

What are the causes  
of war?



Mankind has been fighting one another since before written words could record the outcome. The world we share with all living creatures demonstrates that conflict in the animal kingdom is ubiquitous, therefore why not so for man? If conflict is so ingrained in nature and in human behaviour, then its cause is obvious and it is natural to assume that war is unavoidable and will always be so. However, prior to making such a rash assumption, a review of the theories behind the causes of war and their unavoidability is required.

This essay will discuss the causes of war at different levels of analysis and prove that war is avoidable; albeit with extreme difficulty.

Prior to carrying out such a discussion on the causes of war, we must first define war. Definitions of war are as common as war itself, but for the purpose of this essay we will define war broadly as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations[2]. There are numerous types of war, but due to the size limits on this essay a focused approach is required, hence this essay will concentrate on the causes of interstate war.

## WHAT CAUSES WAR?

The causes of interstate war are many, too many to be analysed using a simple theory or model that will work for all situations and too numerous to be reviewed here. There has been significant debate over how to analyse war but no consensus has been reached about which method is best. What is generally agreed upon by contemporary scholars is that the many causes of war exist at different levels within human society[3] and in order to better understand the causes of war, analysis must be carried out at those different

levels before trying to understand the system as a whole. Again much debate exists over how many levels of analysis there are and how those levels should be defined or structured, but recognising the concept of a multi-dimensional approach to the causes of war is more important than the specifics of the framework used. Just to complicate the analysis of war, scholars recognise that there is interaction between levels of analysis as well[4]. In this essay a selection of the more common theories of the cause of interstate war will be analysed using the system, state, sub-state and individual levels.

International relations theories act at the system level of analysis and therefore have significant input into a review of the causes of war. The anarchic world where a global system of actors exists with no systemic power or rules to safeguard them is the prime basis for the realist approach to war. Within this system realists believe that states act rationally to ensure the best for themselves with the resources they have, ostensibly doing their best to maximise power and then maintain it for as long possible. A state's quest for, and use of power is the primary determinant of international outcomes, hence wars occur as either the intended consequence of aggressive states seeking to expand their power or as the unintended consequence of defensive states providing security for themselves[5].

As states vie for power within the global system, realists also theorise that states will balance the power in the system in order to prevent any one state gaining a hegemonic position. Realists believe that states will dominate if it is possible to do so without the constraint of others and this desire is held in check by the other states opposing such behaviour. The balance of power

theory details that system equilibrium is maintained via the threat of military alliances as deterrence to war or via defeat after deterrence fails[6].

Successfully examples of potential hegemons being vanquished are the defeat of Napoleon in Europe and the two system level wars of the twentieth century.

In contrast to the realist balance of power theory, where system equilibrium maintains system stability, the realist power transition theory posits that system stability is maintained by the existence of system hegemony.

Hegemonic powers arise periodically during history and use their power to strengthen their position and expand their empire. However powerful, history has shown that hegemons are doomed to fail eventually for three reasons[7]; due to the costs of leading the empire, because of internal decay and as technology advances giving other states leverage to act. This theory puts forward the concept that system instability arises during the decline of a hegemony and that the probability of war increases when a second tier state or states within the system decides to challenge the declining leader. This theory predicts that the current global United States led unipolar system is susceptible to instability as the inevitable decline of the US hegemony occurs. Challengers to the US are likely to arise as nations grow in both economic and military power leading to an increased probability of conflict.

Economic Structuralism defines capitalism as the prime reason behind war at the system level. Economic structuralists believe that capitalism leads to states needing to expand in order to provide for declining raw materials in their own countries, exhaustion of cheap labour internally, greater return on investments, and the requirement to continually find new markets in which

to sell their goods[8]. In searching for expanding resources, markets and labour the powerful states create levels of inequality in the less powerful and exploited states that drive them seek redress via conflict. Colonial expansion during the nineteenth century by European nations is a prime example where the wealth of raw materials and labour held by the new colonies was stripped in order to enrich the European states. Inevitably, this led to many conflicts that were often grossly one sided due to superior military strength of the west at that time.

The counter argument to the economic structuralist theory that capitalism causes war is the liberalist theory that free trade and an economically open system at the global level reduces the likelihood of war. Liberalists argue that the absence of free trade makes war more likely for two prime reasons. Firstly, that war is much more expensive than purchasing raw materials, regardless of where they are sourced on the globe and the cost of raising armies and subsequent occupation of a conquered nation is far outweighed by the price of purchase in a free and open market[9]. Secondly, a free trade system builds a level of interdependence between states that works to maintain harmony and peace as all states involved in the system will loose if war occurs. However, sceptical scholars argue that the link between free trade and a lack of war is tenuous because unequal interdependence between trading partners can still lead to economic coercion which can then lead to conflict[10]. Reviews of empirical data of historical wars against geography and trade relationships shows that states tend to trade most with their immediate neighbours but also go to war most with those same

neighbours, hence there is little to support this economic interdependence portion of the liberalist argument.

Some of the system level theories such as the balance of power theory and the effects of capitalism cross the boundary from system into the state and sub-state level, albeit with a different name. There are numerous state and sub-state level theories which will now be discussed.

First let us consider the type of regime and its influence on the likelihood of a state going to war. Scholars argue that the type of regime running a country has a strong input into the likelihood of war. It has long been argued that democracies are highly unlikely to go to war with other democracies but beyond this theory there is little convincing connection between regime type and war[11]. It must be noted that democracies don't go to war any less than other regime types, they just seldom go to war with other democracies. Additionally, newly formed democracies break the democratic peace theory and are much more prone to go to war than more mature democracies or even than stable autocracies[12]. This is because democratising states do not yet have a stable government capable of building public support through diplomatic compromise and foreign policy.

The expected utility theory behind the cause of war can be described as the logical approach to war. This is where the outcome of going to war is considered against the outcome of not going to war, i. e. peace. The outcome with the highest expected utility is selected as the course of action. In reality it is obviously extremely difficult to make such a decision based on the subjective outcome of different state policies, opposing actions and

international intervention. This theory does help understand the puzzle of why so many states that start wars go on to lose them. This can be explained by the expected utility theory in that the option to the leader to wage an unsuccessful war, while irrational, is considered to have a higher utility. The most recent and famous example of such a decision making process is Saddam Hussein's choice to not withdraw his troops from Kuwait in 1991. His rule of Iraq for a further 12 years after loosing this war shows that winning a war against the United States might not have been his prime objective.

Aggressive states are often blamed for causing wars within their sphere of influence. The action of an aggressive state is normally an attempt at transitioning power because of a perceived imbalance in economic affairs, territorial distribution or other factors in the beliefs of their leader or government. Thus power transition theory at the state level is often used to explain the actions of a nation that has grown in power and who believes that a rearrangement of relationships is required to recognise its power[13]. German policy prior to World War One and World War Two are prime examples of a nation seeking to better its position within Europe and the world. In the case of Germany, nationalism was the tool used to drive that country into war.

The ideological roots of nationalism are found in the political history of Western Europe and the end of the feudal system[14]. Nationalism is viewed by scholars as a state level cause of war because it is the nationalism of existing nation-states or the nationalism in the effort to create new nation-states that is the source of conflict[15]. As with other theories behind the cause of war, nationalism and ethnic conflict do not appear as sole sources

driving a state to war, but they often play an important role. Since the end of the Cold War there have been numerous wars around the globe where nationalism and ethnicity have played a large part. Generally, nationalism is now considered as something perceived rather than a physical reality or a genetic grouping such as Nazi Germany, where a race of people believed they had the right to rule and kill others of different races. History shows that while there is little doubt that nationalism has played an important role in the origins of many wars, nationalism itself is a relatively modern concept, yet war is perennial.

Imperialism is the state level theory of war based on a states economic need and the military efforts for conquest due to that need. This state level cause of war is linked to the economic structuralist argument at the system level that capitalism causes war. At the state level, an individual state's needs drive the imperialist urge to improve the economic situation through military might and expansion to meet growing demand in markets, labour and raw materials. The colonial exploits and conquests of European nations during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries are judged by many scholars as prime examples of economic imperial forces at work[16].

Lastly in the state level causes of war, is the strange but surprisingly often used theory of war as a diversion. History has shown many cases of leaders and governments choosing to go to war in order to distract the state and public from other issues deemed more troubling. Argentina and the Falkland's War in 1982 where an unpopular military regime faced economic and political pressure from democratic force is the prime modern example of this tactic. While history traces wars of distraction back as far as 1328 and



the Hundred Years war[17]with many examples through to the present day, the distraction is often not fully realised until well after the event has been initiated and the effect complete.

War as a distraction describes a situation in which a state leader makes a conscious decision to lead his country to war for a ruse. Such a decision begs the question of that leader's suitability to rule and raises the discussion of the influence of human nature and individual leader's psyche in causing war at the individual level.

Psychologists have long argued that natural behaviour is a factor in war and that human beings are inherently violent. Evolutionary psychologists see human beings having the same predisposition towards violence as animals[18]caused by territoriality and rivalry. Animals are naturally aggressive and in humans this aggression reveals itself as warfare. This theory has been supported by animal studies like Dr Jane Goodall's observations of chimpanzees in Tanzania[19].

While human aggression may have some general explanatory value about why war exists, it does not explain when or how wars occur. Nor does human aggression explain the existence of the rare cultures that are completely devoid of war such as the BaMbuti pygmies in Zaire[20]. Additionally, the problem with human aggression theory is that few wars are actually started by the general populace. Far more often the general population has been reluctantly drawn into war by the state leader.

The leaders of autocracies obviously have complete influence over the decision to go to war and many are seen as causing war deliberately rather

than by accident. The pathological “will to power”[21] of Hitler and Napoleon is an obvious explanation for wars associated with each, but many scholars find this explanation too simple. After greater analysis scholars find that there are genuine conflicts behind the leader’s decision making. In the case of both Hitler and Napoleon the distribution of power within Europe was the driving force behind each of their will to power[22].

#### WHY ARE WARS UNAVOIDABLE

The literature and theoretical review behind the causes of war is immense. Scholarly effort since Thucydides first wrote of the Peloponnesian war has been constant, yet why are we not able to predict these causes and therefore prevent the next war from occurring? Part of the answer is in the wide and diverse range of theories that are described in this essay, but more importantly is the fact that these are theories only, not strict rules or laws. The multiple causes of war are a slippery subject that is made more difficult to define by the difficulty in predicting human interaction and anticipating what could occur next. Recent and poignant examples of this is the inability for theorists to predict the end of the Cold War or the 9/11 attacks.

The avoidance of war is similarly difficult for many reasons during the period before conflict initiates. When two states interact, each must interpret information on the other and develop their actions from this information. Misperceptions and irrational calculations can lead one actor to believe that the other actor is hostile or their actions are hostile and vice versa. Problems of misperceptions are often likely to be at greatest risk of occurring during times of high stress, just when a level head is needed. A prime example of

such a decision would be Germany's expectation that Britain would not join the war in 1914[23].

While states go to great lengths to ensure the information on the enemy's physical build up is accurate, circumstances can occur when data is one hundred percent correct and yet decisions are based on the unknown intentions of an adversary. Such unknown intention creates a system of insecurity and competition when attempting to secure the nation and resources via defensive measures[24]. This is known as a security dilemma where both parties escalate their defenses based on knowledge of each others military build up. The start of WWI is the classic example of a security dilemma leading to a conflict that was unexpected by most of Europe.

Breaking this cycle of spiraling conflict and tension before a war is initiated is made more difficult by the individual egos and psyche of leaders, not to mention their personal cognitive and communication skills when under stress.

Finally, overly optimistic assessments caused by the fog of war during a conflict spiral can lead to poor decision making and possibly lead a nation into a situation where war becomes unavoidable. While not over yet, one could argue that the United States decision to enter into the current war in Iraq was based on overly optimistic assessments of the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Weapons that to date have never been found.

CONCLUSION

In order to analyse war effectively the different levels at which the system, states, sub-state actors and individuals interact must be separated and analysed individually. These levels interact with each other and, as such, create an extremely complex system that has no one unifying theory against which scholars can accurately review empirical data and confidently predict future occurrences of war, or lack of.

This essay has briefly outlined a number of the more popular theories of the causes of interstate war across the system, state, sub-state and individual levels of analysis. Each of these theories has strengths and weaknesses in its application to the real world and each equally has proponents and opponents to the accuracy of the theory. Such debate over accuracy and applicability displays the lack of “black and white” in the art of predicting war via the subjects of international relations and strategic studies. While theories have been refined and developed over centuries, along with many new theories postulated, agreement cannot be reached between scholars as to which theory is best. In fact, whenever agreement is nearly reached, a real-world event such as the end of the Cold War or the 9/11 attacks demonstrates human society’s ability to behave in an unpredictable manner.

Human behaviour, interpretation of information and individual performance in times of stress also play a large role in why wars are yet to be avoidable. The multitudes of complicating factors that work towards an escalation of hostilities, and ultimately war, are currently outweighed by the pacifying influences at all levels. Unfortunately, peace needs to break out across all levels of analysis permanently in order to truly avoid war. Until such a time, war can be judged as being unavoidable.

Finally, in reviewing all the causes for war, it must be pointed out the human kind has not been at war consistently across all of time. In recognising that war and peace are two different conditions and that nations periodically shift between them, it can be said that while war is unavoidable peace is unavoidable too.

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