

U.S. Foreign Policy: Explanations for War – Mutual Optimism

Branislav L. Slantchev

Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego

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One surely heroic assumption we have quietly made is that actors know everything there is to know about the simple world in which they exist. For example, we have assumed that they know the distribution of power, which allows them to figure out their expected values of war, and from there locate the bargaining range. In practice, this assumption is almost certainly violated: polities might be uncertain about the capabilities of their opponents, about the skill of their (or their own) commanders, about the morale of the armed forces, and so on. Since all of these factors affect the probability that one actor will prevail in a war, not knowing any of them means not knowing the distribution of power. In the absence of full information about the distribution of power, actors must rely on their best estimates (or guesses). The problem is that without a commonly agreed to estimate of the distribution of power, actors can end up harboring vastly different views of how war might unfold. This is what Blainey calls “disagreement about relative power.” Blainey’s argument is that war is caused by such disagreements, but we wish to be more precise in defining what this means. The model will help.

1 How Mutual Optimism Can Lead to War

Suppose that there are two possible states of the world. In one, actor A is strong and has a high probability of winning. Label this probability $p_H \in (0, 1)$. In the other state of the world, A is weak, and has a low probability of winning. Label that probability $p_L < p_H$. Neither actor knows the state of the real world, and so neither knows whether A is strong or weak. Figure 1 shows these two possibilities. Observe that if the actors knew which state of the world they actually live in, they would be able to avoid war because the bargaining range exists in each of those states. The only difference is that when A is strong, he can expect to obtain a better deal than if he is weak. The problem, then, is that the actors do not know the actual state.

All actors have are beliefs about the what the state of the world might be. Let $q_A \in (0, 1)$ denote the probability with which A believes that he is strong and so $1 - q_A$ is his belief that he is weak. Analogously, let $q_B \in (0, 1)$ denote B ’s belief that A is strong and so $1 - q_B$ is her belief that A is weak. There is no necessary relationship between these beliefs: q_A is merely A ’s belief that they dwell in the world in which he is strong, and q_B is merely his opponent’s belief that they dwell in that world.

It is evident from the illustration that if the difference between p_H and p_L is not very large, the bargaining ranges for the two possible worlds will intersect. If this happens, then

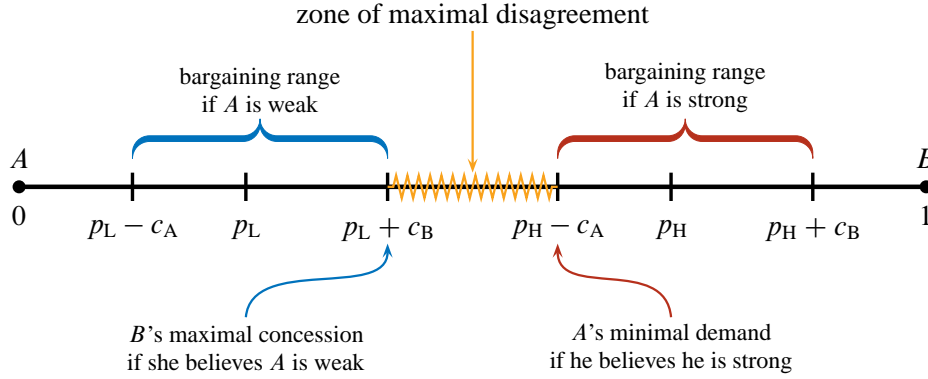


Figure 1: Mutual Optimism and War.

peace must prevail regardless of the beliefs that actors have about which world they dwell in. This is so because when the two ranges intersect, B 's most demanding minimal terms (in the world where A is weak) are smaller than A 's most demanding minimal terms (in the world where A is strong). Any deal between these two is acceptable to both no matter what they believe, and so war would not occur. When the bargaining ranges are disjoint, as in Figure 1, a **zone of maximal disagreement** exists between the most demanding minimal terms of the two actors.

The existence of this zone creates a problem for locating a mutually acceptable bargain when the actors are too optimistic. It should be evident from the illustration that no such deal would exist if A were certain he was strong but B were certain that he is weak. A would not agree to any peace deal that does not locate the border to the right of $p_H - c_A$. Analogously, B would not agree to any peace deal that does not locate the border to the left of $p_L + c_B$. But since $p_L + c_B < p_H - c_A$, it follows that there is no way to position the border such that both demands are simultaneously satisfied. There is no bargain that makes both actors want to avoid war at the same time. As a result, either one can initiate war to resolve the impasse.

We now establish this result for the general case in which actors might be uncertain about the actual state of the world. When A is unsure whether he is strong or weak, his expectation about war must include both possibilities:

$$E(W_A) = \underbrace{q_A}_{\text{A's belief that he is strong}} \times \underbrace{(p_H - c_A)}_{\text{A's war payoff when strong}} + \underbrace{(1 - q_A)}_{\text{A's belief that he is weak}} \times \underbrace{(p_L - c_A)}_{\text{A's war payoff when weak}},$$

and this defines the minimal terms that A would demand in order to agree not to fight. We can rewrite this for convenience and make the dependence on beliefs very clear:

$$E(W_A) = p_L - c_A + q_A(p_H - p_L).$$

In words, A 's war expectation is the payoff he would get if he happens to be weak, $p_L - c_A$ plus the "bonus" if he happens to be strong, $p_H - p_L$, which he expects to obtain with probability q_A (the belief that he is strong). When A is maximally optimistic, $q_A = 1$, we

obtain the upper bound on the zone of maximal disagreement. As his optimism decreases (q_A goes down), the upper bound moves to the left, shrinking the zone of disagreement.

Analogous calculations show that B 's expectation about war is

$$E(W_B) = 1 - p_L - c_B - q_B(p_H - p_L).$$

In words, B 's war expectation is the payoff she would get if she happens to be strong (A 's probability of winning is p_L) minus the "penalty" if she happens to be weak, $p_H - p_L$, which she expects to have to pay with probability q_B (the belief that she is weak). Since B 's maximum concession is defined as $1 - E(W_B) = p_L + c_B + q_B(p_H - p_L)$, when she is maximally optimistic, $q_B = 0$, we obtain the lower bound on the zone of maximal disagreement. As her optimism decreases (q_B goes up), the lower bound moves to the right, shrinking the zone of disagreement.

Since the disagreement zone shrinks as the optimism of the actors decreases, it stands to reason that at some point that zone would disappear altogether and a peace would become possible despite the uncertainty. We now derive a condition that *ensures* that a zone of disagreement exists; that is, we derive a condition on the various parameters of the model that is *sufficient* to guarantee that war must occur.

As before, the war expectations determine the minimal terms that actors would demand if they are to agree not to fight. If these terms exceed the benefit that they can divide in peace, then there would be no war to divide that benefit to their mutual satisfaction – at least one of the players would have to receive something strictly worse than his war expectation. Naturally, he would not agree to this, and war would have to follow. This suggests that we can define **mutual optimism** as those beliefs that ensure that these minimal terms cannot be satisfied:

$$E(W_A) + E(W_B) > 1.$$

Substituting the definitions of these expectations that we derived above and rearranging terms yields the **mutual optimism condition**:

$$\underbrace{\underbrace{(q_A - q_B)}_{\text{extent of disagreement}} \underbrace{(p_H - p_L)}_{\text{size of difference between the two worlds}}}_{\text{expected total benefit of war}} > \underbrace{c_A + c_B}_{\text{total costs of war}} . \quad (\text{MO})$$

We can interpret this condition as follows. On the right-hand side are the total costs of war, which are always positive. Moreover, if they are sufficiently large, then this condition cannot be satisfied. In other words, if war is sufficiently costly, then no amount of mutual optimism would cause the actors to fight. The left-hand side comprises two terms. The *extent of disagreement* is the difference between the probabilities that A and B assign to being in the world where A is strong. The *size of difference between the two worlds* is the difference between the expected gain when A is strong and when he is weak. Multiplying the extent of disagreement by the size of the difference gives us the *expected total benefit from war*. Trivially, the equation states that war must occur when its total expected benefit exceeds its total expected costs.

Let us think a bit about the two terms that define the total expected benefit. Consider first the size of the difference, $p_H - p_L$, which is always positive, and which measures how important the consequences of disagreement might be. Intuitively, if the two probabilities are close to each other, then the expectations about war in the two states of the world would have to be fairly close as well. This means that for the disagreement to matter, the extent of disagreement would have to be very large. (If they are too close, then the bargaining ranges of the two worlds will intersect, and war will not occur.) Conversely, if the potential difference between the two worlds is great, then even a relatively modest extent of disagreement might wipe out any mutually-acceptable bargains. Anything that increases the expected difference between the two worlds (e.g., an untested technology that might give A a decisive advantage in battle) can make war more likely.

Turning now to the extent of disagreement, $q_A - q_B$, it is worth noting that since we put no restrictions on the beliefs actors hold, it is possible for this term to be non-positive: $q_A \leq q_B$. In this situation, A places a smaller probability on the state of the world in which he is strong than B does. It should be immediately obvious that if this is the case, then war would never occur: B , who pessimistically believes that A is strong, would offer a sizeable concession that A , who thinks he is actually weak, would only be too happy to accept. Mathematically, if this term is non-positive, then the mutual optimism condition can not be satisfied, so actors will not fight. If the term is positive, then it captures the extent to which A believes more strongly than B that he is strong. If the extent of disagreement is relatively small, then the condition for war can only be satisfied if the potential size of the difference between the two worlds is very large. Conversely, if the disagreement is relatively large, then even small potential differences between the two worlds can matter. Anything that makes A more optimistic (increases q_A) would make war more likely, just like anything that makes B more optimistic (decreases q_B) does.

Thus, (MO) defines mutual optimism: it specifies the condition that beliefs must satisfy for a disagreement zone to exist. Thus, we can use (MO) to explain war as a consequence of mutual optimism. It is not simply necessary that actors disagree about their relative strength; it must be that they are both “too optimistic” about what they expect war to accomplish. Condition (MO) gives a precise meaning to the phrase “too optimistic” by relating the difference in beliefs to the size of the differences between the two possible worlds and the costs of war. To put it in another way, each actor must be so optimistic that the maximal concession its opponent is prepared to make cannot satisfy that actor’s minimal terms. When this happens, war must break out.

How can such a divergence occur? One possibility is in the different doctrines of war that the actors might have. For example, actor A might believe that he has a very strong offensive capability and is doctrinally committed to waging an aggressive war. Actor B , on the other hand, might have developed tactics that it believes will be effective in defense, and so believes that A ’s chances of success from aggressive war are very small. This can result in a great divergence between the expected consequences from the different distributions of power. Depending on the emphasis the actors place on their doctrines being true - the optimism about being correct (and such “motivated bias” is not uncommon), these differences can close the opportunities for peace.

2 The Role of Fighting

It is one thing to say that “mutual optimism causes war” but it is quite another to explain how fighting a war is supposed to resolve that. And resolve it war must because very few wars end with the total obliteration or disarmament of the defeated party. Most wars actually end while both sides have the ability to continue to fight. This suggests that somehow fighting has enabled them to agree to peace even though initially neither was willing to make concessions. To study this, we need to move from a model of *absolute* war to a model of *ideal* war where fighting and bargaining are simultaneous processes. Doing so makes the analytical work more demanding, so for our purposes I will simply show the mechanism that such a model reveals.¹

Once war begins and neither actor is immediately defeated, fighting can gradually reveal what the true state of the world is. For example, if the true state is that *A* is strong, then *A* would be more likely to prevail in battles, maintain its army, and generally do better in the war than *B*. Since most of this is actually observable by both actors, they will begin to revise their estimates about the true state of the world. The process can be slow and noisy because chance factors might still intervene and cause *A* to lose particular engagements (friction!) but on average *A* would be doing better and both actors would know it. As *B* becomes more pessimistic, her minimal terms would become progressively more concessionary, shrinking the disagreement zone. With enough fighting, this process would cause this zone to disappear altogether. The bargaining range will reappear in the form of deals that both the optimistic *A* and the now pessimistic *B* can agree to, and the fighting will end. War provides the “stinging ice of reality,” as Blainey calls it, which cures actors of their optimism. Since performance in the war is necessarily related to the true state of the world, the beliefs about the state (and this about the location of the true bargaining range) revised on the basis of this performance would converge until they reach a point where peace becomes possible. The war terminates when actors agree on their relative strength, and the process of fighting allows them to revise their estimates until they do come to such an agreement. Thus, war occurs *because of* mutually optimistic assessments of what war will be like, and fighting continues *in order to* reconcile these expectations, which can enable the actors to terminate the war before one of them is defeated militarily.

3 Communication to the Rescue?

One might wonder why actors would fail to reconcile their contradictory assessments about the distribution of power without resorting to a fight. After all, if excessive optimism is pushing them to a war that would not occur if they agreed on a common estimate of its outcome, then they have a strong mutual interest in sharing information so that their beliefs converge without a war. Unfortunately, the private interest in obtaining more favorable terms can overwhelm the collective desire for peace. To see how this can happen, observe that sharing of information, especially information that is not readily verifiable but still

¹The argument in this section uses the extension of the model to *ideal* war in Branislav L. Slantchev. 2005. “The Principle of Convergence in Wartime Negotiations,” *American Political Science Review*, 97(4): 621–32. This is one, but by no means the only one, formalization of the process of belief convergence.

crucial (e.g., about one's resolve or the morale of troops) can be very difficult for strategic reasons. The reason is that ultimately, the willingness of an actor to make larger concessions depends on that actor's estimate of the opponent's value of war: each actor wants to push for a deal that barely satisfies the minimal terms of the opponent. As we have seen, in our scenario, the problem arises from uncertainty about the magnitude of these terms. This is what the opponent is now supposed to rectify by volunteering information about its own expected value of war. But why would that opponent be truthful? There are two reasons to doubt that he will be truthful, one that concerns the incentives of a weak actor to conceal his weakness, and another that concerns the incentives of the strong actor to pretend that he is weak.

Consider the incentives an actor, say *A*, who believes he is likely to be weak: would he necessarily wish to reveal that belief? Suppose that *A* is truthful: he tells *B* that he is weak when he believes himself to be weak, and tells *B* that he is strong when he believes himself to be strong. Since he is truthful, *B* will believe these statements and will revise her beliefs, offering a small concession to the self-described weak *A* and a better deal to the self-described strong *A*. But if the opponent believes his statements, will *A* wish to be truthful in his communication? Of course not: when he believes himself weak, he can simply lie and tell *B* that he is strong – since she expects him to tell the truth, she will offer the more attractive terms, which he will happily accept. Naturally, *B* is quite aware of this possibility and as a result will not believe any unverifiable pronouncements that *A* makes. The possibility for truthful communication is undermined by the incentives the actors have to misrepresent their beliefs for bargaining leverage.

In principle, one could overcome this problem by devising signals that *A* can only send if he is truly more likely to be strong; signals that he cannot fake if he is likely to be weak. For example, military maneuvers can reveal the training of his troops; a public discussion of his budget can reveal the extent of preparedness and popular consensus behind the policies; and revealing one's troop location and equipment can help establish the extent of mobilization and readiness to fight effectively. Badly trained troops will perform miserably in these exercises; a divided polity would voice its disagreements with the policy; and not having troops in sufficient numbers or with adequate equipment would reveal that one cannot expect to fight effectively. It then follows that revealing the exercises, the debates, or the location of troops can credibly inform the opponent about the likelihood of the actor being in a strong military position. Thus, one might think that all one has to do to overcome the communication problem is find such strategies.

Unfortunately, this need not be the case: when it is possible for the opponent to use this information against an actor's interest, then the incentive to reveal it might disappear even though the lack of revelation could lead to war.² Suppose *A* is strong and consider the strategy of revealing his troop dispositions in an effort to impress *B*. One possible reaction, of course, is that *B* is duly impressed and offers better terms. The other reaction, unfortunately, is that *B* uses this information to prepare a more effective assault and in the war that results *A*'s military advantage is neutralized. Revealing the information about being strong can enable the opponent to take counter-measures that undermine that strength and

²This section summarizes the argument in Branislav L. Slantchev. 2010. "Feigning Weakness," *International Organization*, 64(Summer): 357–88.

dissipate whatever bargaining leverage *A* was hoping to obtain. In a situation like this, *A* might not merely seek to conceal such sensitive information; she could also actively try to mislead *B* by fostering a sense of *false optimism*. Actor *A* who believes he is strong pretends to be weak in the hope that this would cause *B* to indulge in excessive overconfidence and perhaps rush into a war without adequate preparation. While *A* would have to forego the chances of obtaining a better peace deal (after all, now *B* is even more optimistic than before), he will have a much better chance of victory against an unprepared and surprised opponent. This sort of problem cannot be corrected through communication even when credible demonstrations are available — actors with incentives to feign weakness would not reveal the information even when they could.

One manifestation of this problem occurred in 1950 when the United States was trying to ascertain whether China would intervene in the Korean War. The initial objective of the U.S.-led intervention had been accomplished — the North Korean army was expelled from South Korea and all but destroyed. With no opposing forces between them and the Yalu River, the Americans were tempted to invade North Korea and unify the peninsula under the leadership of the South. The only military power that could potentially stand in the way was China (backed by the Soviet Union), and the U.S. did not want to fight China over Korea. Before making the crucial decision to invade the North, the U.S. leadership made a concerted effort to determine whether China would intervene. The Chinese leadership was claiming, more or less, that they might, but we know how much faith one should place in such statements. Consequently, the Americans tried to infer China's intent by looking for behaviors that China would engage in if it were truly prepared to fight. In our language, China could either be strong (prepared to intervene and willing to do so) or weak (lacking in one or both of these). The U.S. used planes to try to detect troop movements — was China sending troops to North Korea to defend it? The U.S. used intelligence to monitor preparations in Beijing — was the Chinese government ordering citizens to board up their windows as defense the inevitable American air strike in case of war? The U.S. asked all its allies with links to China to estimate the likelihood of intervention. All sources pointed to the same conclusion: there was no evidence of troop movements to Korea, no preparations for war, and no credible communication even privately that China would fight. Having thus decided that the absence of a credible signal of strength is evidence of weakness, the U.S. crossed the 38th parallel and invaded the North. . .

. . . only to run headlong into a massive Chinese army of crack troops. The Chinese were not merely in Korea, they were there, hiding, in strength. What had happened? If the Chinese were going to intervene, why had they failed to reveal that to the Americans? It is fairly clear from the evidence that had they done so, the U.S. would not have invaded. Why conceal all preparations and practically guarantee that the U.S. would go North? The key to understanding that episode is in the lack of incentive to reveal the military preparations that would have convinced the U.S. to stay out. Showing the disposition and numbers of their troops would have persuaded the U.S. that the Chinese were serious. Unfortunately, the Chinese had no way of knowing what the consequence of that would be: the U.S. might acquiesce but it might instead choose to use its massive firepower to pummel those very troops that China was using for deterrence. At the time, the U.S. had a clear superiority in air power — the nascent Chinese forces had no air force, and the negotiations with Stalin to provide air cover for the ground operations had stalled. Thus, should the U.S. choose

to take advantage of the information the Chinese revealed, it would have little difficulty neutralizing their forces. (With General MacArthur in triumph after the success of his Inchon landing, such an operation might not have appeared unlikely.)

The Chinese were caught between a rock and a hard place: do not reveal the troops and risk almost certain war in which they would enjoy the advantages of surprise; or reveal the troops and either get a good deal (the U.S. stays south of the 38th Parallel) or end up in a war against a fully prepared United States that pulverizes your defenseless troops. With such an unenviable decision to make, the Chinese leadership opted to preserve the military advantage of surprise – they moved over 300,000 soldiers in complete secrecy using round-about routes and marching only at night (officers had orders to shoot any stragglers who broke cover during the day precisely in an effort to avoid detection from American overflights), ending up in North Korea and delivering a serious blow to the unprepared Americans.³

The bottom line is that the incentives to hide information can make it impossible to reveal it in a way the opponent would believe. But if the opponent's beliefs are not affected by communication, then belief convergence cannot occur without actual fighting. Since fighting is more "truthful" than words (performance in war depends on the actual state of the world, not on the state the actor wishes it to be or claims it to be), war can play a function that diplomacy cannot. Bullets speak louder than words: the belligerents can converge on an expected outcome and end the war.

4 Sources of Optimistic Expectations

We conclude that mutual optimism can be a cause of war, and so anything that promotes such optimism can be a contributing factor to both the outbreak of war and its continuation. Conversely, anything that reduces that optimism is a contributing factor to peace and war termination. This suggests several variables we might want to consider in our study of war and society.

Consider **overconfidence** in one's ability to win, or in the reliability of one's allies. This can arise from exaggerated sense of the quality of one's own armed forces, the competence of the military leadership, or the ability to sustain the necessary war effort. It can also arise from a very negative assessment of the opponent's quality, competence, and economic potential. The image of one's own superiority and the opponent's inferiority is important, and it can be arise out of religious differences (God is on our side), racism (we are the superior race), nationalism (our society is more civilized and advanced), faith in technology (our weapons are superior), unifying morale (our cause is just), or military culture (we are better warriors and/or our doctrine is superior). Overconfidence might also be an evolutionary adaptation, so we might all be prone to it for biological reasons.

One famous example of overconfidence that turned out to have been misplaced occurred during the Peloponnesian War in 416 BC. The Athenians landed a powerful army on the

³See "Feigning Weakness" for a summary of this argument. I deal with the other aspects of the Chinese intervention in Branislav L. Slantchev 2011. *Military Threats: The Costs of Coercion and the Price of Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Chapter 6: The Expansion of the Korean War, pp. 191–223.

neutral island of Melos and demanded that the Melians surrender and pay tribute to Athens.⁴ The Melians were hopelessly outnumbered so they tried to reason with the Athenians, arguing that “the fortune of war is sometimes more impartial than the disproportion of numbers might lead one to suppose.” (There is always risk involved in war, so there is a chance that Athens would not win.) The Athenians countered that while this was generally true, the imbalance of military power between them and the Melians was too great to give the Melians any meaningful probability of avoiding defeat. To this, the Melians replied as follows:

You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by the alliance of the Spartans, who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred. Our confidence, therefore, after all is not so utterly irrational (5.104).

In other words, the Melians insisted that they were not as weak as the Athenians believed because the gods were on their side, their cause was just, and their allies would help them. This created a large discrepancy between what the Athenians believed about the likelihood of victory and what the Melians believed. The Athenians based their estimate on their military power; on the very high probability that the Spartans would not be able to arrive in time to intervene even if they were inclined to do so, which they probably were not; and on their belief that all that talk about gods and justice was delusional. Both sides were optimistic in the sense we defined it here: the Melians were unwilling to make the concessions that the Athenians were demanding because they disagreed about what war would entail. Instead of surrender and tribute, they offered a friendly neutrality, which the Athenians found too small of a concession. In the end, the Melians firmly refused to yield to the Athenian demands whereupon the Athenians besieged the city, took it, slaughtered all men, and sold all women and children into slavery. The “stinging ice of reality” had shown that the Athenian assessment had been closer to the true state of the world: neither the gods nor the Spartans had materialized to help the Melians.

There also might be **agency problems in civil-military relations**. The generals might not provide entirely accurate assessments to the politicians. Although this often takes the form of claiming unpreparedness (and demanding larger budgets), it also might be out of personal desire for glory, exaggerated self-confidence, or interest in a policy that might not be entirely in line with what the politicians want. The military leadership can also hide adverse developments in an effort to avoid appearing incompetent and facing censure. All of these activities would leave the political leadership with the mistaken impression that its military position is far stronger than it really is. As H.H. Asquith, the British Prime Minister at the outbreak of the First World War once remarked,

[The War Office kept three sets of figures,] one to mislead the public, another to mislead the Cabinet, and the third to mislead itself.⁵

⁴Thucydides. 1996. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, edited by Robert B. Strassler. New York: Touchstone, pp. 353–54. All quotes used here are from this edition.

⁵Quoted in Alistair Horne. 1994. *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*. London: Penguin, p. 23.

Then there's the mobilization of **public opinion**. When the government needs to maintain support for its military policies, it might cultivate the desired public opinion with intense propaganda that conceals the true state of affairs. Whether or not the government believes its own hype (and they often do), once the public is whipped into frenzy, it would be very difficult politically to change course. The effect of this falsely created optimism would be equivalent to the real thing: those who believe would work hard for the aggressive policy they support, and those who do not would be silenced out of fear of appearing out of step with the rest. Incidentally, this might mean that democracies might be more prone to this problem because democratic governments might be more constrained by public opinion. One famous statement of this view is by Walter Lippmann, who condemned public opinion outright:

The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures. The people have impressed a critical veto upon the judgments of informed and responsible officials. They have compelled the government, which usually knew what would have been wiser, or was necessary, or what was more expedient, to be *too late with too little, or too long with too much*, too pacifist in peace and too bellicose in war, too neutralist or appeasing in negotiations or too intransigent. Mass opinion has acquired mounting power in this country. It has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decision when the stakes are life and death.⁶

One need not take such a drastically pessimistic view of public opinion but one should not ignore the impact it has on politicians concerned with retaining office. Even non-democratic leaders might be very sensitive to this opinion, especially if their legitimation claims rest on some sort of claims to competence in foreign affairs or military matters more generally.

Optimistic assessments can also be linked to **windows of opportunity**: temporary weaknesses of opponents that invite aggression. One very common example is attacking or otherwise trying to exploit an opponent who is engaged in another conflict already. With resources and army already committed to that other conflict, the opponent is (temporarily) weaker or at least expected to be weaker, and so the group can attempt to drive a hard bargain. A polity torn by revolution or civil war can also invite aggression in the belief that it cannot muster the resources for a proper defense. Sudden or extra-constitutional changes in government (e.g., death of a monarch or a coup) can also destabilize the internal cohesion of the group and create doubts about its ability to mobilize for military action. An economic or fiscal crisis, a government near bankruptcy, or the perception of imperial overstretch, all of these can motivate optimistic beliefs in the opponents.

Consider briefly the consequences of three revolutions: the Iranian, the Russian, and the French. When the Iranian Revolution toppled the Shah in 1979, it was not immediately clear that the religious faction would come to dominate politics — there were many competing groups, most of them secular. With the Iranian government in chaos, neighboring Iraq's Saddam Hussein decided that the time was perfect for an invasion, an attempt to annex the oil-rich Khuzestan Province while the country is in turmoil. The consequences of the

⁶Walter Lippmann. 1955. *The Public Philosophy*. New York: Atlantic-Little Brown, p. 20 (emphasis added).

1980 invasion are well-known: Hussein's optimism proved unwarranted — the Iranians buried their differences, and since the religious faction was the only seemingly capable of organizing any sort of defense, it emerged dominant from the Revolution. After eight years of gruelling and vicious war, Iran prevailed, Khuzestan was saved, and the government had become theocratic.

Whereas the aggressor failed in this instance, opportunistic interventions can often lead to remarkable results. For instance, when the Soviet coup toppled the Tsarist rule in Russia in 1917, the Germans — who had been fighting the Russian Imperial Army for three years — decided to press home their advantage. The Soviet regime was weak, the Russian army was disintegrating, and the forces of counter-revolution were already on the move. The Soviet government could not hope to deal simultaneously with these threats. This is not to say that it did not try: in their first negotiations with the Germans, the Soviets argued for peace without territorial concessions (meaning that they simply wished to withdraw from the war and keep the pre-war boundaries). The Germans disagreed and resumed their advance, threatening to reach the capital and perhaps undo the new regime. In an extremely painful political move, Lenin prevailed and persuaded the Soviet government to make concessions to the Germans in order to disengage from the First World War to focus on its internal situation. The concessions the Germans wrested in this way were immense. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918), the Soviets had to relinquish a quarter of the Empire's population and industry, and almost all of its coal mines, among other things. Ukraine — among the most important sources of grain for the Empire — was also lost. Despite the harshness of the peace, the Bolsheviks did gain the breathing room they needed, and managed to consolidate their hold on power after nearly five years of a brutal civil war. With Germany getting defeated in 1919, the treaty was abrogated, and the resulting disputes over territory fueled numerous conflicts between the two world wars.

Thus, a country torn by revolution could be a tempting target because of the optimism this window of opportunity can create. The fact that the “stinging ice of reality” sometimes disabuses the aggressor from that optimism should not obscure the fact that it was this confidence in victory — usually well-founded in such chaotic situations — that propelled him into action.

One potentially important twist might be the ruler's **reputation** or at least the perception that failure to defend one's interests vigorously (especially if this happens under duress) would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and invite future aggression. Under the reputational logic, the group fights now in order to demonstrate that it is strong and thus deter further challenges, possibly by groups not necessarily related to the one it fights now. Fighting is a signal of strength that is supposed to dispel the unwarranted optimism of opponents that is assumed to arise if the group fails to fight (which is why the group expects more serious challenges in the future). Just as in the mutual optimism explanation, fighting is supposed to lead others to form more correct estimates of the distribution of power and of one's resolve. Because of this, they would be more likely to agree to acceptable peace deals instead of indulging in demands that are likely to provoke war because one is unwilling to make the necessary concessions. Note, however, that this line of reasoning does not require that one be particularly optimistic about the war that is being waged out of reputational concerns (although one would be hard-pressed to see how such a war is supposed to impress others if one were to lose it).

One famous statement of this logic is the *Domino Theory* according to which if one of the dominoes is allowed to fall, then all the others must necessarily follow, thereby justifying fighting to prevent the fall of the first one. Although the metaphor is different (one rotten apple infecting the others in the same barrel), the logic used by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1947 to persuade key congressmen to support military measure to contain the spread of Communism was the same:

Soviet pressure on the Straits, on Iran, and on northern Greece had brought the Balkans to the point where a highly possible Soviet breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration. Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east. It would also carry infection to Africa through Asia Minor and Egypt, and to Europe through Italy and France. . . The Soviet Union was playing one of the greatest gambles in history at minimal cost. . . We and we alone are in a position to break up the play.⁷

This line of reasoning has rather a lot of bodies buried in it. There are many difficulties with the concept of reputation to begin with, and with its application to inter-group conflict and war more specifically. Reputation, of course, is something that others confer on one, and as such it is largely beyond one's control. Manipulating the beliefs of others is very difficult because how others interpret one's behavior might have just as much to do with them and with the relations between the two, as with the acts one engages in. For example, too vigorous of a defense of one's interests might easily be interpreted as a sign of aggression and prompt a countervailing response. Appeasing behavior by a friendlier group might be interpreted as an act of generosity rather than weakness. Aggressive behavior in itself might have a detrimental effect if it causes the other to believe that it is being used merely for the sake of maintaining reputation.

At the end of the day, however, whether reputation exists or not and whether it can be successfully manipulated or not might be less relevant than whether groups and their leaders believe that reputation is worth fighting for. If they do, then reputation is just as real as any other factor one might wish to consider.⁸

⁷Dean Acheson. 1987. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 219.

⁸Some have argued that reputation is not worth fighting for. See, for example, Jonathan Mercer. 1996. *Reputation and International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Whether this is so scarcely matters for our purposes — if groups believe it to be so and fight for it, then we need to consider it.