**WEEK 6 -- Explaining War and Violent Conflict**

**Lesson**

**Causes of War**

In studying the phenomenon of war, international relations scholars have focused on two primary questions.

*First*, do certain patterns of warfare and peace exist in the international system? That is can we develop a theory of the causes of war that accurately describes and explains the outbreak of wars in the international system. In other words, there has been an interest in identifying *general causes* of war that can tell us more about whether any particular period in international relations is more likely to witness wars (primarily been great powers).

The *second* set of questions that students of international relations have frequently considered has to do with the outbreak of *specific* wars, or specific *kinds* of war. Thus, many scholars have tried to explain the outbreak of WW I or WW 2, or the Iran-Iraq war (these are all just examples, of course), while others have tried to explain Great Power wars (wars between the Great Powers in the international system), or ethnic wars, or other forms of military intervention, and to identify factors that affect each of these categories. The various theoretical approaches that we have discussed in the last couple of weeks, all have different answers to these different questions. That is, Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Critical theories have offered different (and competing) explanations for the general causes of war, but also for particular wars. In addition to this, there are a number of theories of the causes of war that do not neatly fit in with any of the paradigms that we have discussed thus far, but that should also be considered. A good way of categorizing these theories, and for comparing them, is the levels-of-analysis approach.

**Realism (system level)**. Structural realists, as those who develop realist theories about international relations from a systemic perspective are known, have primarily been pre-occupied with identifying *broad patterns* of war and peace, and have looked towards *structural* or *systemic* factors to explain those patterns. Remember, that systemic factors are *environmental conditions* (that is, conditions in the environment that states interact in) that produce similar incentives and constraints upon all the individual actors in the system (just like the discovery of fire in a classroom with one exit gives all individuals in that room the same incentive… to get to the exit as quickly as possible).

         For such systemic realists (exemplified best by the work of Kenneth Waltz), the anarchical nature of the international system is in its own right an underlying cause for war, as it causes suspicion of motives of other states among its member-states. Because states are required to protect their own existence and interests, they are forced by the way the system is structures, to acquire means for their own defense. In doing so, they inadvertently end up threatening others, as the *security dilemma* tells us. While not every security dilemma will produce war (as sometimes deterrence can prevail), structural realists point out that the security dilemma means that wars can even break out inadvertently between states that do not actually hostile intentions towards one another. It is simply a vicious dynamic that is introduced by the structure of the international system. The *more severe* the security dilemma is (something that is directly related to the kind of military technology that is prevalent in the international system), the more likely it is that a security dilemma will in fact end in war. Presumably, structural realists argue that if the international system was not anarchic (which they argue is a pipe-dream of idealists), that this would eliminate a major cause of conflict and war.

         The security dilemma is *not* the only structural factor that can increase the likelihood of war in the international system.  Structural realists argue that states are very likely to engage in conflict with one another, because they all want different things that are not necessarily compatible with one another. This does not mean that they will always resort to military force to attain their goals. There are, however, conditions that structural realists argue are more likely to produce wars, and this has to do with the *distribution of capabilities* in the system, and the implicit notion that states are purposeful and at least somewhat rational. Realists argue that states will not engage, or at least try not to engage in military conflicts with states that are *stronger than them*. Thus, realists argue, the more *finely balanced* the military capabilities of great powers are, the *less likely* it is that disputes among them will lead to wars. Accordingly, structural realists predict that when a *balance of power* exists, that great power war should be unlikely to occur. That is, when states are equally balanced, they have fewer incentives to go to war with one another.  Structural realists argue that certain distributions of capabilities in the international relations are more prone to great power wars (and they define the war-proneness of the system, or the likelihood of great power war breaking out, in terms of stability).

 In particular, they use the term *polarity* to identify different kinds of distributions of capabilities in the international system. Polarity refers to the *number of great powers* that exist in a system at any given time. According to structural (systemic) realists, can tell us some very important things about the war-proneness of the system. Structural realists distinguish between three types of systems: *unipolar* systems (which are dominated by one major great power that is more powerful than all other states in the system), *bipolar* systems (which are dominated by two great power that are about equal in power relative to one another, although they are much stronger than the rest), and *multipolar systems* (which are dominated by three or more great powers). Although they don’t necessarily all agree about this, structural realists seem to mostly agree that unipolar systems are simply not going to survive very long because states are very worried about having a single great power dominating the international system. The reason or this, of course, is the fact that in the absence of a central authority, a dominant great power can pursue its own interest and coerce all the other members of the international system without fear of repercussions. The result is, according to most structural realists, that other states will seek to increase their power in order to preserve their own security and independence. This process will soon bring an end to unipolarity, as other great powers will rise.  A little bit later, we will talk about the effects of this process on international war and peace, according to realist theory.

         According to some structural theorists (including the intellectual “father” of the Neorealist school, Kenneth Waltz), *bipolar* international systems are stable systems when it comes to the chances of great power wars. In other words, we shouldn’t expect great power wars  to take place with great frequency under conditions of bipolarity (when two Great Powers dominate the international landscape). Why is this the case? Because the most important great powers are *equally balanced* in a bipolar system, they have few incentives to strike one another.  After all, attacking an equally powerful enemy is usually not a very good proposition for success. When we have only two great powers in the international system, moreover, there are few surprises about distributions of capabilities. Both great powers will actually have a pretty good idea about the capabilities of the other great power. Moreover, and this is very important, in a bipolar system the great powers do not have the ability to create strategic alliances with other great powers in the system that may threaten the second great power. In short, what we should expect from a bipolar system, is that it contains to great powers that are relatively evenly balanced, and that have few incentives to go to war with one another.

A *multipolar* system, on the other hand, is a system that has multiple relatively equally-balanced great powers in it. Multipolar system are considered, by most structural realists, as *unstable and war-prone*. Why is this the case?  The problem lies in the inherent *lack of predictability* that this system brings along with one another. Great powers in a multipolar power can simply never know exactly what the distribution of capabilities is, because they may know/believe that they are stronger than one other great power, they cannot predict or really know what the relationships between the various great powers is. Thus, *alliances* can be forged between two or more great powers, making them a formidable enemy. However, states simply do not know what alliances their rivals have and as such they may miscalculate not only their own capabilities (and those of their enemies) but also the *willpower* of their opponents. When states cannot accurately calculate or assess relative capabilities easily and accurately, we should expect more wars to take place in a conflictual international system, because states may be *optimistic* about their abilities to resolve their international conflicts through the use of force. The possibility of shifting alliances in a multipolar system makes it more difficult for policymakers to assess the power and will of their potential rivals, and may therefore contribute to the outbreak of wars.[[1]](https://edge.apus.edu/portal/tool/aabfffa0-1549-4e84-ab89-434a616fc248/view_module_student" \l "_ftn1" \o "" \t "_blank)

         Finally, at the systemic level of analysis, some realists have also identified *military technology* as an important predictor or variable in explaining the frequency of interstate warfare. How is military technology related to the outbreak of war? According to structural realists, we can identify a so-called *offense-defense balance* in any international system. This balance refers to the relative dominance of offensive or defensive technologies. When military technology favors the offense, Realists like Stephen Van Evera argue, we should see more wars in the international system. Thus, the advent of new military technologies in the international system can have an important effect on the likelihood that war will break out between great powers. Military technologies that make defense easier (such as moats, castles, barbed wire, and other technologies that make it harder for one side to attack the other) will have a *pacifying* effect, as warfare becomes riskier and less likely to lead to success. On the other hand, the advent of military technologies that favor the offensive (in particular technologies that combine firepower and mobility, such as cavalry and tanks) tend to be destabilizing, because they make offensive operations more attractive. The Offense-Defense balance is intuitively very plausible. It makes sense that the technologies that we have at our disposal would affect our decisions about warfare. One problem that arises with assessing the offense-defense balance --a problem that we have already encountered when thinking about the concept of power – is one of measurement. What exactly makes a technology an offensive or defensive one? That is not always clear. For example, tanks are often seen as offensive technologies because they combine superior firepower with mobility. When they were introduced into the international system, therefore, they allowed states to circumvent static defenses, while carrying a lot of firepower. That had been impossible before the advent of the tank. The issue, however, is that tanks can be used both offensively and defensively. For instance, during the 1960s, the Egyptians had the most advanced tanks in the world at their disposal. Yet, they did not use them to attack Israel. Not only that, they were soundly defeated when they were put into action against Israeli forces. The reason for this was that Egyptian military commanders *believed* that tanks could best be used in a defensive role. Instead of exploiting the mobility of their tanks and their firepower, Egyptian commanders decided to use their tanks as dug-in artillery pieces. In this way, they became easy prey for Israeli forces. The lesson to draw from this, in other words, is that technology by itself does not mean much, in terms of its offensive and defensive nature, what we have to look at is whether the people that use the technology perceive these technologies to be offensive or defensive. It is the latter that will determine how they get used, and what kind of effect they will have on the decisions to go to war or not.

         In sum, at the *systemic* level Realists argue that broad patterns of warfare over history, and in particular the frequency of great power wars, can be best understood in terms of

(1)The distribution of capabilities in the international system

(2)Shifts in the distribution of capabilities (which increases uncertainty), and

(3)The offense-defense balance.

Realism, of course, is not the only theory that tries to explain the incidence of war in the international system by looking at environmental factors. For Liberal IR theory, the causes of war are mostly related to unit-level attributes, such as a lack of democratic governance. At the systemic level, this means that Liberal theory expects war to be much more prevalent when there is a greater number of illiberal/autocratic/totalitarian states present in the system, while the likelihood of international war will be expected to decline when the system is populated by more liberal/democratic states. In addition to this, Liberal theory argues that *economic interdependence* is a significant obstacle to the outbreak of war, as rational publics are not likely to choose policy tools that will intervene with economic incentives. When two economies are tied to one another, and mutually dependent, therefore, Liberal theory suggests that they will be less likely to engage in violent conflict. At the system level, therefore, Liberal theory would argue that war is more likely when there are fewer economic ties between the states in the system.

Constructivist theory tells us to look at systemic-level norms about the use of force and violence, in trying to account for the prevalence of war in the international system. Although he does not formally claim to be a Constructivist, John Mueller – a political scientist at the Ohio State University – has claimed that major wars between great powers has been on the decline for decades. He argues that the reason for this has little to do with the balance of power, but with the fact that war is a *social practice* that has become increasingly illegitimate in the international system. He argues that the use of war as a policy tool will go the same way as other social practices that used to be acceptable in the past, but that are no longer acceptable (two of the examples that he offers in this context are slavery and dueling, which were both acceptable social practices in the 19th century, but became anachronistic and unacceptable in the 20th century).

One thing to keep in mind in all when considering systemic level explanations for the causes of war, of course, is that *system level* explanations are crude analytical tools. They will not really be helpful in explaining why particular wars break out, or why WW II broke out in September of 1939, rather than in the Summer of 1942 (for example). Such theories are much more likely to give us a general sense of the *conditions* under which wars are more likely in the international system.

**The Unit Level**

     Interestingly enough, as Jack Levy points out in his article, scholars of international relations took a while to start thinking theoretically (or systemically) about the domestic causes of war (that is, the causes of war at the unit-level). While the field has certainly progressed since Levy published his article, as scholars have explored the effects of domestic structure on preventive wars, the use of war as a diversionary tactic from domestic politics, and the effects of domestic economic structures on war initiation. In reading the Levy article, I encourage you to think about contemporary cases of war, and to think about ways in which the various hypotheses linking domestic structures to war can be tested with empirical evidence. That is, how would we know, for instance, if a policymaker chose war as a diversionary tactic to divert the attention of his/her constituents from more pressing matters at home?

**The Individual Level**

Realists have also tried to develop explanations for particular cases of war, however. After all, while it is interesting to understand when the international system is more likely to see great power wars, we also want to understand why particular wars break out. Because realists argue that states are pretty much the same, regardless of their domestic political and economic structures, they have primarily focused their attention in this context on the *individual level* of analysis. In part, Realists have been forced to look at the *individual* level of analysis because historically we have seen that the distribution of capabilities in the international system has not produced accurate predictions about the initiation of warfare. For instance, we find that many states have initiated wars, only to lose them. This suggests that either the distribution of capabilities is not a very useful concept to understand the outbreak of war (after all, rational actors should not engage in warfare if they know that they are going to lose), or that there is another factor that we need to keep in mind when thinking about the effects of the distribution of power upon the outbreak of war. According to realist theory there are a number of factors that we have to understand at the individual level to explain the outbreak of war between two states. First, realists argue that wars are possible whenever two states have a conflict of interests. Because there is no central government that can adjudicate disputes between states, they have to resolve their own issues. This means that force is always an option (although for many states it is an option of last resort). It stands to reason, if we follow realist logic, that weaker states will usually eventually give in to stronger states when their interests conflict, because the stronger states will have the capabilities to punish the weaker states for refusing to compromise or to give in. As such, we should actually expect very few wars in the international system, and we should expect most wars to take place as a result of a *disagreement about relative capabilities*. In other words, wars are most likely to take place when two states that have a conflict do not have a similar understanding about their relative capabilities. Both sides may believe that they are the stronger side, and they will expect the other side to recognize this, or they expect to win in a conflict. Second, and related, is the point that policymakers may simply misunderstand the balance of power as it exists between two states, for a variety of reasons. For instance, Adolf Hitler believed that democracies were inherently weak, because of their political systems. He therefore was not inclined to actually assess the material balance of power between Germany and the United States when he decided to declare war on the United States right after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. Third, another way in which individual policymakers can get the balance of power wrong is because of misperceptions. States never have an incentive to show other states their full capabilities, especially in the military sphere. After all,  a large component of successful military operations lies in the surprising use of military power, and therefore states have no incentive to disclose their actual  capabilities to real or perceived enemies. On the other hand, states do want to make sure that other states believe that they are powerful, because this may prevent challenges to their interests in the first place. In short, states tend to hide their capabilities, and they try to signal to other states that they are still powerful. It is not difficult to see how this can confuse policymakers, and lead them to believe that they are more powerful than they are. In short, at the individual level of analysis Realist theory still focuses on the distribution of capabilities as the chief causal mechanism for understanding the outbreak of war in the international system between two states. However, realists put a much larger emphasis on *perceptions* about the balance of power as the chief causal factor in decisions for war.

As I mentioned earlier, however, there are also theories of the causes of war at the individual level that do not fit neatly into the paradigms that we have outlined thus far. James Fearon’s article is probably the most significant example of this kind of approach to have been published. Fearon’s argument is explicitly based on the *rational actors model* that we have already discussed before, and he explains why two rational actors would choose to go to war in the full knowledge that war is a costly endeavor (and risky as well). A truly rational actor, according to this theory, will only initiate war under very limited circumstances. First, rational actors can have commitment problems. Second, incentives to misrepresent information. Third, issue indivisibility. While Fearon’s arguments are very stylized and formal, they are certainly worth further examination.

**Alternative Approaches**

     While the mainstream approaches to the study of international relations focus on systemic, unit, and individual level variables in order to explain the cause of war, the alternative approaches that we have studied thus far, unsurprisingly, direct our attention to different factors. As Tickner points out, Feminist theories about international security and conflict focus on the gendered nature not only of society (and international society), but also of the field of international relations itself. This structure has considerable implications for the study, and understanding, of violent conflict at the international level, both in terms of its causes and its conduct. (Neo)Marxist approaches also look at different structures (that is, different from those identified by Realists, Liberals, and Feminist theory) to explain the causes of war. More specifically, they look at the structure of economic interests and how it relates to the causes of war and violent conflict.

In sum, the question of the causes of war (whether general or specific) has been one that has preoccupied scholars of international relations from the beginning. One could even say that it is this question that led to the emergence of the field of international relations in the first place. There is a wide variety of explanations for the causes of war, ranging from systemic-level (structural) arguments, to individual-level explanations. Moreover, scholars disagree on the most important factors that lead states to engage in violent conflict, with some arguing that war is a normal occurrence in an anarchical society inhabited by self-interested states, and others arguing that war is the product of how societies are structured. In doing the readings for this week, you should not only focus on the various levels of analysis (and compare theories in similar levels), but also across paradigms and research schools (i.e. mainstream versus Critical approaches). The readings for this week only scratch the surface of a vast literature on the causes of war. Don’t hesitate to let me know if you are interested to find out more about particular approaches or explanations, and I can point you to more readings/sources.

**Sources**

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[[1]](https://edge.apus.edu/portal/tool/aabfffa0-1549-4e84-ab89-434a616fc248/view_module_student" \l "_ftnref1" \o "" \t "_blank) It is important to keep in mind that realists are not all in agreement with this assessment. Some Realist scholars have argued that the uncertainty that comes with the multipolar system actually has a *pacifying* effect as it makes policymakers more cautious. These scholars believe that bipolar systems, where the tension between two superpowers is very high, are less stable because the costs of making a mistake are so high.