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978-0-521-46621-9 - Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers

T. V. Paul

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This book examines a question generally neglected in the study of international relations: why does a militarily and economically less powerful state initiate war against a relatively strong state? Thazha Varkey Paul analyzes this phenomenon by focusing on the strategic and political factors which influence a weaker state's decision for war. The key argument of deterrence theory is that the military superiority of the status quo power, coupled with a credible retaliatory threat, will prevent attack by challengers. The author questions this notion by examining six twentieth-century asymmetric wars: the Japanese offensive against Russia in 1904; the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941; the Chinese intervention in Korea in 1950; the Pakistani offensive in Kashmir in 1965; the Egyptian offensive in the Sinai in 1973; and the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982. The book's findings have wide implications for the study of war, power, deterrence, coercive diplomacy, strategy, arms races, and alliances.

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Events in the Persian Gulf during 1990–91 brought back fears of large-scale conventional wars suddenly erupting in theaters of perpetual tension such as the Middle East. Although predictions of obsolescence of major wars among advanced industrialized countries hold for the time being, war still seems the *ultima ratio* for resolving conflict, at least among some states. The Persian Gulf War generated debates, especially in the United States, on the advantages of air power and short wars and the virtue of high spending for sophisticated weaponry, even during a period of relative economic decline. In January 1991, the US decision-makers abandoned their earlier adopted strategies of deterrence and coercive diplomacy against Iraq in favor of “compellence” or active use of military force.

The American deterrence strategy was aimed at preventing Iraq from undertaking further attacks on other states in the region, especially Saudi Arabia, while the compellence strategy was meant to pressure the Iraqi leadership into backing down from its annexation of Kuwait. The behavior of the challenging smaller power during both the crisis and the subsequent war raised doubts about the notion that when confronted with overwhelming force, states would modify their recalcitrant positions. To a certain extent, the Iraqi willingness to suffer incalculable damage at the hands of a multinational force headed by a super power, possessing several times superior technological prowess, military capability, and economic power, showed the limits of applying coercive diplomacy against a determined opponent.

History has witnessed over and over again challengers and defenders, both strong and weak, pitted against each other on the battlefield. Traditional schools of power politics, such as balance of power, view the outbreak of war among equal powers as less likely because power parity neutralizes both states’ chances for victory. Attacks by weaker powers against stronger opponents are seen as improbable given the notion that rational decision-makers would not engage in such risky ventures that they are likely to lose. More modern schools of conflict



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behavior such as deterrence also view war initiation by weaker powers as unlikely, especially if the superior power has the capability to deny the challenger battlefield success.

This book looks at the empirical question of why, repeatedly in history, weaker powers have engaged in wars against stronger adversaries. I argue that a state inferior in overall power capabilities, even after assessing its disadvantages vis-à-vis the opponent, may still go to war against its stronger adversary by making choices that are within the realm of rational calculations. These choices depend largely on the particular strategy, weapons, and great power alliance support that the weaker state holds and domestic configurations in these states prior to war initiation. This contention is examined in the light of several historic cases and by looking at the decision-making process before the outbreak of war.

The work on this study has been greatly assisted by a number of senior scholars, colleagues, and friends, primarily at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and McGill University, Montreal, and family members. My deep and sincere gratitude goes to Richard Rosecrance who provided several valuable theoretical and empirical insights as well as moral support from the very outset. Several of my colleagues and friends at UCLA, McGill University, and elsewhere provided excellent assistance, especially by way of commenting on earlier chapter versions. They include: Alexander George, John Mueller, Kal Holsti, Richard Smoke, Michael Intriligator, Richard Sisson, Cherie Steele, John Hall, David Lake, John Kroll, Ajit Jha, and Jennifer Tow. I am particularly grateful to Professors George, Mueller, and Smoke and Cherie Steele for making extensive theoretical and methodological comments on earlier chapter versions. The UCLA Workshop on International Security was a great arena for intellectual exchange, constructive criticism, and re-evaluation of my arguments. A number of students who took my graduate seminar on international conflict and cooperation at McGill University also helped me refine some of the arguments.

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Chun and interpreter Zhu Liu of the Beijing Institute for International Strategic Studies hosted my visit to China in August 1992 and extended generous hospitality. I am also thankful to my brother, T.V. Mathew and my in-laws, Anna and P.O. Varghese for their constant encouragement. My wife, Rachel deserves special praise for her unfailing support and assistance during the undertaking. She showed great enthusiasm for the project by way of editing and proofreading several drafts as well as by bearing with my occasional absences during field trips abroad. Thanks also goes to my little daughter, Kavya, for being a great source of joy and inspiration.

Generous financial assistance was provided by fellowships and travel assistance from the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC); US Institute of Peace, Washington DC, through its Randolph Jennings Peace Scholar Award; Institute for the Study of World Politics, Washington DC; UCLA's Center for International and Strategic Affairs (CISA) and the Department of Political Science; and McGill University, through a social science research grant. The travel supports facilitated my undertaking useful field research trips to Japan, China, India, Pakistan, Argentina, and Egypt and conducting extensive interviews with scholars and decision-makers in these countries who have knowledge of the cases. These interviews undoubtedly provided me with greater insight into the wars, their variations and commonalities as well as the specific contexts in which they were fought. In these countries several individuals helped me to make the trips fruitful by arranging interviews and other facilities and I thank them all.