

Introduction to International Relations

Lecture 6: Military Conflict

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Overview. We study the three images of war: human nature, internal organization of states, and the international system. In doing so, we emphasize that ideally war is an instrument of policy, and violence should be a means to an end. We identify several problems with each separate explanation and then note some very interesting arguments pertaining to the distribution of power in the world system.

OUTLINE OF LECTURE 6: MILITARY CONFLICT

1. Clausewitz: war as instrument of policy
 - a) limited and total war
 - b) French Revolution: mass mobilization
 - c) Industrial Revolution: deadly weapons
2. War as consequence of human nature
 - a) deprivation and competition for scarce resources
 - b) violence can solve conflicts
 - c) just and moral war
3. War as consequence of state organization
 - a) Marxism/Leninism: imperialism and colonialism
 - b) geo-political circumstances
 - c) regime type (democratic peace)
4. War as consequence of world system
 - a) distribution of power
 - b) hegemony: regional and global
 - c) system polarity and stability
 - d) balance of power
 - e) power transition

1 War as Instrument of Policy

Before jumping into analyzing causes of wars, arms races, and other security issues, it is worth taking a rather brief stroll down history lane to examine some of the most important factors that have influenced the evolution of military conflict.

We begin, as most current thinking on issues military does, with von Clausewitz, the Prussian military thinker has had as much influence on the modern organization of mass violence in the West as Marx did on the economic experiments of the Russians.

Warfare is continuation of politics with the admixture of other means, to paraphrase roughly his famous dictum. In other words, war is not a goal in itself, but rather, it is a means to an end, and that end is always political. This assertion is timeless especially if one accepts that politics is about distribution of scarce resources and the competition of ideas.

It should be noted that what Clausewitz characterized was war as it *ought* to be, not as it *actually is*. In fact, it is easy to argue that once war departs from its instrumental use, it becomes a manifestation of violence without purpose or reason. Unfortunately, all too often, war acquires its own strange reason once it begins. Often, war aims are lost in the tumult, passions erupt, and the orgy of destruction consumes everything, leaving the victor wondering why it had all began.

One of the chief reasons states exist is to wage war. That is, to be able to wage war in order to ensure the security of its citizens, at least in theory. States are forged in war, and they are the machines that made modern war the enormously destructive enterprise that it is. However, warfare did not use to be on such a grand scale. Armies were limited by the ability of the commanders to supply them (or the ability to plunder enemy territory). Their reach was limited by the technology of transport and communication. Their destructiveness was limited by their weapons. And their viciousness — usually limited by the need to benefit from the conquest when it was successfully completed.

Two crucial revolutions, the French and the Industrial, changed all that. Together, they made total war a possibility and the Europeans were not slow to indulge in it.

The French Revolutionary Wars saw the first mobilization of society, the whole nation, fired up by eternal ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity. (Strange thing is they did not seem to lose any of the zeal once their Republican ruler styled himself emperor after Rome's Augustus.) Much like the Roman citizen-soldiers, the French seemed unstoppable. Out of fear for their Revolution, they began exporting violence abroad. To defend their cherished ideals, they felt they had to crush the monarchies arrayed against them.

Such a force can only be countered by another massive force and though the Russians possessed it in their army of serfs, their model was impossible to duplicate in freer societies. Solution: conscription and the creation of armies of citizens. This was in Clausewitz's time, the regimental organization that im-

bued soldiers with patriotic values of honor, loyalty, and sacrifice. All designed to overcome the rather natural urge to flee from danger and perhaps profiteer a little from the spoils of battle. Where armies consisted of expensive and unruly mercenaries, the unstable elements of society were drafted into cohesive wholes with the added benefit that the military occupation provided for a faithful instrument of state while simultaneously removing potentially disturbing influences from places where they could do much damage.

The Western army returned to some of the qualities that had ensured the success of the Roman Republic and later Empire for about a thousand years. Citizens marching as soldiers make a formidable army, especially when inculcated into the ethos of sacrifice for high ideals.

To succeed with such an army, however, requires that one indoctrinate the soldiers properly, which makes citizen-armies exceedingly dangerous to their enemies: once fired up, it is well-nigh impossible to stop them. They are ruthless for they believe they are fighting for values that transcend mere physical comforts. They are seldom prepared to stop until their enemy is annihilated. The very training of these armies makes them quite volatile as instruments of policy for it is difficult to get them moving for trifles, and once unleashed it is even harder to stop them short of achieving the expansive objectives set before them.

A citizen army almost certainly means total war, and the Industrial Revolution ensured that any such war would be deadly beyond imagination.

Ivan Bloch, a Polish banker, predicted in 1899 that war between the great powers had become impossible because it was suicidal. He believed that quick decisive battles were no longer viable, and therefore each conflict would necessarily turn into an exhaustive war of attrition, leading almost everyone involved into ruin, even the victors. He got many things right, but also quite a few wrong (e.g. ignoring new technologies that would overcome problems of trench warfare). He was mostly ignored or derided by the military planners and nobody really knew what carnage World War I would be.

In fact, precisely because people realized that total war would be hideously expensive if it lasted more than a few months (and therefore no country could really afford it without significant socio-economic dislocations caused by mobilization), the military argued that a short, decisive victory must be planned for! Get it? Because we can't fight for long, we must win quickly. Curious logic, especially when each planning staff should have realized that the opponent's planning would run essentially the same way.

Moreover, this logic ignored the vast industrial potential that the European powers could tap into: allies could depend on resources of their allies and continue fighting where in earlier times they would have been forced to quit. For example, Austria-Hungary could not afford to continue fighting after 1915, but German aid not only kept it buoyant but also prevented it from leaving the war. Russia kept going until an internal coup knocked it out of the war, and France may have quit like it did in 1871.

At any rate, when the marching orders came in the summer of 1914, each nation prepared to fight a quick glorious war with its soldiers coming home for Christmas. This mutual optimism seems to characterize the outbreak of many conflicts. And yet, as Geoffrey Blainey observed, in a war at least one side's optimism must have been exaggerated and its estimates of victory wrong—the loser's.

And even with the example still barely thirty years in the past, the world erupted yet again into an even wilder conflagration. If the horror of death could prevent war, then surely WWI should have been the greatest medicine.

But it did not work. In 1939, the West prepared to march again against the forces of evil not for territory, not for commerce, and not for glory, but for the defense of the very ideals that made the West what it was. This was a war against brutal fascist dictatorships, waged together with similarly sinister totalitarian communists, just as repugnant to Western liberties as Hitler and Mussolini. (I wonder whether people were surprised when the fateful alliance fell apart, having outlived its usefulness by about a year.)

Until the French Revolution, war was the “sport of kings.” Waged over relatively limited aims, with rather limited means, and carefully circumscribed in violence. Wars were always deadly (over 2 million perished in the Thirty Years' War that preceded the Westphalian peace), but nowhere near the scale of destruction once entire societies were able to mobilize against each other with the help of technology.

2 War As Consequence of Human Nature

The first idea, which can be traced all the way back to Confucius, among others, is that it is human nature that causes war. The pessimistic version states that war is endemic and inevitable because we cannot change our nature. The optimistic version states that through education we can promote better understanding between societies, we can eradicate the propensity for violence by inculcating the unacceptability of war as a means to any end, and we can socially engineer our societies to make sure these values persist.

This is not as ludicrous as it may sound, at least according to some. One favorite variant of the “culture of war” idea is the prominent historian John Keegan, who tries very hard to argue that war is a cultural phenomenon and can therefore be eradicated. John Mueller's argument in *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* that war between major powers has become obsolete comes from a similar line of reasoning: we can teach our children that violence is not a legitimate way of resolving our disputes. By foreswearing the use of force, we can abandon war, much like the civilized world has abandoned slavery, infanticide, and dueling. Further, the view that there is nothing inherently natural about war seems to be supported by research from the behavioral sciences (see table on p. 199). Among the most famous proponents of the “evil men cause war” idea is John Stoessinger and his book, *Why Nations Go To War*.

I am simplifying things quite a bit here, lumping all these people together when their arguments for the renouncement of war are actually very different. Still, they all seem to agree that war is a matter of choice: Humans can choose not to fight, and if they do, then peace would prevail. That this is true is beyond dispute, but it is also true that it does not really say all that much.

2.1 Competition for Scarce Resources

For starters, if one nation renounces war, what would it do until everyone else does the same? Rely on the tender mercies of its enemies? Further, if everyone renounced war and disarmed, then what would stop an ambitious but poor nation from challenging a rich but helpless one for its resources?

Switzerland has not fought a war for centuries and its neutrality seems to have worked to its benefit. Yet, Switzerland is a mountainous country that would be exceedingly difficult to conquer. In addition, the Swiss have not exactly disarmed: each citizen has a duty to defend the country if invaded. But this may be a unique case: let's ask the Poles whether they would feel comfortable between Germany and Russia, with borders that are largely defenseless and a country that is easily turned into a stomping ground for mechanized infantry.

The Swedes are also sometimes given as models of reform: after all, the modern Swede does not resemble much the ferocious and brutal Vikings who terrorized the medieval world. But Sweden's eclipse as a great power was nearly instantaneous when the Russians defeated it, and its consequent espousal of neutrality has much to do with military impotence, not with alleged reform of human nature. Today, the Scandinavians are usually on the forefront of peace negotiations, as sworn enemies of the use of force. But (a) it is not at all clear that they would remain so committed to peace if their nice social-democratic order is threatened by, say, bands of marauding gypsies; and (b) their firm insistence on the rule of international law has much to do with the simple fact that without it, they have no say in world politics whatsoever. (We shall return to this point again later.)

The point of all this is that it is impossible to disarm and live in peace in a world characterized by competition over scarce resources. Relative deprivation and scarcity is all around us. Some people have things, others do not. Some societies are more imaginative, more inventive, more dynamic, and better able to extract benefits from these resources than others.

The idea of inter-societal equality is preposterous. Some regimes are so backward that they are unable to produce any of the technology that the West takes for granted and sells them (and in many instances gives them gratis). While grudgingly accepting the fact that the West is better at producing these material bounties, the members of these societies have historically indulged in profound hatred of the West.

"Why do they hate us?" We hear this quite often from historically illiterate pundits and talking heads. But the question is misleading for "they" have always hated us. Let me quote here from a Prussian advisor to the Turkish Army,

Helmuth von Moltke, who was sent there in 1835 on request of the Turks to help them modernize along Western lines:

A Turk will concede, without hesitation that the Europeans are superior to his nation in science, skill, wealth, daring and strength, without it ever occurring to him that a Frank might therefore put himself on a par with a Muslim... The colonels gave us precedence, the officers were still tolerably polite, but the ordinary man would not present arms to us, and the women and children from time to time followed us with curses. The soldier obeyed but would not salute.

Or take this interesting episode from an encounter between the traditional Muslim warriors, the Mamelukes (a peculiar caste of slave warriors), and the Westernized Ottoman forces:

A single one of us can defeat your whole army. If you do not believe it, you may try, only please order your army to stop shooting with firearms... You have brought with you this contrivance artfully devised by the Christians of Europe when they were incapable of meeting the Muslim armies on the battlefield. The contrivance is that musket which, even if a woman were to fire it, would hold up such and such number of men... And woe to thee! How darest thou shoot with firearms at Muslims!

Needless to say, the Mamelukes were annihilated by their "fellow" Muslims. However, the basic idea is clear: Europeans, and by extension later Americans, were hated because they were feared. Their societies managed to outproduce, outwit, and out-invent the shackled empires of sand, and when the Europeans finally turned the tables on the Muslim world, their former tormentors found themselves largely dependent on these wretched non-believers. How odd is one's memory that it recalls the Crusades but fails to remember the gates of Vienna or the occupation of Spain, the conquest of entire North Africa, the obliteration of the Eastern Roman Empire, and the cruel subjugation of the Bulgarians, the Greeks, and the Serbs in the Balkans.

Yet all of this is forgotten and today we have to do soul-searching and ask ourselves why they hate us? How about this: they hate us because they feel helpless to deny us what we want. We are much stronger because of what we have, what we have been able to accomplish; because of our values that have enabled our dynamic societies to progress at such an astounding pace. They hate us for everything they do not have and cannot have without the forces of secular rationalism that liberate the inquisitive spirit. They will continue to hate us while this inequality persists, and it will continue to persist until they change their ways. There is nothing we can do about this except help them help themselves. We surely should not try to deprive ourselves from the fruits of our labors for their benefit.

Even avowed pacifists sometimes recognize the necessity to resort to force and sacrifice (usually somebody else's). Since everybody knows that Gandhi

stood for non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflicts, here's a quote from the man, "I'm a true *mahatma*" Gandhi, himself:

I would not flinch from sacrificing a million lives for India's liberty.

It is worth noting that perhaps the man's peace inclinations were a tiny bit influenced by the fact that militarily, India could not have kicked out the British; not only because they were strong, but because a lot of Indians liked their rule. One must never forget that the British ruled India's population of millions with a few thousand troops. Never has a subjugated territory successfully rebelled against an empire: in all cases of national liberation the empires gave up fighting without using their full military capabilities. (We shall see why.)

And what does that mean? It means that, as the Romans said, *if you want peace, prepare for war*. Nothing invites exploitation as weakness (we shall discuss this more as well), and disarming for peace is the ultimate folly. We must accept the simple fact that there are good and evil people, that there are people who want what they do not have, that we cannot simply give them that, and we must therefore be prepared to defend it.

What's worse, research suggests that this feeling of deprivation does not even have to have genuine causes! In other words, one need not actually be deprived to feel that more is due to him. The Germans were by and large enjoying the highest standard of living in Europe prior to the First World War, but they interpreted this as the world owing them a more prestigious place in its hierarchy. They had more than everyone else around them and they still felt deprived.

The worst outbreaks of violence are usually preceded not by deteriorating conditions, but by a steady improvement followed by a sudden crash. This is when expectations that have been rising suddenly become thoroughly misaligned with reality. The Palestinians engaged in the most widespread violence just when by all accounts the conditions were finally beginning to improve due to the Oslo Peace Process. We shall never know whether the process was going to work or not, of course, but the point is that when hopes went soaring and reality failed to keep up, people turned to violence.

Hence, in the end one does not even need to reach for real inequality among societies for the cause of conflict. One need not even appeal to the bickering over the distribution of scarce resources. Wants and needs could be conjured up from thin air, and this seems another peculiar uniquely human characteristic.

Violence is not unique to humans, warfare is. But then again, so is toilet paper and you don't hear many trying to renounce that. The point is that an argument that denies the utility of war on the basis of biology is fundamentally misguided: people fight because in many cases force settles things. That is why we will always have war: First, because violence cannot be unlearned. Second, because it often works. Third, because the threat of violence is also useful. Fourth, because war is sometimes just and moral.

2.2 Violence Can Solve Conflicts

First, violence cannot be unlearned much like nuclear weapons cannot be dis-invented. You can certainly go neutral and refuse to engage in it, but that does not mean that people will forget how it works and what they could get if they use it, or, in the case when you've disarmed, just threaten to use it. It is hard to see how one can seriously suggest that such a scheme would work. Perhaps it would if everyone had collective amnesia, but even then it would probably last a day. (I am always reminded here of Kubrick's opening shots of *2001: A Space Odyssey* with the prehistoric humans learning violence.) We can all join hands, sing *Kumbaya*, and pray for world peace, and it would have just about as much effect as when people meditated to levitate the Pentagon.

Second, it is a profoundly ahistorical lunacy to suggest that violence never resolves anything, what some, like Russel Weigley (quoted approvingly by John Keegan), call the "chronic indecisiveness of war." In fact, many wars do settle scores, sometimes once and for all. One could argue that the failure to arrive at a permanent durable settlement usually arises from a failure to win the war.

We don't hear much about German Nazis or Japanese militarists rummaging in Nazified Europe or colonized China. Why? Because their aggression was stopped, rolled back, and obliterated by 1945. It has been six decades with these two countries staying the course as model democracies (of sorts). To claim that violence did not remove that threat is absurd. In fact, one of the causal factors for the Second World War was the failure to impress upon the Germans that they had lost the First. They had been licked and with the U.S. entry they had no chance whatsoever. Yet the war ended before the Entente powers entered German soil, and so the myth quickly arose that Germany was stabbed in the back by communists and Jews, feeding right into the hands of the ugly racial propaganda of the brown-shirts. Many ordinary Germans swallowed the myth whole and rose again against the unjust terms of the Versailles Treaty, which were only unjust if one bought that Germany was betrayed and tricked into accepting it without losing the fight. Fortunately, there was no such mistake the second time around.

What about other wars America has fought? The Civil War settled both issues of slavery and secession at the same time once and for all. South Korea is still a free and semi-democratic country, not a totalitarian lunocracy like its northern neighbor. Vietnam was unified by the North successfully in 1975 after the U.S. withdrew. Just about every war that America has waged has been decisive one way or the other.

The chronic civil wars of medieval Japan were all brought to an end when a succession of three talented leaders managed to defeat all their rivals. The Tokugawa peace after the conquest of Osaka in 1615 lasted for three hundred years. Not bad for a culture that had not only seen violence for most of its existence but actually glorified it. This was not accomplished with pleading, but with killing. Sometimes it is prudent to kill a few thousand now to prevent tens of thousands from dying in the future.

And what about the largest period of peace that Europe has ever known, the *Pax Romana*?¹ True, there were skirmishes along the borders, but basically nobody could stand up to the Roman Empire, the superpower of its times. Wherever its legions went, they conquered. At the height of their power, they made Roman citizens of the conquered peoples, ensured the flow of trade through the Mediterranean, and provided stability and protection. Without idealizing them (they fail many modern standards), we should acknowledge that no entity had gotten close to distributing as much benefits and justice as the Romans did. And how was it that the Romans did that? Conquest and violence.

It was not for nothing that the American Founding Fathers sought to emulate the republican ideals of early Roman history. And, by the way, how was this nation born? Revolution (violence). And how was its primary character determined? Civil war (violence). And how was Europe saved twice from its own folly? World war (violence). Don't tell me that violence never solves anything because it does.

This leads me to the third general argument, the use of force. Because violence can be useful, the threat to use it can be put to good use as well. As we've seen, every situation can be viewed as an occasion for bargaining, and by this, you should recall, we do not mean talking and negotiating only. We mean coercive bargaining as well, when one or all parties engage in attempts to influence each other's expectations with actions. Sometimes, unhappily, these actions are painful and costly, but then again, the power to hurt the opponent is a power to influence his expectations.

If a threat of violence is credible, one usually does not need to carry it out: the opponent will give in. Ostensibly, there was no direct application of force. And yet, force has been used nevertheless. The threat carries the implicit, contingent use of force with it, and it is the fear of the consequences that has influenced the bargaining position of the other party.

If you talk loud and carry a large stick, there will be no reason to use it. But that does not mean that the stick is worthless. Warfare is a type of military coercion (there are others, less costly and less violent, like raids, blockades, even maneuvers). That is, it is a bargaining tactic.

¹This stands for "Roman Peace" and refers to the long period of stability and prosperity ushered by the Roman conquests. There have been other such "peaces," like *Pax Britannica*, the world trade and commercial stability ensured by the maritime dominance of the British imperial fleet; like *Pax Mongolica*, the short-lived but historically crucial peace ensured by the extensive Mongol conquests in the 13th century when the East finally met the West along the Silk Road; or like the *Pax Americana*, that seems to have characterized the latter half of the 20th century and in which we still live. It is worth noting that the peace that all these periods refer to is not defined by the absence of warfare, but rather by warfare on the periphery while the main actors enjoy the security and prosperity provided by the dominant one. We shall talk more about this when we go over *hegemonic stability* theory.

2.3 Just and Moral War

Finally, let me turn to the idea that war is always abhorrent and morally repugnant. That is it always abhorrent is absolutely true. There is no grandeur in slaughtering people, there is no glory in warfare, as General Sherman summarized it well, "War is hell."

And yet, the step from acknowledging war's ugliness to denying its justice and morality under certain conditions is a long and uncertain one. It is the moral vapidness of today's education that has led many Americans astray. It is suggested that there is moral equivalency between Allied bombings of Dresden that killed tens of thousands of German civilians and the German atrocities against the civilians of the nations they conquered. Or between the American use of nuclear weapons against Japan and modern terrorists! We shall talk more about this when we get to international law, but let me just point out the obvious. The idea that Dresden was this nice city entirely devoid of industry supporting the Nazi war machine, is plain wrong. There were many legitimate targets there. Still, it is true that the goal of the bombing campaign was to break civilian morale. However, the Germans and the Japanese were the aggressors, they had unleashed the dogs of war on the world, their civilians enthusiastically supported the racially-motivated programs of conquest and extermination of others. Simply put, they should have been disabused of the illusion that they could dominate the rest of the world.

War is untidy and ugly, and yet sometimes it is necessary to fight it to defend one's ideals, and one's way of life. Culture is not inviolate, it has no inherent worth because it is entirely created by human beings. Therefore, its worth is measured in its ability to provide its members with benefits, material and spiritual, that are in accordance with their desires. Thus far, the Western culture has proven uniquely attractive and resilient in that respect, and that is why it is superior to cultures that practice subjugation of women, or all sorts of intolerance and hatred. And that is why this culture is worth fighting for.

The conclusion is that while war may not be biologically preprogrammed in humans, it is a permanent fixture of our social landscape. It is permanent because there will always be conflicts about wants and needs, real or imagined, and because such conflicts cannot be negotiated away as long as one side can use force to impose a solution. Once we learned that violence can resolve certain conflicts, we had to start inventing better ways of using it. Once we invented the weapons, the strategies, and the organizations, we made war exceedingly deadly. This makes large-scale war an unsuitable instrument for policy, at least when it comes to fighting equally advanced societies. But how do societies organize themselves for war? Are some more prone to use force than others? This leads us to the second image of war.

3 War As A Consequence of State Organization

According to the *second image*, war arises as a consequence of different internal organization of states. This includes the form of governance (democracy, theocracy, autocracy, lunocracy), the economic structure (market capitalism, socialism, fascism), or sometimes the composition of society (e.g. cultural explanations).

For example, as Marx famously argued, the economic structure defined in terms of the ownership of the tools of production, actually produces a deterministic flow of history. In this view, capitalism was doomed because of its unequal distribution of benefits which privileged the bourgeoisie capitalists over the proletariat. You did not have to be Marx to come to similar conclusions: Hobson, a liberal English economist, also argued that because the working class was so poor, capitalists would have to invest abroad to make money in foreign markets. The competition among capitalist states for markets and the need for raw materials would drive them toward *imperialism*, which Lenin labeled “the highest stage of capitalism.”

This was the explanation for European **colonialism**: a competition to divide the world into spheres from which the ever-greedy Europeans could extract resources. There was something of the old *mercantilism* that thrived between the 17th and 19th centuries and that fueled the original quest for colonies. The idea was that a nation could only be strong (and therefore enjoy prosperity and prestige unmolested) if it had enough money, and that the state should actively participate in the strengthening of the domestic economy, securing of access to foreign markets, and provision of materials from colonies.

At any rate, in their incessant quest for markets, the capitalist imperialist powers would eventually run out of colonies to acquire, and then they would inevitably come into conflict with one another, and *imperialist wars* would be the natural consequence. It was during these wars that the deprived proletariat should make a grab for power and overturn the capitalist system altogether.

These theories were curiously divorced from reality. I’ve already mentioned the simple fact that the proletarii of different countries who, according to doctrine, had much more in common with each other than with the ruling capitalists in their own states, actually fought with great enthusiasm in the supposed “imperialist wars” of their masters. That was why they were said to have “false consciousness” that prevented them from acting in their own self-interest. Moreover, the colonies were not used that much for investment (it was much more profitable to invest in places like the United States where the return was great).

Another version of the economic structure argument would apply selectively to certain countries. For example, Britain was seen as dependent on access to India, and so British imperialism arose mainly as a result of the necessity to protect its interests there. Before the Suez Canal, ships had to sail all around the southernmost tip of Africa, which is why the British gained a foothold there. To maintain the security of its sea lines, Britain was forced to maintain a navy so enormous that it would be able to defeat any combination of its three largest

rivals. So British expansion was actually driven by strategic concerns fueled by its economic vulnerability.

The other important second image explanation comes from the political organization of the state. Who has access to governmental decision-making units? How accountable is the government to the people? How responsive it is to their wishes? How able is the government to provide for the security and prosperity of its people? What about their spiritual needs?

We already discussed some related issues when we talked about sovereignty, and legitimacy. We also briefly touched on the problems with creating social preferences out of individual ones. Also, in the sections above, I alluded to societal characteristics that propel some of them to greatness while dooming others to despair and obscurity. We shall have an occasion to talk at length about the consequences of internal structure of states when we get the **democratic peace**, the empirical fact that democracies never fight each other even when they are quite bellicose toward non-democracies.

According to this logic, there are “good” and “bad” states, where the relative goodness is defined in terms of how likely a state is to engage in violence. The definition, obviously, differs by author. For Marx, a good state is the one where the proletariat owns the means of production. For Kant (and recent democratic theories), it is a state organized along the abstract principles of what is right. For followers of President Wilson, it is self-determination. For some people today it is almost anything but a fundamentalist Islamic theocracy. But the empirical fact is that all of these states have been engaging in violence at one time or another, and it is not at all clear that an autocracy is less prone to conflict than a democracy.

Even if the internal organization of states can make them more or less prone to using force externally, the question arises whether some of these propensities are not built into the structure of the world system itself. This leads us to the next image of war.

4 War As A Consequence of the World System

According to the *third image*, the anarchy of the international system permits war. Each member can judge its own grievances and ambitions according to its own preferences, and can choose the means to redress the perceived inequities. This choice would include military force, and its use would only be tempered by the relative capabilities of states. When each state is left to its own devices, it has to prepare to demand what it believes is due, and resist encroachments by others. Hence, the most important incentives for state action are imposed by the structure of the system itself.

In this view, both good and bad may lead to war, or may not. Anarchy does not make war a certainty, but it does permit its occurrence. However, as we have already seen, the international system is not exactly anarchic, but is rather hierarchic. The third image tries to get at this idea by referring to the **distribution of**

power in the system but since it is only dealing with structural characteristics, it cannot refer to the identity of the states that possess this power (a serious deficiency: an American “empire” would be quite different in character than a Russian one).

So what this image offers then is the idea of **system polarity**: a simple count of the most powerful states in the system. A *bipolar* system is one with just two superpowers, like the U.S. and the USSR throughout the Cold War. Similarly, a *unipolar* system is what some believe characterizes the present: a single dominant state, the U.S. When one state dominates others in some respect (military, economic, cultural, etc.), we call this state a **hegemon**, and we can distinguish between *regional* and *global* ones. Hence, the U.S. is a global hegemon in military power, and a regional hegemon economically (the European Union is another regional hegemon in terms of the economy). China is a regional hegemon in Asia. Again, one can discern various levels of hierarchies across different spheres of activity: political, economic, cultural, and security. Finally, the most common occurrence historically is the *multipolar* system, where there are several competing great powers (usually around 5, always fewer than 10).

Analysts then spend their time arguing which type of system is more stable in the sense that it is less prone to great power wars. Proponents of bipolarity argue that in such a system, the two superpowers are more or less evenly matched. Most other lesser powers would gravitate toward one of the two camps, and the remaining unaligned ones are (by definition) too weak to make any difference whether they join one side or the other. Given that each superpower only has one main adversary, with time each will come to know the other. They will know what to expect, and will be very careful and circumscribed in their actions toward each other. All of this would reduce uncertainty, the chance for mistakes, and therefore would decrease the likelihood of a general war between them.

On the other hand, should a general war break out in a bipolar system, it would be guaranteed to be exceptionally severe. Hence, both sides would put a premium on conflict management. But because both know that a general war would be so costly, both know that each would try to avoid it. This opens up a whole range of possibilities for militarized disputes through proxy, where friends of the superpowers would fight it out, with their “masters” stepping in when things threaten to get out of hand. The awesome nature of a general war between the two superpowers would in fact unleash a host of lesser wars among regional ones. This, in fact, is precisely what happened during the Cold War and millions of people died in various conflicts.

4.1 Cold War Stability and Nuclear Proliferation

The absence of major war between the U.S. and the USSR has led many to ask what caused it. Was it bipolarity itself? Or was it the moderating presence of nuclear weapons? If it was the former, then what about the current situation: are we entering a period of instability or are we bound to end up in an even

more stable world now that there's only one dominant power remaining? Peace in history seems to have followed the conquest by one of everybody else around it, so maybe unipolarity is even better?

If it was nuclear weapons that prevented war, then perhaps we should stop opposing proliferation and argue for their spread. If every country is armed with nukes, then any sort of challenge would be extremely dangerous and its opponents would be deterred. But would we be willing to place nukes in the hands of fundamentalists of this stripe or that? When Iranian clerics openly commit to using a nuke against Israel as soon as they get their hands on it? Or when terrorists like Qaddafi have repeatedly tried to acquire such capability? Or a person like Saddam? Perhaps instead of removing him we should have let him have his nukes?

And what about crisis stability? Suppose everyone has nukes. Now, some countries would have a couple and others would have hundreds, perhaps thousands. Certainly, even one nuke could wreak unspeakable havoc and is extremely dangerous. But consider this: two states are in a crisis, one of them has a few nukes, the other has a few hundred. If the state with many nukes attacks first and manages to take out its enemy's nuclear capability, then it can effectively remove the threat of destruction. So it has incentives to jump the gun: after all, there are only a few nukes to destroy, and so the possibility of achieving this goal is pretty high.

Its opponent, of course, is fully aware of this incentive to preempt. It has no chance of destroying the many nukes of its enemy, and if it waits, it may find itself without defenses, exposed to the nuclear blackmail of its powerful neighbor. So what does it do? The moment the heat is on, it would attempt to preempt the preemptive strike of its enemy. But the enemy knows this as well, so it will attempt to preempt the preemption of its preemptive strike, and so on. The **dynamics of mutual alarm** would cause a reciprocal fear of surprise attack, and this fear would feed on itself, spiralling out of control until one of them jumps the gun.

This first-strike capability (the ability to destroy the enemy's retaliatory capability through a surprise attack) is, in fact, exceedingly destabilizing. Before the U.S. and the USSR acquired enough nukes to ensure that a strike force would survive such an attack, people worried quite a bit about crisis instability and the incentives to preempt. One reason the nuclear weapons may have contributed to stability during the Cold War is the simple fact that neither side could expect to disarm the other through a surprise attack.

To achieve such second-strike capability (the ability to absorb a surprise attack and then retaliate in kind), each superpower built enormous arsenals of nuclear weapons, ushering in the era of *mutually assured destruction*: it did not matter who struck first, both would be destroyed in the resulting nuclear war. Hence, to be stabilizing, nuclear weapons must be secure, and since it is unreasonable to expect that each nation would be able to stockpile enough to guarantee second-strike capability, nuclear proliferation would lead to instabil-

ity even if we assume that lunatics cannot get their hands on them.

4.2 Balance of Power

At the other extreme, some argue that systems with many powerful states where capabilities are approximately evenly distributed among them would be less prone to conflict. Because there do not exist two supreme antagonists, each state must ensure proper relations with others, at least most of the time. Unlike the bipolar case with its frigid alignments, alliances in a multipolar system are fleeting, temporary truces made for mutual convenience and abandoned as soon as circumstances change. As the British were fond of remarking, “there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests.” An ally today could be the enemy tomorrow, and vice versa.

This frenzy of coalition-building produces a lot of uncertainty and one can never be sure whether his current friends can be relied upon. Should a state grow too strong in the sense that it can threaten its powerful neighbors, it would provoke a coalition against itself. Presumably, states would balance against a common threat. This system would also tend to preserve smaller states in the sense that their larger neighbors would not be allowed to absorb them lest they should grow too big and threatening to others. This means that frequent conflicts among the great powers would probably tend not to change the system that much.

This view has a lot of historical evidence to overcome. The “golden period” of the balance of power is usually considered to be the first half of the 19th century after a coalition of Russia, Britain, Austria, and Prussia eliminated Napoleon, boxed in France, and restored the monarchy there. What followed was a period of stability (rent by the occasional quickly suppressed liberal revolution), without a general war among the great powers until the Seven Weeks War of 1866 (the Crimean War between Russia and an alliance between Britain, and France was not fought in Europe). During this period, Britain was said to have played a stabilizing role by preventing any one power from dominating the continent.

The explanation has a bit of a problem in that the system was not exactly multipolar: Russia and Britain were unquestionably stronger than Austria, Prussia, and France. On land, Russia was unrivalled, its troops had reached Paris, and at the peace conference in Vienna, the Tsar was able to grab a chunk of Poland with the argument that Russian troops had already occupied it and nobody could drive them out. At sea, Britain brooked no equal either, and she soon got busy maintaining her far-flung empire, losing interest in continental affairs. Not to mention that its own liberal traditions made cooperation with reactionary regimes very difficult politically.

Austria was wobbly and even though everybody referred to the Ottoman Empire as the “sick man of Europe,” Habsburg Austria was dying as well. Prussia was a backward kingdom that got saddled with the worst territories at the Vienna conference. Little did they (or anyone else for that matter) know that these worthless lands would turn out to contain natural resources that would pro-

pel Prussia to first-rank power within five decades. France itself was defeated (twice) and existed in peace at the sufferance of the others.

To summarize, the system was characterized by Russian land dominance and British sea dominance, not a balance of power. Britain lost interest on the continent and the curious question is why Russia chose not to expand further into Europe where it could not have been seriously opposed. The supposed balancing act also completely failed to stop the unification of Germany. First, Prussia defeated Austria, acquiring the leadership of the German confederation. And then when it turned on France, the French found themselves alone on the losing side. When Germany emerged in 1871, there was no question that the new power had to be reckoned with. That Bismarck had the foresight not to rock the boat further did not negate the simple fact that the new country was a cultural, economic, and political dynamo: it quickly outstripped all other European powers in just about everything and by 1914 it had caught up even with Britain. (The only country growing at a faster rate was the United States.) And nobody balanced against it.

It would appear that balancing tends to occur once shooting starts, it does very little to prevent it. And when is shooting most likely to start?

4.3 Power Transition

The great British historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote:

The Great Powers were, as their name implies, organizations for power, that is, in the last resort for war. They might have other objects—the welfare of their inhabitants or the grandeur of their rulers. But the basic test for them as Great Powers was their ability to wage war.... The test of a Great Power is then the test of strength for war.... The war of 1866, like the war of 1859 before it, and the wars of 1870 and 1914 after it, was launched by the conservative Power, the Power standing on the defensive, which, baited beyond endurance, broke out on its tormentors. Every war between Great Powers [during this period] started as a preventive war, not as a war of conquest.

Here we have a concise statement of the idea of **preventive war**, which is caused by the economic (and military) rise and decline of various states. In other words, differential growth rates among the great powers eventually causes one of them to excel all others even without the direction of its leaders plotting world conquest. Some states are simply better organized than others and are better positioned to take advantage of emerging technologies. Britain was becoming stagnant by the end of the 19th century, its world trade quickly being eclipsed by the United States, and its imperial overstretch (the sun never sat over the empire) was costly to maintain. Germany, on the other hand, had no commitments, and as a newly emergent economy was not dependent on obsolete modes of production. By 1914, Germany had either overtaken Britain or

caught up with it, and this had nothing to do with German rulers planning the overthrow of the system.

Here's Germany's Crown Prince Wilhelm, the son of the Kaiser and heir to the throne, talking about the prospects of war in 1913:

Germany has behind her since the last great war a period of economic prosperity, which has in it something almost disconcerting. Comfort has so increased in all circles of our people that luxury and claims to a certain style of life have undergone a rank development.

Now certainly we must not thanklessly deny that a wave of economic prosperity brings with it much that is good. But the shady side of this too rapid development often manifests itself in a painful and threatening manner. Already the appreciation of wealth has gained in our country an importance which we can only observe with anxiety.

The old ideals, even the position and the honor of the nation, may be sympathetically affected; for peace, peace at any price, is necessary for the undisturbed acquisition of money.

But the study of history teaches us that all those States which in the decisive hour have been guided by purely commercial considerations have miserably come to grief. The sympathies of civilized nations are today, as in the battles of antiquity, still with the sturdy and the bold fighting armies; . . .

Our country is obliged more than any other country to place all its confidence in its good weapons. Set in the center of Europe, it is badly protected by its unfavorable geographic frontiers, and is regarded by many nations without affection.

Upon the German Empire, therefore, is imposed more emphatically than upon any other peoples of the earth the sacred duty of watching carefully that its army and its navy be always prepared to, meet any attack from the outside. It is only by reliance upon our brave sword that we shall be able to maintain that place in the sun which belongs to us, and which the world does not seem very willing to accord us.

Growth, as the Prince recognized, does threaten the international system because sooner or later, the emergent power would attempt to take advantage of its newly found strength by demanding a redistribution of the benefits provided by the system. As German power grew, Britain aligned itself with France and Russia for it had become increasingly clear that France and Russia by themselves were no match for Germany. This is what the balance of power theory would predict, but not what followed.

When the balance was approximately even, world war broke out. That is, at the point of transition, when forces were most equally distributed and hence neither side should have expected an easy victory, the two alliances went to war with each other.

Power transition theory claims that in general these transitional points are the most dangerous periods. Why? Because a rising challenger would not threaten the system while it is still weak. If the dominant state demands submission at this point, it is likely to get it. Conversely, once the transition is past, the new dominant state could get its way without fighting by demanding and getting a redistribution from the one it has eclipsed. Hence, war is unlikely when some state is enjoying a **preponderance of power**. It is during the transition that things are most uncertain, and hence when both sides could have incentives to fight: the challenger believes that now, for the first time, it has a chance of winning, while the defender believes that now is the last time it would have a chance of defeating the upstart.

This logic is the one that Taylor uses to explain all wars in his book: the dominant but declining state wages war on the rising challenger to prevent it from exploiting its inevitable advantages in the future. It is the, "better fight now rather than submit later" justification. Further, as A.F.K. Organski (one of the originators of power transition theory) claimed, the rapid rise in power creates dissatisfaction itself, much like in our discussion of misalignment between rising expectations and reality that fails to keep up. Hence, the newly powerful state demands respect and position in the system but since it has not proven its worth in war, it is unlikely to get those without fighting. Again, we see the idea of perceived, not real, deprivation interacting with the problem of unproven strength.

As Taylor wrote, the real test of a Great Power is war. However, all too often, the only way to remain a Great Power is actually not to fight it. General war between powerful states is so ruinous that usually both lose in the end. The Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Russia all disintegrated as a result of the First World War. The British Empire fell apart as a result of the Second. The only country who seems to have benefitted from these global conflagrations is, ironically, America.

However, ignoring the characters of the rising challenger and the declining state might miss important causes of non-violent transitions. For example, Britain voluntarily relinquished its maritime empire to the United States at the end of the 19th century. We are very tempted to read much into that: perhaps Britain was not afraid that the U.S. would turn to exploitation tomorrow. And why? Perhaps because despite its brief flirtation with empire, the United States is internally organized in a way that is quite inimical to imperialism. At any rate, for some reason Britain chose not to fight America over this. Why, then, are some transitions peaceful while others are not?

Where does all this leave us? Neither of the images can predict when war will occur. Each has serious deficiencies as theoretical explanations. We shall mostly ignore the human nature reasoning mostly because it (a) does not seem at all necessary for any theory of war, and (b) if it is necessary, then we are in trouble for we can never know what sort of lunatic would start the next one. Hitler may have been a loony, as Saddam and many others. And yet, he did not wage war

by himself: he had followers, almost always enthusiastic ones. He had talented generals to plan the war. He had extremely talented scientists to engineer his weapons. He had excellent soldiers to do the fighting. In short, his madness does not entirely explain Germany's bid for supremacy.

Further, in keeping with the rational actor model, we shall now begin investigating possible reasons that would cause actors to end up fighting while being fully cognizant of the certain havoc that war would cause. We shall see, perhaps surprisingly, that there are quite a few reasons why war can be a rational choice. This would be a very depressing finding indeed.