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Excerpt

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I THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1 INTRODUCTION: WAR INITIATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

This book addresses the question of war initiation in asymmetric conflicts – a conflict in which two states with unequal power resources confront each other on the battlefield. In most theoretical discussions on war, not much attention has been paid to the basic question under investigation here: *Why does a militarily and economically less powerful state initiate war against a relatively strong state?* Examples of asymmetric wars in which the weaker side attacked its stronger opponent abound. Prominent ancient cases include the Spartan attack on a coalition of Athens, Corinth, and Argos in 394 BC, Pyrrus' attack on Italy in 275 BC, the several Gallic, Gothic, and Heruli invasions of the Roman Empire in the third century AD,¹ and the Muslim invasion of Persia in AD 636.²

In the modern era, a number of such wars have occurred. For instance, Frederick the Great possessed an inferior force level when he waged the Seven Years' War against Austria. In fact, his 30,000-strong Prussian Army beat an Austrian force of 80,000 at Leuthen.³ The Hungarian attack on Turkey in 1747 is another case of this nature. The initiators of the First Balkan War in 1912 – Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece – possessed a combined force smaller than that of their target state, Turkey, and yet were able to defeat their superior adversary.⁴ The Paraguayan attack on the allied forces of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in 1866, the Japanese attack on Russia in 1904, the Polish–Ukrainian attack on the USSR in 1920, the Finnish attack on the USSR in 1941, and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 are other prominent examples of relatively weak states initiating wars in the modern era.

In the post-World War II period, several wars have been initiated by weaker states against their more powerful adversaries. The Chinese intervention in Korea (1950), the Pakistani offensive in Kashmir (1965), the Israeli attack on the Arab states (1967), the Egyptian offensive against Israel in the Sinai (1973), the Syrian offensive against Israel in the Golan Heights (1973), the Cambodian military incursions against Vietnam (1977), the Somali attack on Ethiopia (1977), the Ugandan

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attack on Tanzania (1978), the Argentine invasion of the Falklands (1982), and the Croatian offensives against Serbia (1993) all stand out as important cases in which the relatively weak side launched war against a state with more overall power capability.⁵

Although it is not the focus of this study, a number of brinkmanship crises have also been initiated by weaker states.⁶ Iraq's brinkmanship behavior during the Persian Gulf Crisis of 1990–91 is such a case. The Iraqi regime's annexation of Kuwait in August 1990 and its unwillingness to defuse the crisis by withdrawing from the occupied nation led to a militarily disastrous situation vis-à-vis a superior US-led coalition. The ensuing military confrontation virtually threatened the very survival of the Iraqi state, suggesting that a weaker nation even under threat of annihilation need not bow down to the enormous military power arrayed against it. In addition, several wars of independence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have been initiated and won against colonial and imperial powers by weaker liberation forces. In the post-war era, many powerful countries had to withdraw their interventionist armies without achieving their objectives against less powerful guerrilla forces.⁷

The rationale for this study thus springs from a realization that these cases neither comprise a negligible number of inter-state wars in the modern age, nor are merely inconsequential outliers in the overall incidence of international warfare. Although there have been significant attempts to define and theorize global wars, asymmetric wars initiated by weaker states still elude serious attention from the field of international politics. Major systemic explanations of war tend to focus upon long-term changes in hegemonic leadership and control associated with structural conditions in the international system.⁸ Other theorists have attempted to find causes of wars in the growth and changes in population, technology, resources, markets, and national expansion.⁹ Although these explanations provide broad theoretical bases for understanding international conflict, especially the underlying causes resulting from anarchy and other structural properties, they tend to be of limited use in explaining proximate or contextual factors that lead to the outbreak of asymmetric wars, in particular their timing. As A.J.P. Taylor observes, the general causes of wars may be found in systemic properties such as anarchy, but for particular causes that resulted in specific wars one has to look deeper into situational or contextual factors.¹⁰

Crucial studies on systemic and sub-systemic wars have also focused upon separate long-run and short-run variables that have correlations to war initiation.¹¹ One of the central debates among theorists who

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study long-term variables has been whether power parity among opposing states or preponderance of the status quo power preserves peace at the systemic as well as the sub-systemic level.¹² This debate is largely derived from the conception of classical balance of power theory which contends that the power preponderance of one state or a coalition of states is so unstable that wars are bound to occur as such a state or a coalition is tempted to indulge in aggressive behavior.

Power parity and war initiation

Notwithstanding the disagreement among scholars and statesmen on the precise meaning of balance of power, it can reasonably be stated that the theory is predicated on the argument that peace is preserved only when an equilibrium of power exists among great powers as otherwise the strong may attack the weak.¹³ The initiators of wars generally are stronger states who, if not balanced by countervailing power, would be tempted to upset the status quo in order to change the system in their favor. If an equal distribution of power exists, no single state or coalition of states will possess overwhelming preponderant power and thereby the incentives to launch war against weaker states. In other words, power parity prevents war since no state can expect victory in such a situation. The potential initiator, who is deterred by a realization that its chances of military victory are limited because of high uncertainty, will prudently avoid engaging in war.¹⁴

The theory's contention that "parity preserves peace" is based on a notion that an aggressive state will not go to war if it perceives that its power (or the power of its coalition) is less than that of the opponent.¹⁵ Thus the theory assumes that states engage in wars only when they have superior capability, which in turn allows them to win. On the contrary, if their existing capabilities do not allow military victory, states will not engage in war initiation. Although a preventive war is not ruled out, the best way to achieve an equilibrium or an optimum level of power and security is through the alignment of small states among themselves and with the opponents of the hegemonic power.¹⁶ Structural realists contend that secondary states flock to the weaker side in order to form coalitions that may achieve defensive or deterrent strength sufficient to dissuade adversaries who are usually the stronger states.¹⁷

Despite its strengths in explaining war initiations by dominant powers, the preceding discussion suggests that the balance of power theory and its main hypothesis, "parity preserves peace," cannot fully account for wars begun by weaker states. Although preventive wars by

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weaker states are included in the theory as a means to balance a stronger potential aggressor, this category forms only one type of asymmetric war. As per the theory, minor powers generally should not launch wars on their own as they are conceived as objects of major power politics. They are at times considered as states that can produce troublesome situations which can be exploited by major powers.¹⁸ The “parity leads to peace” hypothesis would thus predict that weaker states should not be the initiators of major inter-state conflicts. Yet a number of historical examples show that these states do engage in war initiations on their own against more powerful adversaries. The contention here is that although balance of power theory has strong merits in explaining war initiations by dominant powers, it needs further qualification as well as the inclusion of additional variables if asymmetric war initiation by weaker states is to be explained more accurately.

Preponderance and war initiation

The alternate hypothesis to “parity preserves peace,” i.e. “preponderance deters war,” is put forward by, among others, power transition theorists.¹⁹ According to this theory, peace is maintained when satisfied great powers are in preponderance, while war is more likely when dissatisfied challengers begin to approximate their capabilities with the preponderant power. Other theorists, who subscribe to this hypothesis agree that preponderance is a pacifying condition. To Claude, a potential aggressor is more likely to be deterred by confrontation with a preponderant rather than a merely equal power²⁰. Knorr considers war by a state confronting a preponderant power unlikely, as weak states “do not even consider certain courses of action, because it is obvious that they are likely to incur the displeasure of a militarily very superior state . . .”²¹ Some theorists have applied the “preponderance deters war” hypothesis to regional sub-systems where the superiority in capability of one or more status quo powers is deemed to have prevented war by relatively weak challenging states²². In the policy realm, many national leaders follow the “peace through strength,” dictum without question. The rationale for high military spending has been that peace can be ensured only by preparing for war. Scholars and policy makers tend to cite historical examples to show “how failure to maintain adequate armed forces strength has led to an aggressive war.”²³

Although the “preponderance deters war” hypothesis seems to have some merits, our discussion so far suggests that it cannot fully

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account for asymmetric wars initiated by weaker states. Notwithstanding the possibility that overwhelming preponderance may exert some influence on the calculations of potential war initiators, it is not apparent how the presence of a general preponderance in capabilities of a stronger power deters attack by a weaker challenger. Additionally, the theorists who use this hypothesis tend not to specify the type of preponderance, i.e. offensive, defensive, or deterrent, that can result in preventing weaker powers from undertaking asymmetric war initiations. Moreover, in some of the cases I study, the overall military and economic dominance of the status quo power was neither a pacifying condition nor a deterring factor against a weaker state attacking.

War initiation in decision level theories

Unlike systems level theories such as balance of power and power transition, decision level theories focus specifically on the cost/benefit calculations that initiators make prior to launching wars. For instance, deterrence theory considers retaliatory military threats and their impact on the choices for or against war by decision-makers. The expected utility model of Bueno de Mesquita also looks at the on-the-eve calculations of war initiators. Although deterrence theory has many systems level attributes, the concern here is how it treats decision-making by an initiator who is about to launch an attack.

War initiation in deterrence theory

Deterrence is largely a decision level theory that considers short-term factors as critical in war initiation and war prevention. The mainstream deterrence theory contends that the possession and deployment of adequate weapons (whether conventional or nuclear) and the credible communication of their use would deter an aggressor from challenging the status quo militarily.²⁴ This conception could be applied to both general deterrence and immediate deterrence. In the former, opponents maintain armed forces with an expectation that the implicit threat of resorting to force deters the potential attacker. Immediate deterrence is likely to obtain when one state seriously considers an attack and the defender mounts a successful retaliatory threat in order to prevent it. General deterrence focuses on the deployment and implicit threat of using military power to prevent military and diplomatic crises from erupting in an adversarial relationship, while immediate deterrence deals with war prevention once a crisis begins.²⁵

Theorists have classified deterrence into deterrence by punishment

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and deterrence by denial. As regards the former, states in adversarial relationships maintain adequate amounts of forces, especially of nuclear nature, to maintain a credible retaliatory capability. The potential initiator is deterred because of the threat of retaliation or punishment that makes the benefits from the attack of lesser value than its costs. In a deterrence by denial relationship, adversaries maintain military forces, especially conventional, ground, sea, and tactical air forces, with the purpose of denying battlefield success to their opponents. As war initiation does not promise gaining one's objectives on the battlefield, the potential initiator is deterred from engaging in an attack.²⁶ Denial type deterrence is most significant in the conventional realm. And for this study, the most relevant deterrence version is deterrence by denial, as embodied in theories on conventional deterrence. Deterrence in the conventional sphere has been defined as a function of the capability of denying an aggressor its battlefield objectives with conventional forces.²⁷

According to the deterrence logic, especially as presented by the first and second wave (or classical deterrence) theorists, the attacker will be more likely to fight (deterrence failing) to the degree that the attacker's overall existing and potential military and economic capabilities exceed those of the defender.²⁸ A key embedded argument in deterrence theory is that decision-makers of a given nation will rationally calculate the military balance with its adversary and will decide (1) to attack if the balance is favorable, or (2) not to attack if it is unfavorable.²⁹ The theory treats decision-makers as value maximizers who choose war only if its benefits exceed costs. They are also expected to make calculations on the probability of success and the likely response of their adversary if they initiate a war. Accordingly, if the probability of success is remote because of the threat of retaliation by the adversary, the would-be initiator refrains from launching an attack.

Deterrence theorists, especially those who subscribe to the deterrence by denial approach, thus pay a great amount of attention to balance of military forces between the attacker and the defender in the correct deterrence force equation, as without sufficient capability a potential aggressor would not contemplate an attack. It is generally assumed that a state will not initiate a war that it expects to lose, so that the defender's possession of superior military capability (besides the adversary's recognition of the superiority) is a sufficient condition for successful deterrence.³⁰ The initiator must calculate whether it has the required military capability to win a war with the defender, and the cost of such an action. This calculation affects the attacker's raw utility of fighting the defender, and also its estimate of the probability that

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the defender will retaliate.³¹ Deterrence by punishment also gives prominence to the capability factor in the war calculations of likely initiators. According to this approach, if the potential initiator believes that the defender has the capability and the willingness to retaliate, it is deterred by a conviction that the threatened punishment exceeds the benefits of attacking and that the attack will make it worse off than not attacking. However, if the initiator believes either that the defender is incapable or that its threat is incredible, then it will attack.³²

From this discussion it is apparent that deterrence theory has constraints in explaining war initiation by a weaker state. A weaker power may engage in war without expecting a major military victory, contrary to the expectations of deterrence theory.³³ In some asymmetric wars, the initiators' expectations in terms of military victory were less pronounced than the calculations in terms of political victory. As I will show through the case studies, in some instances these calculations were based on expectations that war might bring political changes that could help alter an unfavorable status quo. Among other political motives, a challenger may view war as a means to get sympathy for a cause, or if defeated, to lose honorably rather than give up without a fight. A related second dimension of war initiation that is not given full consideration in the theory pertains to different options and strategies that an initiator may have. Thus a weaker challenger with a "controlled pressure" strategy may not be deterred when the defending power is exclusively concerned with major attacks.³⁴ In other words, a weaker challenger can pursue particular strategies that do not involve an all-out war in order to achieve its objectives. Finally, most often the theory does not adequately consider the influence of time pressure on decision-making. Challengers under serious time pressure may attack, despite the theory's prediction that rational decision-makers will be prevented from attacking by the defender's deterrent threat. Decision-makers who experience time pressure may view an opponent's deterrence policy as offensive and aggressive and may therefore resort to arms in order to prevent such presumed aggression that could occur in the future.

A problem with deterrence theory is that its focus is rather narrowly predicated on the defender's capability for denial and credibility of threat for punishment purposes. The absence of these conditions could be important in the calculations of states that initiate wars, but they are inadequate to explain several wars started by weaker challengers. The theory leaves out other variables that can play crucial role in an initiator's calculations as well as conditions that could spark war at particular junctures in an enduring conflict relationship involving

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two unequal powers. The third wave deterrence theorists have attempted to rectify some of the problems associated with the theory. Psychological studies during the 1970s and the 1980s have brought forth some key problems in the theory.³⁵ Case studies have cited several instances of deterrence failures. Some such case study authors have highlighted the lack of political content in deterrence as well as the problems associated with the deductive logic of the theory.³⁶ Yet deterrence still largely remains a capability and threat-oriented strategic theory that gives scant attention to political variables that impinge upon the calculations of initiators and defenders.

War initiation in an expected utility model

The BDM model, as described in Bueno de Mesquita's *The War Trap*, attempts to explain war initiations by the strong and the weak alike on the basis of the theory of expected utility. It contends that national leaders make deliberate choices based on their estimation of costs and benefits that are equivalent to losing and winning a war. These choices depend on: (a) the relative strengths of the attacker and the defender, (b) the value that the attacker places on changing the defender's policies, relative to the possible changes in policies that the attacker may be forced to accept if it loses; and (c) the relative strengths and interests of all other states that might intervene in the war.³⁷ The gains and losses are multiplied by the respective probabilities of their occurrence, in order to arrive at the expected positive utility of war initiation. War initiation also depends on how risk-acceptant or risk-averse a decision-maker is and what the expected response of third nations would be in the event of war. The leader who contemplates war is assumed to make assessments about the relative value that the third states may contribute to his nation as compared to his adversary.³⁸

As the first major attempt to explain war initiations by the weak and the strong alike, using a broad expected utility framework, this model is significant. The prominence it gives to responses by third states and the risk-taking propensities of decision-makers as crucial variables makes it more valuable than systems level theories in explaining asymmetric wars. However, the model seems incomplete for understanding war initiations by weaker states as it ignores key variables such as strategic calculations and domestic power changes. In most of the cases I study, relative gross capability in its abstract form does not appear as a sufficient indicator as to when war initiation occurs. For some states, the expected utility of war can be positive even when relative gross capabilities are not.

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Further, as Bueno de Mesquita uses only cases of war occurrence, it is not apparent what the state of the independent variables are when decision-makers fail to initiate wars. A constraint of the model is thus its static nature. A more dynamic theory would explain why wars occur at particular times and not at others.³⁹ Additionally, the model tells little about the stakes in a conflict, the nature of the deteriorating status quo, or the state of other political and military conditions that generate war decisions. A more complete theory would explain how utilities are shaped, from where they are derived, who shapes them and how external and internal changes affect them in decision-makers' choosing between war and peace.⁴⁰ The model also does not take into account the effect of limited choices under time pressure on decision-making. These criticisms do not imply that the model is entirely inappropriate to explain asymmetric wars. The contention is that it can be made more effective by incorporating factors such as strategic and domestic calculations of initiators that may in turn help explain asymmetric war initiations more accurately. The additional variables that can account for changes over time seem crucial in explaining why asymmetric wars are initiated during some periods of time and not others.⁴¹

Why study asymmetric wars?

A variety of war initiation theories has been discussed in this chapter. The alternative theories bring forth the limited consensus among scholars on the causes of wars, the role of the initiator, and the role of power in the war initiation process. Furthermore, despite the extensive attention devoted to war in international relations theory, we still lack a systematic explanation of the factors and conditions that allow war initiations by weaker powers.⁴² The discussion reveals that the mainstream theories incline to make us believe there is little sense for the weaker side to go to war. Broader systemic theories such as balance of power and power transition view asymmetric war initiation as unlikely to occur. They leave out the specific short-term and medium-term determinants that affect the preferences of initiators and therefore seem to be of limited help in explaining the timing of war in particular asymmetric conflict situations.

Decision level theories such as deterrence and expected utility are only partially useful for this purpose because they pay inadequate attention to factors such as strategic considerations and domestic calculations of initiators. Therefore, additional inputs are needed to make them sufficiently strong to explain asymmetric war initiations.