization, which generates a momentum of its own and triggers a nearly irreversible action-reaction cycle.80

Thus, bureaucracies may identify a particular situation as a threat and initiate a predetermined procedure to deal with threat without stepping back to assess the nature of the threat and whether the previous plans actually are appropriate for the particular situation.

Beliefs and Perceptions

What leaders believe and how they process information is another factor at the decision-making level that can explain why wars occur. Particularly dangerous are beliefs or images that another country is aggressive and evil. Seeing the other as evil or immoral often prevents any compromises that might avert war and may prolong a war until an unconditional surrender is achieved. Furthermore, these enemy images (see Chapter 5) can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when leaders begin treating the other country as an enemy—by responding to its leaders in hostile language, developing a military defense against it, or breaking off diplomatic relations. Upon seeing such actions, the country begins perceiving the other as the enemy, responds in kind, and in the end becomes the enemy they were believed to be.

Also, because strongly held beliefs are very resistant to change, any information that a leader receives that is inconsistent with the enemy image is often ignored, denied, or distorted. The way that information is processed to fit existing beliefs and images means that cooperative gestures may be missed, leading the states further down the path to war.

Because the process of organizing and simplifying can result in errors in judging information and political events, images can lead to either harmful or beneficial decisions which in confrontational situations can serve to increase or decrease the level of
conflict intensity. Psychologically, once conflict begins to intensify, it is much more likely for an actor to move with the flow of escalation than to stop and back down. As conflict intensifies, it becomes even harder to achieve the accurate communication and shared understandings necessary for deescalation.81

(For more on how information is processed to be consistent with preexisting beliefs, in general and in the case of Tony Blair’s decision making on the Iraq war, see Chapter 5.)

In this way, enemy images can create misperceptions regarding the likelihood of war.82 Leaders who have enemy images are likely to exaggerate the likelihood of conflict, because they see the other as inherently aggressive. For example,

Anthony Eden’s estimation of the threat posed by Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 illustrates the impact of cognitive predispositions on the overestimation of threat. The prime minister’s formative experience was Britain’s appeasement of Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s, appeasement that resulted in war.... Fifteen years later, when confronted with the Egyptian nationalization of the canal, Eden could only see President Nasir as yet another dictator. He did not consider the critical differences between Nasir in Egypt in 1956, and Mussolini in 1935 and Hitler in Germany in 1938. Rather, he saw what he expected and what he expected to see was a threat of massive proportions.83

Leaders may also underestimate the likelihood of war if they have a belief that the other country lacks a will to fight or is too constrained domestically. During the Korean War, U.S. policymakers ignored China’s warnings that if UN troops moved north, China would intervene in the war. U.S. President “Truman and [U.S. General] MacArthur were convinced that China neither would nor could intervene in Korea and believed that their frequent pronouncements of America’s nonaggressive intentions would reassure the Chinese leader.... They simply did not see the intervention coming.”84 Perceptions about the likelihood of winning a war may also influence a leader’s decision to pursue war. “Military optimism is especially dangerous when coupled with political and diplomatic pessimism. A country is especially likely to strike if it feels that, although it can win a war immediately, the chances of a favorable diplomatic settlement are slight and the military situation is likely to deteriorate.”85

Decision-Making-Level Explanations of Three Wars

Explanations of the beginning of World War I have featured the decision-making-level of analysis in addition to the other levels. One explanation emphasizes the importance of bureaucracies and the military technology
that was expressed in certain standard operating procedures. Generals of the time were convinced that rapid mobilization of forces would be crucial in determining who would win the next war. Accordingly, in Germany and Russia particularly, but also in Austria-Hungary and France, the armies made elaborate plans to ensure rapid mobilization. After Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia, Russia mobilized. Germany did not respond immediately; Kaiser Wilhelm sent a telegram to his cousin Nicholas, the Russian czar, requesting that he show some sign of good faith that would allow the kaiser to avoid issuing his own mobilization orders. The czar canceled a general mobilization order and substituted an order for partial mobilization. But the Russian military bureaucracy would not respond to a change in its operating procedures for full, rapid mobilization. The generals feared the consequences of trying to convert to partial mobilization once general mobilization had been initiated. Czar Nicholas then became convinced that such a sudden change of plans might throw his military organization into chaos, and he reinstated the original general mobilization order.

When Kaiser Wilhelm realized that Russia was not going to pull back from its general mobilization, he and his advisers decided that they must proceed quickly with their own. But because the German army was aware that France and Russia were allied, and because the German generals assumed that the Russian army would take longer than the French army to mobilize effectively, the German plan called for mobilization and attack against the French first. The French would be quickly defeated, and the Russians could be dealt with in turn. So although the Russians were responding to the threat from Germany’s ally, Austria-Hungary, the German war plans called for an attack against France. At the last moment, Kaiser Wilhelm was led to believe [with help from the British] that France might be kept out of the war even if Germany became involved against the Russians. Therefore, Wilhelm decided that to give France a chance to stay out, Germany ought to turn its troops around and attack Russia instead. But the German generals were as reluctant as the Russian generals to change their plans at the last moment. Helmuth von Moltke, the German chief of staff, reportedly broke down in tears at the suggestion that such a thing might be attempted. Historian Barbara Tuchman describes the process that the kaiser wanted to modify in the hour of crisis:

Once the button was pushed, the whole vast machinery for calling up, equipping, and transporting two million men began turning automatically. Reservists went to their designated depots, were issued uniforms, equipment, and arms, formed into companies and companies into battalions, were joined by cavalry, cyclists, artillery, medical units, cook wagons, blacksmith wagons, even postal wagons, moved according to prepared railway timetables to concentration points near the frontier
where they would be formed into divisions, divisions into corps, and corps into armies ready to advance and fight. From the moment the order was given, everything was to move at fixed times according to a schedule precise down to the number of train axles that would pass over a given bridge within a given time.87

The fact that Austria-Hungary and France also had rapid mobilization schedules, an important element in the pressure on Russia and Germany, adds strength to the argument that the state of military technology and the bureaucratic organizations administering it were important causes of the war. With all sides so intent on rapid mobilization, had the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand not taken place, some crisis was bound to lead to war sooner or later.

The reluctance by the Russians and the Germans to alter their prearranged responses in this moment of crisis also corresponds with theories of the making of foreign policy emphasizing factors other than standard operating procedures and prearranged responses. Undoubtedly, under the pressure of the moment, there was a tendency to simplify matters, resulting in a number of misperceptions:

Before World War I, all of the participants thought that the war would be short. They also seem to have been optimistic about its outcome. Some of the judgments of July 1914 were proven incorrect—for example, the German expectation that Britain would remain neutral and Germany's grander hopes of keeping France and even Russia out of the war. Furthermore the broader assumptions underlying the diplomacy of the period may also have been in error. Most important on the German side was not an image of a particular country as the enemy, but its basic belief that the ensuing events would lead to either "world power or decline."88

The tendency to simplify, misperceive, and focus on information consistent with prior beliefs is not unique to policymakers in World War I:

The list of misperceptions preceding World War II is also impressive. Few people expected the blitzkrieg to bring France down; the power of strategic bombardment was greatly overestimated; the British exaggerated the vulnerability of the German economy, partly because they thought it was stretched taut at the start of the war. Judgments of intentions were even less accurate. The appeasers completely misread Hitler; the anti-appeasers failed to see that he could not be stopped without a war. For his part, Hitler underestimated his adversaries' determination. During the summer of 1939, he doubted whether Britain would fight and, in the spring of 1940, expected her to make peace.89
Entrenched beliefs also play an important part in many explanations of how the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union began and how hostile relations continued for decades. Specifically, one can point to the perceptions that the superpowers formed about each other in the first few years following World War II. Despite the high hopes for friendly postwar relations that leaders in both countries seemed to have, each began to perceive the other as committing hostile, threatening acts. The United States was appalled at Soviet actions in Eastern Europe and viewed Soviet control over governments in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, for example, as contrary to the promises for elections in those countries that Stalin had made at Yalta. Furthermore, Soviet support for a divided and weak Germany, pressure on Turkey for access to its ports, and threats against Iran for oil concessions were increasingly viewed by American policymakers as evidence of hostile, expansionist intentions and of the need to contain the Soviet Union.

The Soviets for their part viewed the aid package to Western Europe, the aid to Greece fighting a Communist insurgency, support for a strong Germany, and Churchill’s speech in the United States in 1946 calling for English-speaking peoples to unite and use the atomic bomb that “God has willed” to the United States against the Soviet Union as evidence of Western hostility. Even when “the United States offered to extend aid to the Soviet Union to assist in the reconstruction of its economy after the war, Soviet leaders suspected that the United States was seeking a market to absorb the expected surplus of peacetime production.” By the late 1940s, and certainly by the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, both sides had strong enemy images of each other that directed their attention toward information that confirmed their perceptions and away from information that disconfirmed their perceptions. For example, when the Soviet Union ceased its pressure and threats against Iran in 1946, even though the Soviets did not receive the oil concessions they were after, U.S. policymakers did not use this piece of information to alter their emerging view of the Soviets.

The mirror enemy images that Soviet and American leaders held persisted throughout much of the Cold War and led policymakers in both countries to interpret the others’ behaviors as consistent with their assumptions. Most U.S. leaders, for example, believed for a long time that all Communist states and movements were part of a monolithic bloc directed from Moscow. Thus, despite the differences between Communist China and the Soviet Union and despite Communist and socialist movements that originated independently, any group or leader with some connection to communism was assumed to be part of the Soviet threat, and numerous U.S. military interventions and supported coups (such as in Iran, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Grenada, and Vietnam) took place because of suspected, and usually exaggerated, links to Moscow.
Multilevel Explanations of War: Using Caution When Comparing Levels of Analysis

Convincing explanations of war come from the various levels of analysis: the system, the state, dyads, and the decision-making process. Even the same war can be explained by factors at all levels, as with World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. The implication of this point is not that one kind of analysis is better than another but that analyses on different levels can lead to distinctly different conclusions regarding the relationship between the explanatory factors and behaviors or events being analyzed. Those conclusions, though apparently contradictory, may be equally valid. The contradictions are only apparent, and they are a function of the relative independence of the different levels of analysis.

Imagine, for simplicity, that there are only three pairs of states {dyads A, B, and C} in a hypothetical international system we want to investigate. Imagine further that we are interested in the relationship between the extent to which these pairs of states are democratic and the amount of war involving those same pairs of states. Looking first at Pair A and considering three successive time periods \(t_0, t_1,\) and \(t_2\), we find that when Pair A’s democracy scores go up, it experiences more war, and when they go down, it becomes involved in less war. In other words, in this imaginary system [and its imaginary nature should be emphasized], we find, contrary to the democratic peace proposition, that war is positively related to democracy: As the pair of states becomes more democratic, it gets involved in more military conflict.

Inferring a causal connection from this covariation would be risky. First, only three time periods have been considered; the degree of democracy within this pair of states and instances of war between them might have gone up and down together that many times just by chance. Also, perhaps some third factor, such as the amount of unrest in the state, has an impact on both democracy and war that causes them to covary. [In principle, it could also be true that war has a positive impact on democracy rather than democracy having a positive impact on war.] But suppose, for the sake of this example, that investigations of all those possibilities reveal that none of them applies. For Pair A, the positive correlation between democracy and war indicates that the former causes the latter.

Suppose further that analyses of Pairs B and C in the same hypothetical system reveal the same pattern between democracy and war. In other words, we find that for each pair of states in the system, the greater its degree of democracy, the more war it experiences. It might then seem logical to conclude that the higher the average level of democracy in the system, the greater the amount of war that will occur. But such a conclusion would constitute a level-of-analysis error. Consider Table 6.2, showing the relationship between the level of democracy and war experience of dyads of states A, B, and C. Notice that as the democracy scores for the three time periods for each pair of states go up, the numbers representing
the amount of war experienced go up too. Similarly, as the democracy scores go down (for example, for Pair A from \( t_1 \) to \( t_2 \)), so too does the amount of war it experiences. For every pair of states, there is a positive relationship between democracy and war.

Now consider the data pertaining to the entire system, obtained by adding up the numbers on democracy and war for the separate pairs of states. In the international system as a whole, there is a negative relationship between the level of democracy and the amount of war. On the system level of analysis, as the level of democracy in the system increases, the amount of war decreases. And conversely, when democracy at the system level goes down, the amount of war increases.

This system-level negative correlation may or may not reflect a causal connection between democracy and war. The point is that one cannot safely infer that a pattern existing on a lower level of analysis necessarily also exists on a higher level, or vice versa. That is, it would be a logical mistake (a level-of-analysis error) to infer the system-level relationship from the patterns revealed on the lower, dyadic level of analysis. It would also be a mistake to focus on the negative system-level relationship between democracy and war depicted in Table 6.2 and to conclude that the democratic pairs of states (or individual democratic states) are likely to experience less war.

Similarly, if one finds a positive relationship between the number of alliances in the international system and the amount of war that occurs, it would be a mistake to conclude that states with many alliances are
more likely to become involved in wars. The system-level correlation might occur because smart states form protective alliances, whereas dumb states avoid alliances and fight the wars. Even though, in such a case, there would be a positive correlation between the number of alliances and the amount of war in the international system, the relationship between alliances and war on the national level of analysis might be negative in every case.

Thus, caution must be exercised when comparing levels of analysis. Levels of analysis primarily provide students of global politics a way to categorize various factors that are involved in the very real problem of war between states. These factors, such as lack of an overarching authority, economic and political relationships, and psychological beliefs about “the enemy,” can also be found within the levels of analysis that explain ethnic conflict, to be explored in Chapter 7.

**SUMMARY**

- War is a pervasive part of global politics. Statistics indicate that the frequency and destruction of war, both interstate and internal war, have increased throughout history. Studies of international politics can focus on a variety of social entities, such as individual leaders, states, groups of states, or the entire international system. Such levels of analysis have to do with what kinds of questions are asked (such as why some states are war prone versus why some systems are war prone) and the answers that are given (such as wars are caused by certain types of states versus wars are caused by individual leaders).

- The system level of analysis points to characteristics of the international structure as the root of war between states. Realism focuses on the anarchy in the international system and the security dilemma it creates and on the distribution of power in the international system. Some argue that multipolar systems such as the classic balance-of-power system in nineteenth-century Europe are the most stable. Others point to the relative stability of the Cold War bipolar system. Hegemonic stability theorists believe that unipolar systems are the most stable, although during times of power transition, major war can erupt. Liberalism looks to the degree of interdependence at the system level, arguing that economic connections between states make war less likely.

- At the state level of analysis, arguments have been made that the type of economic system and economic factors operating in the state can contribute to war. Opposition in political systems may also serve to constrain or push states into war. Although opposition in democracies does not necessarily mean that these types of states are more peaceful, dyads of democracies are typically less likely to experience war. Potential explanations for the dyadic democratic peace have been the focus of much recent research. Some argue that democracies apply their
cultural values of peaceful resolution of conflicts to other democracies and others that the structural features of democracies constrain states when they both are democracies.

- Decision-making processes, such as bureaucratic procedures, can factor into decisions for war. Decision making by leaders is also susceptible to biases in beliefs and perceptions, biases that favor war.

- Convincing explanations of war come from all levels of analysis: the system, the state, dyadic, and the decision-making process. Even the same war can be explained by factors at all levels, as with World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

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