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The Determinants of War in International Relations

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Abstract -- The study of warfare is one of the oldest and most important dynamics of interest for students of politics. This area of research is predominantly - but not exclusively - undertaken within the sub-field of international relations (IR). IR theorists argue that war is the contingent outcome of the interaction among variables operating at three "levels of analysis": the international level, the domestic level, and the individual level. The international level explores variables that operate exclusively "above" states such as anarchy and the distribution of power. The domestic level explores variables that operate exclusively within states, such as regime type and bureaucratic design. The individual level explores the ways in which individual psychology (i.e. beliefs, culture, personality) contributes to the outbreak of war. We also offer a discussion of new puzzles and challenges in the study of warfare, such as the decline of war hypothesis and the growing prevalence of civil war, insurgency and non-state violence.

War has been a preoccupation of policymakers, heads of state and political leaders for as long as there have been political communities. Thus, the “study” of warfare can be said to have begun almost as soon as its practice (Keeley 1996; LeBlanc and Register 2003; Gat 2009). Early studies of warfare were undertaken by direct observers of war or by its practitioners, including landmark works by the Greek historian Thucydides and the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu in the 5th Century B.C., as well as

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Frederick the Great and Carl Von Clausewitz in the 18th and 19th Centuries. The emphasis in these works is as much to understand the practice of war as to master it. However, it was not until the maturity of the modern university system and the emergence of political science as a distinct social science by the early 20th century that the formal scientific study of warfare began to take shape. Indeed, it was in part the experience of World War I – the "War to End All Wars" – that catalyzed the rise of the subfield of international relations, born out of an urgent desire to understand why conflicts between nations descend into war so easily and so regularly despite its enormous human and economic costs.

Inter-war "idealists", such as U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, focused their efforts after World War I on establishing moral and institutional constraints that would render war obsolete as an instrument of statecraft in international affairs. These hopes, embodied perhaps most notably in the League of Nations, were soon dashed by the rise of Nazi Germany and the even more devastating World War II, which would end in yet another dangerous standoff: the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Idealists soon fell out of favour as political tensions mounted and the threat of nuclear annihilation loomed. In their place, "realists" stressed the need to accept the fundamentally conflictual nature inherent to the international dimension of politics and identify strategies to survive within it, rather than attempting the Sisyphean task of eliminating war. Indeed, our discipline is essentially divided by war: much of political science focuses on domestic politics under conditions of government, within which cooperation can be enforced and conflicts resolved, in principle, by a higher authority; in stark contrast, *international relations* focuses on politics without government, where

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interactions take place without any higher authority than sovereign states; cooperation cannot be enforced and conflicts have no final arbiter. In such a system of "anarchy", states must look after themselves and war is always possible.[1]

War itself is relatively rare, occurring in only around 1 in 14,000 potential inter-state dyads per year (Bennett and Stam 2003; Levy and Thompson 2010b). For some, therefore, the study of war is the study of an abnormal phenomenon, the *failure* of politics. However, as we show later, most theories of war recognize it as an intrinsic feature of international politics and a fundamental, if extreme, means of statecraft. Furthermore, it is vital to recognize that, first, when inter-state wars do occur, they have historically represented one of the most significant sources of change in the international system (Tilly 1992; Turchin et al. 2013). Second, while war itself may be rare, its effects represent a perpetual influence on politics, with preparedness for war a daily policy problem manifested in numerous ways, including alliances, military defense budgets, deployments, strategy, deterrence, and diplomacy. War among states may be rare, but it is rarely far from the minds of statesmen. To theorize conflict and war is to theorize many of the most important aspects of state behavior even during times of peace.

The decades after World War II saw perhaps the greatest leap forward in the study of war. As the political urgency of achieving stability and deterrence in a new nuclear world gathered momentum, scholars incorporated the classic insights of their predecessors into more formal theoretical and empirical investigations of the complex dynamics of inter-state conflict. Due to the importance of this shift, we therefore limit our scope of inquiry to the study of warfare in the post-war period since 1945. We begin with

[1] The notion that international relations is defined as a realm of anarchy is generally accepted; however, there is disagreement about the constitutive nature of anarchy as well as its nature as a variable in international relations. For discussion, see Bull (1977), Milner (1991), Wendt (1992), and Lake (1996).

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a brief discussion of definitions of war as well as an overview of the methods that political scientists utilize when studying the causes of war. Although there are common elements to the definitions of war used by political scientists, this definition is ultimately a methodological convenience more than an indication of disciplinary consensus. The reality is that definitions of war and conflict in political science are at least as diverse as the methods we have to study it.

Once concepts and methods are described, we review the major theories of warfare. Although the "-isms" of international relations such as realism and liberalism dominated intellectual discourse for much of the 20th century, their hegemony has ultimately waned and – especially in the causes of war literature – is increasingly replaced by "middle-range" theories of state and non-state conflict, which focus more on specific empirical patterns and hypotheses for their occurrence. Currently, the most prominent explanation for the outbreak of war is the "bargaining model of war", which is a rationalist and game theoretic framework that incorporates assumptions about the nature of decision-making as well as the structure of the international system. In this framework, since violent conflict is so costly to winners and losers alike, war is a puzzle that requires explanation. Why are state leaders unable or unwilling to reach negotiated bargains that reflect their relative power and avoid recourse to political violence? We place this framework within the context of mainstream IR theory and the full range of different theories on the causes of war. We end by considering some of the big questions currently facing the field such as the decline of war thesis, the growing importance of sub-national violence and civil war, and the return of great power politics. We also caution the reader that our discussion is necessarily far from comprehensive and we seek instead to paint a portrait of the study

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of war in international relations that comprises the most significant findings and debates in this field.

What is warfare and how do we study it?

The application of scientific methodology to the dynamics of warfare is complicated in no small part because there is a multitude of social patterns across time and space that could justifiably be referred to as "warfare." Although warfare has long been an object of study across the social sciences, political scientists tend to define war in a way that makes it unique to the behavior of nation states at the international level. Thus, a common definition of war among political scientists is the following: "Sustained combat, involving organized armed forces, resulting in a minimum of 1000 battle-related fatalities within a 12 month period" (Sarkees & Wayman 2010). This definition, from the Correlates of War (COW) project (a standard open-access dataset for the study of war), is clearly not aimed so much at deciphering a fundamental essence of warfare as it is at establishing a definition or coding criterion that is empirically useful, allowing researchers to develop and test hypotheses about inter-state war that are clear and specific (for comparison, scholars of civil war – wars within states – often use a lower figure of 25 deaths per year).

Such a threshold is a methodological convenience for researchers whose unit of analysis is a strictly modern phenomenon. Political scientists who seek to explain changes in the practice of warfare over broader stretches of history must employ more general definitions of warfare. For example, in their discussion of the evolution of warfare and strategy from pre-agriculture to the present day, Levy and Thompson define

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war as "sustained coordinated violence between political organizations" (2011). This allows them to identify underlying dynamics of warfare that are common across many forms of inter-group conflict (from nation-state warfare to conflict among early proto-states) and to track key variables that explain changes in the nature of warfare over the centuries. Other scholars have very different definitions. For example, one influential scholar defines it generally as a conflict that involves at least one *great power* (Mearsheimer 2014). Interestingly, however, the trend among several of the leading and seminal discussions on the causes of war in political science do not even attempt to define their dependent variable at all (Waltz 1979; Fearon 1995; Stephen Van Evera 2001).

Just as definitions of warfare in political science are diverse, the methods that researchers use to test hypotheses on the causes and consequences of warfare are similarly diverse. Perhaps the two most common methodological approaches are large-n statistical analyses and game theoretic models. The former examine the relationship between warfare and a host of other state- and inter-state level variables such as GDP, regime type, international trade, and geography (Gowa 1994; Reiter and Stam 2002; Bennett and Stam 2003; Vasquez 2012; Copeland 2014). These statistical models may examine the relationship among variables at a fixed point in time, or trace effects across time. In parallel, game theory models seek to explain how states are likely to behave given a set of assumptions about how individuals make decisions as well as the nature of the constraints that they face in their environment. Given the fact that the focus of analysis in these models is often the strategic interaction among actors, this approach is sometimes labeled a "strategic choice approach" (Lake and Powell 1999). The

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"individuals" in these analyses may be actual state leaders, or researchers may prefer to treat the entire nation state as a unitary actor, again, for the sake of methodological convenience (although sometimes this is an explicit theoretical conjecture). A common but not universal assumption across these models is that decision-making operates according to various maxims of rationality (Ferejohn 1991; Morrow 1994; Brown et al. 2000; Mercer 2005).

In addition to large-n statistical analyses and game theoretic models, political scientists also commonly make use of comparative case-study analysis, within-case analysis (or "process tracing"), survey experiments, lab and field experiments, natural experiments, simulations, and a host of methods for understanding the behavior of individual leaders, such as psychobiography, "Operational Code" analysis (a way of scoring leaders' personal beliefs and preferences according to standardized criteria), and Leadership Trait Analysis (Hermann and Preston 1994; George and Bennett 2005; Jervis 2013; McDermott and Hatemi 2014; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015). Given the numerous actors and complexity of political behavior, especially in the international realm, efforts to infer causality are in many cases limited. A common recourse, therefore, is to apply multiple methodological approaches to the same question so as to triangulate causal relationships as closely as possible. For example, in his analysis of modern military strategy, Biddle (2006) employs case studies, experiments, statistical analysis and formal modeling to explain variation in battlefield outcomes. Similarly, Kertzer (2016) combines lab and survey experiments with analysis of historical cases to explain why some states demonstrate greater resolve in conflict than others.

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These mixed methods approaches have been able to demonstrate a wide range of "risk-factors" or conditions associated with war (usually as correlational evidence), as well as identifying causal processes via the use of experiments and painstaking archival research into historical crises to process-trace the formation of policy and strategy and the factors that served to steer it in a particular direction (Van Evera 2001; Levy and Thompson 2010b; Vasquez 2012). After many decades of such work, political scientists have learned a great deal about the causes of conflict. The fact that despite this progress, political scientists have not been able to enact solutions to prevent war suggests they might be right about some of its more underlying, pernicious causes, which we turn to in the next section.

One small but important success, however, has been the development of frameworks from which to derive hypotheses on the causes of war, which also allows greater clarity regarding the kinds of evidence needed to substantiate such explanations. Table 1 outlines broad typologies of explanations for war, which are useful for clarifying different types of causes, how they may interact with each other, and whether they are mutually exclusive or may occur simultaneously.

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Table 1. Typologies of Causes of War (Garnett 2007)

Proximate versus Ultimate Causes	**Proximate** The immediate trigger for war; usually an *event* (e.g. assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914), or a *decision* (e.g. Bush's decision to invade Iraq)	**Ultimate** The underlying politics that lays the kindling for war (e.g. Great Power competition in 1914)
Necessary versus Sufficient Causes	**Necessary** Factors that must be present for war to occur; e.g. opposing political groups, sufficient arms to wage war, ability to project power	**Sufficient** Factors that, if present, guarantee war (e.g. irreconcilable issues or issue indivisibilities, such as an inability to tolerate the existence of another state)
Efficient versus Permissive Causes	**Efficient** The pursuit of explicit goals or aims (e.g. conquest of a desirable territory or a preemptive strike against a threatening state)	**Permissive** Conditions that permit war to occur (e.g. underlying structure of the international system: Anarchy and self-help states means there is nothing to prevent conflict from occurring)
Conscious versus Unconscious Causes	**Conscious** Deliberate aims of war; war as a tool of policy; pursuit of national interest (practitioners tend to give these kinds of reasons)	**Unconscious** Other factors operating in the background (often invisible), which may *give rise* to conscious aims, or affect perceived costs and benefits (scholars tend to give these kinds of reasons)

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What Do We Know About Warfare? Theory and Arguments

In what follows, we survey and explore the leading theories and arguments regarding the causes of war. Debate on the causes of war has to some extent evolved against the backdrop of a larger theoretical debate between two "grand theories" of international relations – realism and liberalism – that offer competing frameworks for explaining state behavior generally, and war specifically. Broadly, although with some exceptions, realists have preferred to explain state behavior with reference to causal variables specific to the international system, while liberals have preferred to emphasize domestic-level causal variables. After discussing research on the causes of war in each of these domains, we then proceed to discuss theories of warfare that explain conflict as a function of individual psychology and leader attributes. Lastly, we consider the "decline of war" hypothesis and implications for the growing importance of wars involving non-state actors.

The Tradition of Realism

As a philosophical tradition, realists throughout the centuries have emphasized that states prioritize their own survival, jealously guard their security, and seek to maximize their power relative to other states (See Table 2 for an overview of the realist tradition). Realist thinkers from Thucydides in the 5th century BC to E.H. Carr in the 20th century reject the conjecture that justice, morality and ethics place meaningful limits on state behavior, arguing instead that competition for power determines the nature and scope of state behavior. By extension, international institutions such as the United

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Nations, far from constraining state behavior, are instead 'captured' by powerful states and merely reflect their interests.

Table 2. Realist Theories of International Relations (adapted from Baylis et al. (2011)).

Variant	**Author**	**Key Work**	**Date**
Classical Realism	Thucydides	*The Peloponnesian War*	5th C. BC
	Machiavelli	*The Prince*	1532
	Morgenthau	*Politics Among Nations*	1948
Structural Realism	Rousseau	*The State of War*	c.1750
	Waltz (defensive realism)	*Theory of International Politics*	1979
	Mearsheimer (offensive realism)	*Tragedy of Great Power Politics*	2001
Neoclassical Realism	Schweller; Zakaria	*Various*	1997, 1998
Rational Choice Realism	Grieco; Krasner	*Various*	1993, 1999

Early realists, often referred to as "classical realists," were blunt in identifying human nature as an ultimate explanation for why humans strive for power and security in the first place. Influential IR theorist Hans Morgenthau argued that humans possess an *animus dominandi* (a desire to dominate others), and Reinhold Niebuhr argued that humans suffered from inherently "evil" behavior. Both sought an origin for the competitive behavior that they observed to recur among nations with depressing regularity across the globe and across history. Early critics of classical realism were

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uneasy with "human nature" explanations for conflict because such arguments often lacked any scientific basis. Some of this criticism even came from scholars within the realist tradition. For example, Blainey famously argued that, although hubris and overconfidence could in part explain conflicts that arise from a dispute about the measurement of power, such explanations appeal to "moods which cannot be grounded in fact" (Blainey 1973, 54). In short, although realists agreed on the competitive nature of international politics and the importance of power, they were sometimes ambivalent about ultimate causes.

NEOREALISM: STRUCTURE, NOT NATURE. The realist tradition was given its most prominent modern exposition by the late Kenneth Waltz, whose 1979 book *Theory of International Politics* is universally regarded as the paragon of neorealist thinking. The Waltzian tradition is "neo" realist in that it incorporates many of the dynamics of classical realists before it, such as the perennial pursuit of power among states. In earlier work Waltz had examined causes of war at the levels of individuals, states, and the international system (giving us the "levels of analysis"), and famously rejected individual-level human nature explanations because, as he saw it, no "fixed" trait of human nature could explain the observable *variation* in war and peace (Waltz 1959). Instead, Waltz argued that the competitive behavior of states emerges not as a result of internal human drives, but instead is a consequence of competitive pressures established by the "structure" of the environment in which states find themselves—namely, a world of other similar entities jostling for survival without any Leviathan to protect them. Waltz's neorealism is therefore also known as "structural realism" because he sought to build a parsimonious theory of international politics that emphasized the structure of the

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international system and abstracted away from causal variables at other levels of analysis (i.e. the domestic level and individual level). In other words, if we want to understand the broad patterns of state behavior, and in particular the stubborn recurrence of war over time, Waltz argued that we need to examine the structure of the international system itself rather than the domestic arrangements of states or their individual leaders.

According to Waltz, analysis begins by identifying the fundamental principle by which the international system is ordered. This principle is *anarchy* – the absence of centralized government above states that could, for example, regulate behavior or enforce contracts among them. Anarchy is a descriptive rather than normative attribute of the international system. Under anarchy, all states (assuming they are rational and prioritize their own survival) share one functional attribute: each state must provide for its own survival and cannot rely on the assistance or goodwill of its neighbors. In other words, anarchy compels self-help behavior among states. In a world of anarchy and self-help behavior, states must closely monitor the distribution of power and corresponding threats, and states navigate this uncertain landscape by building up their own power ("internal balancing") or by building alliances with other states ("external balancing"). War occurs when states attempt to increase their power, which leads rivals or coalitions to rise to preempt or counter them. This, however, can occur in a variety of ways.

REALISM: EXTENSIONS AND MIDDLE-RANGE THEORY. All realists acknowledge that shifts in the balance of power shape the prospect of war. However, realists disagree as to whether war is more likely when power is distributed evenly or unevenly. Waltz and his followers argue that war is more likely when power is distributed unevenly. For example, it was the dramatic unification of Germany in the late 19th century, and the

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military arms race on land and sea that it sparked, that paved the way to World War I. This is a long-held view by realists dating back to Thucydides, who famously noted: *"What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta"*(Thucydides 1954, Book 1, Chapter 23). By extension, therefore, the implication of these arguments is that war is less likely as the distribution of power is more evenly dispersed, particularly between two large powers, producing a system in which alliances are stable and expectations are clear, such as during the Cold War (Waltz 1988).

In contrast, some scholars find evidence that war is in fact more likely when power is distributed evenly rather than unevenly. "Power transition theory", for example, argues that war is increasingly likely as a weaker state rises in power relative to that of the established hegemon, and they approach parity (Organski 1968, 1984; Lemke 1997). In this scenario, assuming that the rising power is increasingly dissatisfied with continuing to operate in an international system that is organized around the preferences of the hegemon, it will either bargain or fight to rearrange the prevailing order. Power transition theorists are divided, however, over whether it is the hegemon or the challenger that is likely to instigate conflict (Chan 2004). In short, as Levy and Thompson summarize: "Balance of power theory posits that hegemony rarely occurs and that concentrations of power are destabilizing, while power transition theory posits that hegemony frequently occurs and is stabilizing" (2010b, 47)

This debate helps to highlight that intentions are often either exogenous in realist explanations of state behavior or constitute relatively simple preference structures (e.g.

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satisfied vs. dissatisfied; revisionist vs. status quo).[2] Again, this is largely due to the fact that neorealists are interested in how structural pressures – as opposed to the complexities of psychology or domestic politics – shape international outcomes. Neorealists such as Waltz argue that states reliably respond to international shifts in *material* power (e.g., armies, weapons, and general military capabilities) principally because they care about their own survival. He has even gone so far as to admit that his theory does not require that states are rational (Waltz 1986), though others have countered that realism must assume rationality (Fearon 1995), or that it should (Mearsheimer 2009).

Aside from questions of rationality, others such as Steven Walt (1990), argued that perceived threat is not necessarily a function of material power alone, and that the actual or perceived threat posed by a given state can be a function of other variables in addition to material power, such as a country's geography and domestic population. This broader conceptualization of threat can help to explain the existence of alliances and anxieties that would seem inexplicable as a function of the balance of material power alone. For example, Britain is a relatively powerful state, but is not perceived as a threat to American survival; by contrast Iraq is a relatively weak state, but in 2003 was perceived as a grave threat to the United States. Walt's corrective is therefore labeled a "balance of threat" perspective, in contrast to earlier "balance of power" approaches, and has been extended to explain why there appears to have been a lack of classical military balancing against American hegemony in the decades since the end of the Cold War.

[2] Although space does not allow a deeper investigation here, it is important to note that although many "systemic" theories of warfare sidestep the question of the issues themselves over which states fight, other approaches to war in international relations give such issues central consideration in their examination of the nature of specific state-to-state interactions ("dyadic interactions"). A prominent example is the "steps-to-war" model of dyadic conflict, which examines patterns of conflict associated with disputes over territory, policy, and regime type (Senese and Vasquez 2008)

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According to this view, military balancing against the United States has been nonexistent because, beyond the great material costs that such an effort would entail, the states that might otherwise do the balancing either share American values or view its intentions as relatively benign (Levy and Thompson 2010a). Therefore, the post-Cold War distribution of power generally, and the American case, specifically, suggests that aggregate military power alone may be a necessary but insufficient cause of military balancing in the international system (Table 1).

Most realists suggest that states are *security* maximizers; that is, they want to use the balance of power to preserve the status quo and the security of their place within it. States are therefore risks averse and go to war only to defend themselves from attack or as a balancing coalition against an aggressor state. Hence, this view has become known as "Defensive Realism". In contrast, John Mearsheimer has powerfully challenged this view, arguing that since states can never be sure about others' intentions (however benign they may appear), they cannot afford to be satisfied with the status quo. Instead, the only way they can assure their security is to not maximize *security* but to maximize *power*, whenever the opportunity arises, at the expense of other states. This theory is called "Offensive Realism", and importantly leads to different predictions, namely that states will be willing to risk war to improve their relative power position, and that all great powers ultimately strive toward hegemony in the system. Since this is currently impossible because of the constraints of geography (even the US is limited in its projection of power across the oceans), states are locked into never-ending swings of perennial competition, resulting in the "tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer 2014)

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Despite the many disagreements among realists regarding questions of human nature, rationality, and the balance of power as a cause of war, realists of most stripes acknowledge one particularly pernicious mechanism that can facilitate a slide to war in many cases: the security dilemma (Jervis 1978). Put simply, this mechanism operates when a state's efforts to make itself more secure lead to insecurity among its neighbors. The effect is especially powerful when it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between the offensive and defensive capabilities of one's neighbors. In these situations, a military buildup by one state, even if motivated by purely defensive intentions, can be misperceived as an aggressive posture by its neighbors. In other words, an inability to distinguish between offensive and defensive capabilities can further muddle the already deep uncertainties states have about each other's intentions under anarchy. These misperceptions can inadvertently instigate arms races and lead to war.

These observations have led researchers to ask an important related question: how does the nature of weaponry itself affect the actual or perceived costs and benefits of war? Scholars agree that when the nature of weaponry is such that it is easier to take rather than defend territory, the situation is one of "offense dominance," and the following conditions, *inter alia*, are true: there are significant incentives to strike first; preemptive and preventive wars predominate; arms races are faster; states are more secretive; and diplomatic bargaining is less successful (Levy 1984; Van Evera 1998; the same logic operates in reverse, such that "defense dominance" results in a world of less insecurity or war). Interestingly, it is probably also the case that the *perceived* offense-defense balance matters just as much if not more than the *actual* balance. Van Evera (1984) makes the compelling case that in the years prior to World War I, strategists held

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the false belief that they were living in an offense-dominant strategic environment, and it was largely this perception that led policymakers to discount the long-term costs of war and develop first-strike preferences that eased the path to war. In contrast, nuclear weapons are thought to have created a defensive dominant world, at least among nuclear armed states or alliances, where major power war is unlikely. Thus, the security dilemma is agreed to facilitate the slide to war under anarchy, and scholars acknowledge that "defense-dominant" environments can mitigate – but not eliminate – some of its pernicious consequences. Current debates also examine the nature of cyberwarfare from this perspective (Lindsay 2015).

REALISM, RATIONALITY AND BARGAINING. Although, with some exceptions, most of the theories described above seek to explain the causes of war, few focus on the nature of the diplomatic bargaining process itself to explain why wars break out when they do. Describing a set of "rationalist explanations" for war, a new group of scholars has argued that sufficient explanations for the outbreak of war require an answer to the question: why do states fail to reach bargains that would avoid the recourse to war? In these models, all bargaining among states is conceptualized as a conflict of interest over the allocation of a good, such as territory or a particular policy issue. Ideally, of course, states would prefer to achieve their maximum objectives without paying any cost for them. When a state uses war to achieve their objectives and they are successful, the state is better off by an amount equal to the value of the achieved objective minus the cost of fighting for it. Thus, it follows that if there were some bargain that would have allowed the state to acquire an equivalent value without having to fight for it, states have a

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rational incentive to identify this settlement during the bargaining phase and avoid war.[3] In short, war is a puzzle because it is an inefficient outcome for rational actors; war is costly, and mutually beneficial bargains must generally exist that are superior to what each state would be left with in the case of war (Fearon 1995).

Having established these premises, rationalist approaches to war focus on explaining why states might fail to identify and agree to war-avoiding bargains when they exist. As a whole, these "rationalist explanations" are collectively known as the "bargaining model" of warfare. The first reason why states fail to reach war-avoiding bargains is that, although states would prefer to avoid the costs of war, they also prefer to do well in the bargaining process, which may lead them to misrepresent the costs they are willing to pay for it – in other words, states bluff regarding intentions and capabilities. Given that information regarding the intentions and capabilities of states is held privately, states are able to bluff and have incentives to deceive others in order to do well in the bargaining despite a preference to avoid the costs of war. Relatedly, any fighting itself can be considered an extension of the bargaining process and serves to reveal a more accurate signal of relative power and who is likely to win, and thus the bargaining model can explain the termination of wars as well as their onset.[4] These observations have in part facilitated a renewed and productive interest in the role of signaling in state conflict, as well as the determinants of state resolve (Fearon 1997; Slantchev 2012; Kertzer 2016).

The second reason why states may fail to reach war-avoiding bargains is that, even when agreements can be identified, neither state can credibly commit to uphold its end of the bargain in the long run—especially a strong or rising state that would be able

[3] Of course, the bargaining phase may extend beyond the point that fighting erupts, and indeed, fighting may in many instances constitute a component of the bargaining process itself.
[4] The first person to be accredited with this insight is generally Blainey (1973).

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to use force easily in the future. In game theoretic terms, states face commitment problems under anarchy that can lead rational actors to fight despite preferring to avoid the costs of war.

The third reason why pre-war bargains may not come to fruition is that sometimes the "good" over which states bargain is indivisible. In principle, however, many rational choice theorists argue that there is no object or policy whose intrinsic properties render its division impossible (e.g. territory can always be divided or compensated somehow), which suggests this is in fact not a rationalist explanation for war as such, but rather, an example of the failure of rationality in the bargaining process. An "all or nothing" attitude among policymakers can facilitate violence by rendering war-avoiding bargains impossible to agree on, or even to identify (Fearon 1995; Lopez 2016).

State-Level Theories of War: Towards a Democratic Peace?

Realists and their followers have focused largely on how attributes of the international system can shape the costs and benefits of warfare for states. In other words, for these scholars, the dependent variable is warfare and the relevant independent variables are to be found "above states" in the nature of the international system. This has led to a greater understanding of how dynamics related to anarchy and the distribution of power make it more or less likely for states to resort to warfare. However, other scholars have preferred to examine independent variables at the national level, such as regime type, or the individual level, such as leader personality, when explaining the outbreak of warfare. We discuss national attributes here before turning to individual-level attributes in the following section.

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Perhaps the largest body of research on state-level attributes that shape the prospects for war and peace is the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) – the conjecture that democracies tend not to fight other democracies (Russett 1994). Classically, Immanuel Kant argued in the 18th century that leaders could be expected to be more measured in their foreign adventures when they are held directly accountable to the citizenry (Kant 2003). Modern explanations focus either on the incentive-shaping structure of democratic institutions, or on the shared norms of peaceful competition and compromise within democratic states that might lead them to refrain from using violence against each other (Maoz and Russett 1993; Tomz and Weeks 2013). Research on the nature of democratic institutions is the more diverse of the two strands of explanation, with research showing, for example, that democracies enjoy signaling advantages relative to non-democracies (Schultz 2001), and relatedly, that mutual transparency may reduce the incentives to strike first among democracies (Mesquita and Lalman 1994). In other words, according to DPT, many of the negative consequences of anarchy about which realists worry are mitigated among democracies due to the unique nature of democratic institutions.

These arguments, however, do not indicate that democracies are less violent in general; rather, they demonstrate more narrowly that democracies tend not to fight each other. Democracies are just as likely as non-democracies to be involved in war (that is, against non-democracies; Gleditsch and Hegre 1997). Interestingly, democracies are also more likely than non-democracies to win the wars they are involved in, regardless of who initiated hostilities (Reiter and Stam 2002). As discussed above, these claims depend heavily upon how one defines war as well as how one defines democracy. For example, Mansfield and Snyder (2007) point out that the DPT may be more descriptive of mature

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democracies than of young democracies or democracies in transition. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the relationship between democracy and peace may be explained by confounding variables, such as economic wealth (Gartzke 2007) and common strategic interests (Gowa 2000).

DOMESTIC INTERESTS AND INSTITUTIONS. The political institutions of democracies represent one set of domestic attributes of states that may explain why and when wars occur. Other domestic attributes and dynamics such as the nature of public opinion and the arrangement and composition of interest groups also matter. Indeed, the idea that states may find themselves at war for the sake of special interests (as opposed to the general or national interest) is an old one. John Hobson, as well as Vladimir Lenin, for example – though from different angles – argued that one explanation for the spread of imperialism was the insatiable thirst for resources and profit to satisfy domestic financial interests (Hobson 2005; Lenin 2011), and of course American President Dwight Eisenhower worried about the expansion of what he termed a "military-industrial complex" that might wield excessive policy influence if left unchecked. What many political scientists recognize, therefore, is that the incentive-shaping nature of institutions, organizations and offices will have a measurable impact on policy outcomes, such as the decision to go to war. This is captured generally by Graham Allison's "bureaucratic politics model", in which he notes that policymaker preferences are shaped by bureaucratic imperatives – or more simply, that "where you stand depends on where you sit" (Allison 1969; Allison and Halperin 1972). Allison's classic case study of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crises showed compelling evidence that, even during the very high stakes of a nuclear confrontation, organizational interests and procedures several times brought

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the two sides perilously close to conflict, beyond the knowledge or intentions of U.S. President J. F. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Of course, leaders do not sit passively atop a pyramid of competing bureaucratic and special interests. Leaders have their own interests and seek to manipulate domestic audiences toward these ends, sometimes resulting in the use of force abroad. For example, the classic "scapegoat hypothesis" suggests that leaders whose tenure is threatened by controversy at home may start wars abroad in order to divert attention from turmoil and benefit from "rally 'round the flag" effects. Despite initially inconclusive evidence, current research on this conjecture is increasingly nuanced in its examination of the conditions under which opportunistic elites seek such diversionary wars. Johnson and Barnes (2011), for example, argue that when leaders are perceived to have a high level of responsibility for domestic economic outcomes they will be more likely to use force opportunistically. Similarly, Kisangani and Pickering (2011) found that among democracies, executives at the head of majoritarian rather than coalition governments are more likely to use force abroad for diversionary purposes. Although this literature often takes for granted that diversionary wars are started by elites with nefarious private interests (Gagnon 1994), some acknowledge that this is not a necessary condition for leader deception to occur. Schuessler (2010), for example, argues that leaders may resort to deception domestically in order to facilitate the use of force against a growing threat in the context of narrow windows of opportunity for action. In short, leader deception may sometimes be in the national interest (Mearsheimer 2013).

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Psychological Explanations: Individual Theories of War

Discussion of the interplay of domestic interests and its consequences for the outbreak of war inevitably leads toward an examination of the role of individuals. By extension, this may lead us to ask about the role of psychology. Such investigation ultimately has at least two components: First, what do we know about how humans make decisions? Second, what are the effects of the operation of specific psychological decision-making systems in political contexts? A straightforward approach, therefore, is to simply identify heuristics and biases that are known to guide cognition and behavior in humans, and then to examine their political effects in individual policymakers or political groups (Goldgeier and Tetlock 2001; McDermott 2004b). For example, the phenomenon of optimistic overconfidence, well established in psychology, has been explored for its effects on decision-making in the context of warfare (via experiments and case studies). In contrast to Waltz's concern about human nature being fixed and thus unable to explain variance in political outcomes, individual level theories have begun to emphasize the role of contextual variation, by specifically asking *where* and *when* psychological factors become amplified or suppressed (Kertzer and Tingley 2018). The role of overconfidence, for example, has been applied to international relations in the form of a "rubicon theory" of war, which suggests that once individuals shift from a "deliberative" mindset (deciding what to do) to an "implemental" mindset (putting a plan into action), important cognitive biases and errors become engaged that can lead states to start wars that they are objectively unlikely to win (Johnson et al. 2006; Johnson and Tierney 2011). Leaders have exhibited this bias in many instances, such as in Europe in 1914 and in Iraq in 2003, facilitating war in these episodes. In another vein, McDermott has applied findings from

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prospect theory in cognitive psychology to explain why leaders may resort to greater risk-taking when they perceive themselves to be in a domain of losses (McDermott 1998, 2004a). This dynamic is consistent with observations of leader preferences and behavior in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and Japan's decision to attack the United States in 1941 (Levi and Whyte 1997; Haas 2001).

In addition to a focus on individuals, political scientists often apply known dynamics of group behavior toward an understanding of international conflict. For example, Jonathan Mercer and Omar McDoom each apply insights from social identity theory to explain why cooperation among states is scarce (Mercer 1995) and the mechanisms by which ethnic conflict may escalate and become intractable (McDoom 2012). Others have focused especially on the stereotypes, or "images," that individuals within groups such as states use to represent other groups (Cottam 1994; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Herrmann 2003). When extreme, these in-group/out-group dynamics can contribute significantly to the perception of threat and the decision to fight.

The lion's share of research on individuals and their role in shaping the course of war has examined the personal and developmental attributes of leaders themselves. Although too diverse to cover in a fully comprehensive way, it will suffice to note that the examination of leader attributes as they pertain to conflict outcomes has examined factors as diverse as career trajectory (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Fuhrmann and Horowitz 2015), reputation (Wolford 2007), decision-making style (Hermann and Preston 1994), as well as physical variables such as gender/sex (Johnson et al. 2006) and neurobiological correlates (Rosen 2007; McDermott and Hatemi 2014). Although political science continues to wrestle with the question of when and how leaders

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"matter," researchers are now armed with a better sense of the decision-making process in domains of conflict, and are more sophisticated in their study of the interaction of personal attributes and institutional constraints (Greenstein 1992; Byman and Pollack 2001; Jervis 2013; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015).

In addition to research that focuses on individuals from a psychological perspective, there is also a body of research that is often not explicitly psychological but does examine the effects of constructed identity on outcomes in international relations. Alexander Wendt's aptly titled "Anarchy is What States Make of It" (1992) is a paragon of this tradition, and although he and early constructivists sought to critically reexamine notions of anarchy and identity, most apply these insights toward better understandings of specific conflicts rather than toward a generalizable understanding of patterns of warfare, per se. Katzenstein's edited volume (1996) is emblematic of efforts to integrate identity and culture more deeply into our concepts of national security, and feminist approaches to questions of conflict have also made important corrective in-roads (Enloe 2007). A fruitful avenue for future research is therefore the integration of psychological and constructivist approaches, particularly in the study of conflict (Shannon and Keller 2007; Shannon and Kowert 2011). Given the range of sources and influences, constructivist accounts feed into or compliment many of the theories of war in Table 3, across all levels of analysis.

To sum up this section, and using the familiar "levels of analysis" in international relations (Waltz 1959), research on the causes of war has focused on three types of independent variable: attributes of the international system, attributes of the domestic organization of states, and attributes of individuals (key theories across each of these

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levels are summarized in Table 3). The first has led to a clearer understanding of the effects of power and its distribution internationally, the second has helped us to understand how a state's foreign policy is shaped by its domestic politics, and the third completes the picture by explaining how individuals make decisions that can lead to war. Note that, referring back to Table 1, any given war may require multiple causal explanations acting (and interacting) at different levels—permissive conditions, necessary and sufficient conditions, an underlying issue of disagreement, a proximate trigger to spark conflict, and a decision to fight.

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Table 3. Theories of the Causes of War

Level	**Theory**	**Argument**	**Ref**
1a. SYSTEM (arise from the *structure* of the international system)	Balance of Power	Coalitions fight to counter aggressors	Waltz 1979
	Power Transition Theory	Rising powers fight to change international order	Organski 1984
1b. DYAD (arise from the *interaction* between states)	Steps to War	States fight over irresolvable political issues (e.g. territory)	Vasquez 1999
	Bargaining Model of War	States fight when bargaining over issues and relative power fails	Fearon 1995
	Economic Independence	States do not fight if they have shared economic interests	Copeland 2014
2a. STATE (arise from the *characteristics* of states)	Marxist Theories	Elites suffer lower costs and greater benefits than others	Lenin 2011
	Diversionary Theory of War	Elites launch foreign wars for domestic political gain	Gagnon 1994 Schuessler 2010
	Democratic Peace	Democracies do not fight other democracies	Kant 2003 Russett 1994 Reiter and Stam 2002
	Clash of Civilizations	Cultures fight over differing values	Huntington 1997
2b. ORGANIZATION	Bureaucratic	Organizational	Allison 1971

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(arise from pathologies of the *group*)	Politics Model	processes inadvertently lead to escalation	
	Governmental politics	Competing domestic political incentives lead to risky policies	Allison 1971
	Organizational Interests	Turf wars and organizational goals among governmental institutions encourage conflict	Allison 1971
2c. GROUPS	Ideology of the Offensive	Military organizations seek or promote escalation	Snyder 1984
	Lobby Groups	Powerful interest groups push for war	Mearsheimer and Walt 2007
	Small Group Dynamics	"Groupthink" makes war seem attractive	Janis 1982
3. INDIVIDUAL (arise from pathologies of the *individual*)	Cognitive biases	Human decision-making mechanisms lead to war	Jervis 1976 Tetlock 1998
	Motivated biases	Human motivational desires lead to war	Jervis 1976 Mercer 2005
	Crisis Decision Making	Limited time, information, and stress encourage escalation	McDermott 2004c Nicholson 1992

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The Decline of War? Trends in Interstate and Civil Conflict

So far we have exclusively discussed interstate war, given the magnitude of its effects and its central role in international relations theory. However, empirically, inter-state wars have been in decline since 1945, while the number of civil wars (i.e. wars within states) have increased dramatically (Figure 1). This has been reflected by an increase in attention paid to understanding the causes of civil wars among political scientists as a whole. Debate continues as to whether civil wars or interstate wars will remain more important in the future, and whether they have distinct or similar causes (Mueller 2007; Pinker 2011; Fearon & Laitin (2003) also note that the increase in the frequency of civil wars is in part a result of old wars lasting longer as well as new ones starting).

Wars of the past tended to be characterized by clear-cut actors, usually nation-states, pursuing political aims. As Clausewitz (1976/1832) famously observed, "war is politics by other means". Such wars also tended to have clear frontlines and a clear winner and loser. Civil wars, and in particular the spate of so-called "new wars" that have erupted around the world since the end of the Cold War, stand in sharp contrast (Münkler 2004; Kaldor 2007). The actors in these conflicts include sub- and trans-national guerillas, private entrepreneurs and international networks, whose (allegedly un-Clausewitzian) economic as well as political interests may be as nebulous as the organizations within which they operate. Furthermore, the frontlines of these often-intractable conflicts are unclear, and the fighting may end or fizzle without any clear winner and loser. Faced with such different kinds of wars, political scientists have

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searched for new kinds of causes, as well as testing the extent to which existing theories of war apply in these cases as well (Cunningham & Lemke 2013).

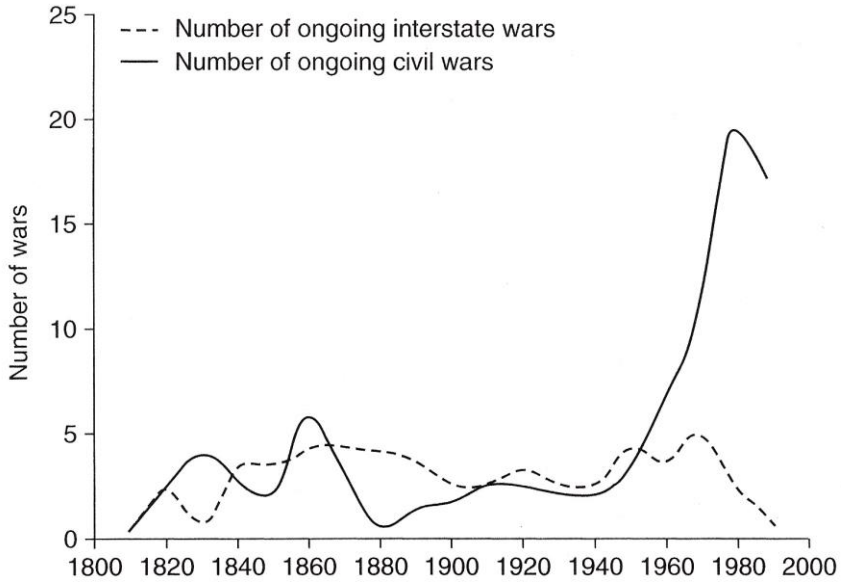

Figure 1. The decline of inter-state war and the rise of civil wars (Dannreuther 2007).

The decline of interstate war, especially major war among Great Powers (the focus of most IR theory), is often traced to the end of WW II and the beginning of the Cold War. The bipolar standoff between the US and USSR reduced the permissive conditions for war: (1) vast nuclear arsenals made major war unthinkable (according to deterrence theorists); (2) the bipolar system meant there were only two powerful states to pose a threat to each other (compared to the multiple European Great Powers of the past); and (3) major alliances on each side – NATO and the Warsaw Pact – provided a balance of power in Europe, as well as constraining opportunities for war among other states

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elsewhere around the globe. Because of the dominance of the two great powers and their elevated interests in avoiding war due to the presence of nuclear weapons and extended alliances, interstate wars of the Cold War were few and limited. In addition to this, neoliberals would argue, the rise of economic interdependence, international institutions, and democracy (at least in some regions of the world) helped to mitigate the scourge of anarchy and prevent war.

While interstate war has been in decline, civil wars have shown a sharp rise. Civil wars were certainly not new, having precedents from the Roman era and before (Boot 2013). However, they became particularly common in the latter half of the 20th century due to two major dynamics. First, the two World Wars successively undermined and weakened the colonial empires of the European Great Powers. This enabled a wave of national liberation wars and secessionist movements across the globe. A second surge followed the end of the Cold War, when nationalist and separatist movements of civil conflicts that had been suppressed or fought as proxy wars between the superpowers were given new life as the fetters of foreign interest were removed. Overall, the end of the World Wars and Cold War lifted the artificial boundaries of empire and allowed numerous groups to fight for their own territories and borders. This dynamic was compounded by the fact that factors helping to prevent (inter-state) war among western states in the "Global North" (nuclear deterrence, interdependence, democracy), were largely absent in the "Global South", where states were weak, developing, and destabilized by histories of conflict.

Whatever the reasons for the shift, civil wars have clearly become an important policy issue. They have killed more people than inter-state wars since 1945, and tend to

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reflect or exacerbate numerous related problems including inequality, control of resources, poverty, famine, migration, economic development and terrorism. The reduction in governance capabilities due to war leads to the so called "conflict trap" (in which weak structures and institutions required to resolve and prevent conflict become even weaker as conflict continues). In the subfield of security studies, scholarly attention and theorizing has tracked this shift in war, moving away from strategy, inter-state war, and deterrence to broaden our cenceptualization of security to include economic, environmental, resource, and human dimensions of security (Dannreuther 2007; Collins 2013).

But what are the *causes* of these civil wars? Common knowledge of history leads most people to think that civil wars are political disputes between groups vying for control of the state. However, this turns out to be just one of many hypotheses for the causes of civil wars, which can be broadly divided into three types of explanation: political grievances, economic opportunity, and weak governance.

The first category involves political grievances of a marginalized group, who have nationalist, ethnic, or religious incentives to vie for independence or power, often following long periods of suppression by authoritarian regimes. Among such groups, some of the dynamics can be similar to those operating at the international level. A "security dilemma" can exist among initially peaceful groups, who in competing for power must resource themselves for defense, but by doing so only decrease the security of other groups, who arm in response. This has been identified as an aggravating factor in the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Iraq in 2003, for example. The relationships between particular groups have also been examined in detail, because they

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often have the character of long standing rivalries or "ancient hatreds" that appear to be intractable. The role of ethnicity in competition for power has been hotly debated. While apparently a major factor in recent conflicts such as the Balkans in the 1990s and Iraq and Syria today, some scholars find that, once other factors are controlled for, ethnicity itself is less important as a correlate of civil war than poverty, weak states, political instability, rough terrain, and large populations (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Other studies find ethnicity is crucial to understanding intra-state war (Toft 2005), perhaps especially in interaction with economic inequalities among groups (Cederman, Weidmann, and Gleditsch 2011).

While difficult to resolve, civil wars about political grievances are intuitive. In recent years political scientists have identified another cause of civil war which is less intuitive but equally pernicious. The economic incentives of controlling and exploiting resources is argued to sometimes cause or extend civil war (Berdal and Malone 2000; Ross 2004). Under conditions of peace, such control by armed groups would not be granted and revenues would be lower without the same opportunities for extortion. War itself thus offers economic opportunities for the exploitation of goods such as arms, drugs, diamonds, oil and timber. Civil wars may sometimes thus be about "greed", not "grievance". Major factors contributing to such wars are shorter time horizons (that is, protagonists face an uncertain future, and thus have low reputational costs for engaging in exploitive practices), lack of policing (lower detection and punishment), lack of market competition (large profits, monopolies), and "rent-seeking" (extracting sustainable income). Under such conditions, opportunists do well – whether rebels, corrupt businesses, or criminal networks – and become disproportionately influential. Peace is unlikely to favor these groups, so there is little incentive to end war. In these cases, armed

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groups may be unlikely to accept a political solution, however beneficial it may appear to outsiders or the population at large.

A final category is the role of governance and weak or "failed" states. At issue here is the vital role of the state and governance in maintaining order and preventing conflict (e.g. Hironaka 2008). Where these state functions are absent or compromised, the domestic political environment increasingly resembles the anarchy so familiar at the international level, where there is nothing to stop competing groups from fighting to achieve their aims. Many developing states are not only weak and poor in GDP terms, but also are primarily commodity exporting countries, vulnerable to lootable resources. They also tend to have not yet passed the "demographic transition", and have a high proportion of unmarried and unemployed young men (serving as a large pool of available recruits), and with limited opportunities for education (thus alternative income-earning opportunities are especially attractive). These states lack the legitimacy of democracy, and also lack the repression of autocracy, leaving them in a difficult middle ground where effective governance is particularly hard. In states with colonial legacies, ethnic groups often straddle borders and share countries, and economic or political inequality is prevalent. Outside intervention is often tempting but ineffective at resolving these root causes of war.

Paul Collier, an advocate of the greed argument, makes a compelling point about a special problem inherent to civil wars (Collier 2000). A rebellion with *political* goals represents a tough challenge. First, there is an intense free-rider problem: why would any individual risk their life for political change if others can stay at home and reap the benefits? Second, there is a problem of coordination: only a critical mass of people can

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make victory possible, but how can all individuals willing to contribute, despite the free-rider problem, be safely identified and act together? Third, there is a commitment problem. While the risks may be outweighed by the rewards of having participated – if victory is achieved – there is no way of knowing it these promises will be honored, especially in the chaos and power struggles during and following war. In combination, these factors make it remarkable that rebellions ever get off the ground.

In stark contrast, rebellion for *economic* incentives has none of these problems. Rewards are confined to participants (there is no free-rider problem, or its existence is mitigated). Second, the rebellion does not need to be large, or even victorious. Third, the rewards can be immediately realized in payments and goods, so rebels do not have to merely hope that they may materialize at some point in the future. While the empirical data on the greed versus grievance argument is contested, economic incentives remain compelling over and above the more traditional role of political grievances, at least for some conflicts or as a contributing aggravator in many.

TOWARDS CONSENSUS. Research on the causes of civil war is the new battleground for scholars of war in political science. Indeed, despite the decline of inter-state violence over the last century, research on warfare has remained steady and has recently experienced an increase, as these new forms of political violence are increasingly prominent (Figure 2). There are strong views, rival theories, burgeoning and differing datasets, and no small measure of funding and political interest in identifying the causes of such wars for the purposes of intervention and prevention. One consensus is perhaps the fact that GDP is a consistent correlate of civil war, suggesting that development aid to weak states is a vital method of forestalling conflict in the longer-

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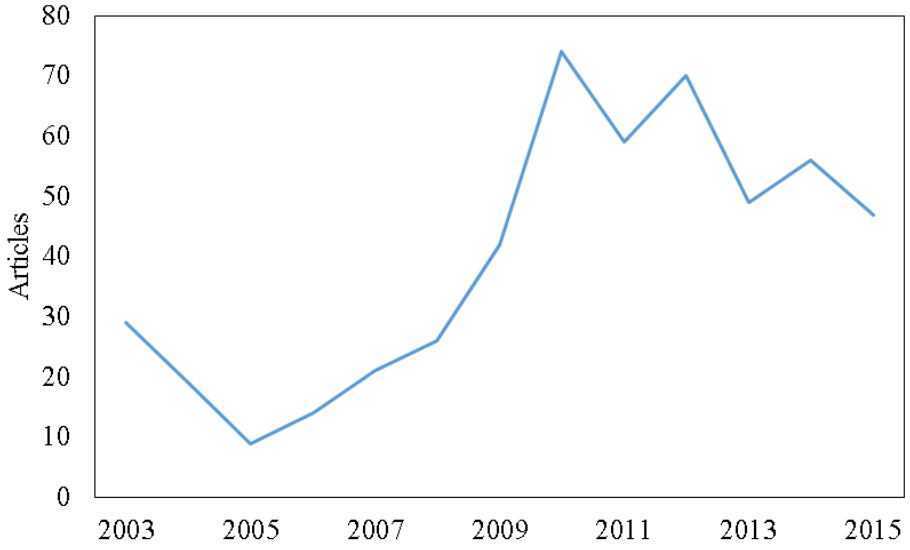
term. The debate matters because alternative causal pathways suggest competing policy options and choices.

Figure 2: Conflict-Related Papers in top Political Science Journals, 2003-2015[5]



We began this section by suggesting that many contemporary civil wars represent "new wars" that are different in their causes and nature from more traditional wars of the past. However, a large literature now challenges the "new wars" thesis. First, civil wars were common in the west's own experience of early internecine wars prior to the modern nation state (for example, in pre-unification Italy and Germany, England, France, the United States, Spain, and so on). Strong states in the "global north" are in part a *result* of both civil and inter-state wars of the past, and these wars themselves may have been

[5] Figure 1 displays conflict-related papers that were published in top political science journals between 2003 and 2015. The figure was generated based on five journals (*American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*) and the search terms (war, violence, conflict, bargaining, aggression) commonly associated with theories of conflict in political science. Web of Science searches for articles within the given journals with these terms in the title were performed on 29 September 2016. Special thanks to Kevin Laughren.

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undesirable but instrumental to generating strong states, enduring political institutions, and representation among different groups within the country.

Second, there is a problem of perspective. New wars may seem "new" to our parochial perspective, having become accustomed in western experience and scholarship to certain types of war, institutions, incentives, and actors. Until recently the US and UK, for example, were primarily preparing for World War III. But however the *character* of war changes (Strachan and Scheipers 2014), its strategic logic is remarkably enduring (Kalyvas 2001). While the Clausewitzian model was supposedly challenged by apolitical non-state actors and economic incentives, in fact scholars have come to argue that most modern civil wars actually reflect the Clausewitzian "Trinity" very well, which Clausewitz himself never said were unique to states (Fleming 2009). These are that war is always a product of passions and enmity (usually the "people"), chance and probability (usually the military), and political purpose (usually the government). These phenomena, however, are not tied to the state, and the goals of rebel groups are usually far from irrational. Organized violence among groups, even in messy "new wars", can be understood within the timeless logic of Clausewitz.

Conclusion

Much of political science has been focused in recent years on the immediate foreign policy problems posed by civil wars and insurgencies, and the insecurity, state failure, trafficking, criminality, and refugees that have propagated around them. While such intra-state wars show no sign of abating, a broader perspective suggests that we should remain skeptical about the decline of war among states as well. First, war has often been

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heralded as in decline before, for example in the Concert of Europe system following the Napoleonic Wars, prior to WW I, and after the Cold War, with Francis Fukuyama's (1992) *End of History* boldly arguing that western capitalism, democracy, and liberal politics had won and would simply spread to fixation across the globe. Second, 9/11 and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, while arising among non-state actors, has led to numerous inter-state wars and foreign interventions across the globe. Third, while the US remains dominant on the world stage, the distribution of power – in old-fashioned realist terms – is changing rapidly and significantly. Not only are China and India, among others, on the rise in economic and military power, but Russia has a newfound boldness in competition for power and territory in Europe. Beyond these significant developments, nuclear weapons have proliferated to North Korea, Pakistan and perhaps in the future to Iran, leading to major changes in power relations in Central and East Asia, and the Middle East. The rise of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as well as other rising states, means the balance of power is shifting away from Europe and the US. The US has openly announced its "pivot" from military and strategic commitments in Europe to focus on Asia. History has demonstrated that, as Waltz would predict, a multi-polar world (a world of several Great Powers) is a dangerous environment where major war is a recurrent phenomenon. The bipolarity of the Cold War appears to have been relatively stable, and the unchallenged unipolarity of the US, for now, also appears to exert some stability in avoiding major wars, particularly considering American leadership among a prevailing "security community" (Wohlforth 1999; Jervis 2005). Few would disagree that we are, even if slowly, moving back to a multipolar world, one that we have not seen since the world of 1914 and 1939.

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The new Great Powers have many differences to resolve among themselves (e.g. Pakistan-India, India-China, China-Russia), China has competing territorial claims against several other states in the East and South China seas, and all of them face the problem of competition for declining resources in a warming world, with a still rapidly rising population. Optimists will point to the success of interdependence, institutions, and democracy as signs that the world really is different now, and major war is no longer within the playbook of modern states. Pessimists will point out that it is only ever the optimists who have been disappointed by history, and the anarchic nature of international politics has changed little in its essence since the time of Thucydides 25 centuries ago. Under anarchy, war is a feature of the environment in which we must live, and there is little reason to believe that this century will be fundamentally different from those that came before.

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