

1

Introduction to the Study of War

War has been a persistent pattern of interaction between and within states and other political units for millennia. In its many varieties, it is probably the most destructive form of human behavior. War kills people, destroys resources, retards economic development, ruins environments, spreads disease, expands governments, militarizes societies, reshapes cultures, disrupts families, and traumatizes people. Preparation for war, whether for conquest or for protection, diverts valued resources from more constructive social activities, and it often undermines security rather than enhances it.

War also has a profound impact on the evolution of world politics and the behavior of states. Over the years it has been one of the primary mechanisms for change in the world system, through its impact on both the distribution of military power and wealth and the structure of the world economy. War also has a profound impact on the institutional structures and cultures of states, and it has played a key role in the birth and death of many states. We cannot understand the development of the modern nation-state system four or five centuries ago, or of earlier or more recent states, in the absence of patterns of warfare. As Tilly (1975:42) argued, “war made the state, and the state made war.”

It is hard to imagine what life would have been like in the late twentieth century in the absence of World War I and World War II, which had such profound effects on the global system and on domestic societies. The same can be said for the Cold War. For nearly a half century it shaped both international and domestic politics and cultures, not only in the United States and the Soviet Union but also in Western Europe and the Third World (Weart, 1989). The development of new states in the contemporary era continues to be influenced by warfare and preparations for war. With the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and with the threat of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorist groups and “rogue states,” new threats to the security of even the most powerful states in the system have emerged.

2 Introduction to the Study of War

The proliferation of civil wars and conflicts involving “non-state” actors has changed life throughout the developing world. A better understanding of the causes of war is a necessary first step if we are to have any hope of reducing the occurrence of war and perhaps mitigating its severity and consequences.

The unquestioned importance of war as a social phenomenon has led scholars, journalists, and others to devote enormous amounts of intellectual energy in attempt to better understand the nature of war and its causes. Ever since Thucydides (1996) wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* over 2,400 years ago in an attempt to explain the great war between Athens and Sparta (431–404 BCE), scholars from a wide range of disciplines – philosophy, history, political science, theology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, mathematics, biology, literature, and others – have engaged the questions of what causes war and how humankind might eliminate war or at least bring it under greater control. Their efforts have led to a proliferation of theories but to no consensus as to the causes of war or of other forms of social violence.

Scholars disagree not only on the specific causes of war, but also on how to approach the study of war. It is not surprising that there are divisions between scholars in different countries (Wæver, 1998) and in different disciplines – that psychologists generally emphasize psychological factors, that economists emphasize economic factors, that anthropologists emphasize cultural factors, and so on. We also find enormous differences within each discipline. Scholars debate not only what the causes of war are, but also what theoretical approaches and methodologies are best suited to identifying those causes. The only consensus that seems to be emerging is that the question of the causes of war is enormously complex, although a minority of scholars question even that. Scholarly debate goes on, but the scourge of war continues.

The complexity of the question of the causes of war is compounded if we consider the many different forms of war. Most of the scholarly research on war since the time of Thucydides has focused on wars between states. Interstate wars dominated the study of war in political science until the last couple of decades, even though civil wars have actually been more frequent than interstate wars during most periods (Levy and Thompson, 2010b), and dramatically so in the last half century (Sarkees, Wayman, and Singer, 2003; Human Security Centre, 2005; Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr, 2008). If we broaden our focus from interstate war to include civil war, colonial war, ethnic war, tribal war, and other forms of warfare, the question of the causes of war becomes even more complex. Although each of these forms of warfare shares some common elements (for example, the use of military force is usually seen as a strategy for advancing group interests), there are important differences as well.

Differences across types of war are particularly clear in the scholarly literature on interstate war and civil war. As we demonstrate later in this book, theories of interstate war emphasize fundamentally different factors than do theories of civil wars. To take just one example, the emphasis on the distribution of military power in the international system that is so common in discussions of the causes of interstate war, particularly great power wars, is given relatively little emphasis in theories of civil war. Similarly, the key variables of levels of economic and social welfare, which are critical in much of the literature on civil war, are given much less attention by scholars who study interstate war. As a result, most of the contemporary literature on war focuses either on interstate war or on civil war, but not on both.

With the changing nature of warfare, we believe that no general book on war is complete without some treatment of both interstate war and civil war. For that reason we break with the scholarly norm and include discussions of both. Still, we give most of our attention to interstate war, for a variety of reasons. More than any other form of warfare, interstate wars have shaped the evolution of the modern international system. This has made them the central focus of scholarly attention and debate for several centuries. Thus the literature on the causes of interstate war is intimately tied to the literature on international relations theory that has developed during the past 60 years. It is only recently that international relations theorists have engaged the question of the causes and consequences of civil war. Prior to that, students of comparative politics had a monopoly on the study of civil war, and for many years their approach was more descriptive than theoretical. The fact that little consensus has emerged on the causes of interstate war is another strong argument for continuing to study it.

There are other considerations as well. Though it has been declining in frequency, interstate war continues to have a profound effect on the contemporary world. The United States has already fought two interstate wars in the first decade of the new century – against the Taliban government of Afghanistan in 2001 and against the Iraqi government in 2003 – and each war evolved into an internationalized civil war in which the United States was deeply involved. The Iraq war contributed to enormous human costs, a significant decline in US prestige around the world, political divisions at home, and economic costs that contributed to its declining economic fortunes. As we write in summer 2009, analysts debate whether it will be possible for the US to win the ongoing internationalized civil war in Afghanistan. Elsewhere, the Russian–Georgian war of fall 2008 signaled a renewed Russian assertiveness in international politics and sent shock waves through the West.

In addition, a brief survey of the world suggests a number of “flash points” that could trigger an interstate war, and some of these carry a

4 *Introduction to the Study of War*

significant risk of escalation to a broader conflict. We have almost certainly not seen the end of Palestinian–Israeli conflicts, which recently led to short wars in Lebanon involving Hezbollah in 2006 and in Gaza involving Hamas in 2008–09, and the potential for one of these conflicts to draw in other Arab states cannot be discounted.

The prospective proliferation of nuclear weapons involves other possible flash points. When Israel suspected that Syria was in the early stages of developing a nuclear program, it launched a limited preventive strike against a Syrian facility in September 2007.¹ In response to the development of Iran’s nuclear program, which most observers believe is within a few years of becoming operational, and to Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s open call for the destruction of Israel, Israel has threatened to launch a preventive strike against Iran. The United States strongly prefers non-military means of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, but it has thus far refused to take the military option “off the table.”

One also thinks of the Indo–Pakistani rivalry, which has already led to three major wars in the past 60 years (1948, 1965, 1971) and which is increasingly dangerous because both sides have nuclear weapons and because of domestic instability within Pakistan. The rivalry led to a war over Kargil in 1999 and to high levels of tensions at other times, including after the deadly terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008. It is known that Pakistani citizens led the attack, and India charges that Pakistani security forces trained and equipped the terrorists. Other possible danger points are located in the Far East. One is the Korean Peninsula, with a nuclear-armed North Korea often acting in unpredictable ways. Still another danger is the dispute between China and Taiwan over the political status of the latter, which has enormous implications for US–China relations, particularly in the context of the possibility of a “power transition” involving the ascendancy of China over the United States within a few decades.

Thus while interstate war is not likely to be the most frequent form of warfare in the upcoming years, it has the potential to be the most destructive in human and economic terms. A war involving advanced nuclear states could be the most catastrophic war in history and fundamentally change human life as we have known it. Thus we devote most of our attention to interstate war, while reserving some attention to the phenomenon of civil war, which continues to occur on a regular basis.

We proceed as follows. In the rest of this chapter we provide a theoretical and historical context for our study of the causes of war. We define war and identify some of its primary characteristics. We then attempt to describe the changing nature of war over time, in order to put our extensive treatment of interstate war and briefer discussion of civil war in a broader historical context. Next we summarize the levels-of-analysis framework that we use for organizing our survey of the causes of war. Then in

subsequent chapters we examine some of the leading theories of interstate wars. Our aim is not to present our own theory of war, but rather to survey some of the most influential theories advanced by scholars over the years and to point out some of the limitations of each of those theories. We give particular attention to the theories developed by international relations scholars in political science, but we also include important theoretical work from other disciplines as well.

What is War?

If our aim is to explain the causes of war, we must begin with a brief definition of the subject of our inquiry. We define war broadly as *sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations*.² Such a definition includes great power wars like World War I, colonial wars like those fought by the European great powers in Africa and Asia from the eighteenth century to early twentieth century, civil wars like those in the United States in the nineteenth century or in the Congo or in Yugoslavia in the 1990s,³ organized insurgencies like the one against American forces in the Iraq War, tribal wars among pre-modern societies, and a wide variety of other forms of violence. This definition has several component parts, and it would be useful to examine each of them individually.

First, and most obviously, war is violent. It involves the use of force to kill and injure people and destroy military and economic resources. The German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz ([1832]1976:89) ended the first chapter of his famous book *On War* by identifying “primordial violence” as the first element of a “trinity” of “dominant tendencies” of warfare.⁴ That violence has the potential to be quite extreme. Earlier in the same chapter Clausewitz argued (p. 77) that “war is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force.”

The element of violence in warfare separates it from other forms of intergroup and interstate conflict. Conflicts of interests – over power, territory, resources, and more symbolic issues – are common in world politics. Rivalries involving sustained and hostile competitions between actors are also common, as are threats of force by actors in an attempt to resolve disputes in their own favor.⁵ But conflicts of interests, rivalries, disputes, and threats of force do not become a war unless they involve sustained violence. The “Cold War” between the United States and the Soviet Union was a rivalry, not a war.⁶ Indeed, one of the distinctive features of the Cold War was the fact that the US–Soviet rivalry, unlike most previous rivalries between the leading states in the system, did not escalate to war. This is something that many scholars have spent a great deal of time trying to explain, with little agreement (Gaddis, 1987).

6 Introduction to the Study of War

To take another example, the Arab–Israeli conflict goes back to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and beyond. Yet we would not describe it as a continuous war. Rather, it is a conflict or rivalry that has involved frequent low-level military activity, including armed incursions across borders and subsequent retaliations, but that has also been punctuated by a number of well-defined wars. The most prominent of these are the wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, though we would probably also include as wars the Israeli conflicts in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008–09. The point is that conflicts of interests and rivalries are fairly common, whereas wars are not. Explaining why some rivalries, conflicts, or disputes lead to war while others do not is an important question. This makes it all the more important to define war as a separate concept, distinct from conflict or rivalry.

Another component of our definition of war involves the apparently innocuous word that follows violence in our definition – “between.” Yet this element of the definition is far from trivial. It indicates that violence must be reciprocated for it to qualify as war. A war is *between* two political organizations. If the target of the initial violence does not fight back, we do not normally call it a war. The Hungarian army forcibly resisted the Soviet invasion in 1956, and consequently scholars refer to the violent struggle that followed as the Russo–Hungarian War (Singer and Small, 1972). The Czechoslovakian army did not forcibly resist the Soviet invasion in 1968, and consequently we describe this as the Soviet invasion of (or intervention in) Czechoslovakia, but not as a war. To take another example, in 1981 Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor, with the aim of destroying the facility before it could become operational. Iraq did not respond militarily, in part because it was already engaged in a war with Iran. For that reason, scholars refer to the Israeli action as a preventive strike but not as a war.

Thus we treat war as the joint outcome of the behavior of two or more actors. In an alternative use of the concept, scholars sometimes talk about war as a strategy rather than as an outcome (Vasquez, 1993: chap. 1). Here the question is why a state or other political organization adopts a strategy involving the substantial use of military force rather than some other strategy. In speaking of war as a strategy, it is generally assumed that military action will be resisted. If it is not resisted, however, most scholars would not refer to the outcome as a war.

This brings us to the actors who engage in war. The actors are organizations, not individuals. Individuals do the actual fighting, but they fight on behalf of a larger collective political unit, under the direction and coordination of political and/or military leaders, to advance the goals of the collectivity, or at least of its leadership. An individual who acts on his own to kill a border guard, or who crosses a border to kill citizens of another

political system, is not engaging in war. But if that individual is part of a political system's formal military organization, and that military organization engages in a sustained campaign of violence against the military organization of another state or another organized group, we would call it a war.

Most books on the history of war in the modern era (which historians date from about 1500 on) focus on interstate wars, with particular attention to interstate wars between the great powers, the most powerful states in the system.⁷ These wars were the primary focus of Clausewitz ([1832]1976), who wrote after the experience of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) and who emphasized the importance of major battles between the armies of the leading states in the system.⁸ Interstate wars, however, constitute only one manifestation of the wide variety of sustained, coordinated violence that we observe over the millennia.

In addition to fighting other states in interstate wars, states fight domestic challengers in internal or civil wars for the control of the state or for secession from the state. Those domestic challengers may fight each other. States may also fight non-state entities in their external environments, as illustrated by the current US wars against al Qaeda and against the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and by the frequent armed conflicts between the state of Israel and the Palestinian authority and other non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Wars may involve many of these elements simultaneously. The Iraq War started out as an interstate war (between the United States and the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein) but then involved a domestic insurgency against an external state (the US), a civil war (between Shia and Sunni) for the control of Iraq, a war for secession from – or at least independence within – Iraq (by the Kurds), and international intervention in the civil war by state and non-state actors (the United States, Iran, and al Qaeda).

We must also remember that the nation-state, or even the broader category of the territorial state, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Before the rise of the state in early modern Europe, life was organized around kings and nobles, before that around “city-states,” and long before that around looser forms of social organization, including agricultural communities and groups of hunter-gatherers.⁹ During each of these periods organized violence between groups was fairly frequent. It differed in many respects from organized violence in later eras, but one thing that much of that violence had in common was that it involved the sustained, coordinated use of armed force by one political organization against another.¹⁰ We define war broadly enough to include those phenomena.

Thus far we have said nothing about the purpose of violence. Although political leaders' motivations are not technically part of our definition of

war, implicit in our discussion is the idea that violence is usually driven by a purpose. The political organization, as represented by its authoritative leadership, has goals, and one of the strategies they sometimes adopt in pursuit of those goals is the use of force. The purposeful nature of violence was most famously captured by Clausewitz ([1832]1976: 87), who repeatedly emphasized that war is a “political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means. ... The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”¹¹

A good example of an appreciation of the Clausewitzian view of the fundamentally political nature of war is an exchange between an American colonel and his North Vietnamese counterpart a couple of years after the end of the Vietnam War, which was widely regarded as a major defeat for the United States. The American colonel stated that, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.” The North Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant” (Summers, 1984:21).

It is the diplomatic and political outcomes of war that are important, and they are not always congruent with military outcomes on the battlefield. Egypt was in a stronger diplomatic position after the 1973 Arab–Israeli War than it was before the war, even though it was on the verge of a major military defeat at the end of the war until the United States forced Israel to withdraw its forces rather than crush the Egyptian army that it had surrounded. Egypt was militarily defeated but politically successful in the 1973 war.¹²

When political actors resort to military force, the goal is usually to influence the adversary’s behavior in ways that advance their own interests. As Clausewitz ([1832]1976:75) emphasized on the first page of *On War*, “War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” War is fundamentally coercive, driven by the aim of influencing the behavior of other actors. The Greek historian Polybius recognized this nearly two millennia before Clausewitz wrote, when he stated in his *Histories* (second century BCE) that “It is not the object of war to annihilate those who have given provocation, but to cause them to mend their ways.”

Sometimes the immediate goal of the use of force is not to influence the enemy’s behavior directly but instead to destroy or weaken his military forces or economic resources.¹³ This is usually an instrumental strategy, however, since weakening the adversary militarily and economically reduces its future battlefield performance and therefore its coercive bargaining leverage. In their use of force and conduct of war, state leaders aim to change the adversary’s expectations of the outcome of the war if the war were to continue, and presumably to make the adversary more willing to make extensive concessions to avoid that outcome.

In most cases, of course, political leaders would prefer to achieve their goals through non-forceful means, including diplomacy and economic pressure, which are generally less costly and less risky than the use of military force. Political leaders may use threats of force to reinforce their demands, but they generally prefer that their adversaries comply with those threats and concede what is demanded, so that the actual use of military force is unnecessary. In fact, the most effective uses of military power are often found in those situations in which military force is not actually used but where the mere threat of force is sufficient to change the adversary's behavior. Deterrence, or the dissuasion of an adversary from taking an action that would be harmful to one's own interests, is a good example. If the adversary is unwilling to make sufficient concessions, however, and if political leaders are convinced both that they can achieve more through military force than through negotiation and that they have no other option that would work as well, then the use of force often becomes an attractive option.

It is sometimes argued that diplomacy stops when war begins, that diplomacy and military force are two alternative strategies for preserving or advancing state interests. That view is quite misleading. The use as well as the threat of force is often an integral part of an actor's bargaining strategy. It is a highly coercive activity, aimed at influencing the cost-benefit calculus of the adversary and persuading the adversary to change its behavior. The goal is to convince the adversary that the costs of continuing the war will be sufficiently great that it is preferable to make concessions now through a negotiated settlement. Referring to the subtitle of a recent book, this is "bargaining with bullets" (Sisk, 2009). The American use of the atomic bomb against Japan in 1945, for example, was driven by the goal of coercing Japan to end the war quickly, by sending a signal that additional violence would follow if Japan did not surrender. US leaders wanted to avoid the casualties that would be involved in the prolonged warfare that would otherwise be necessary to defeat the Japanese army. Thus diplomacy and force are often inseparable. As Frederick the Great of Prussia is widely reputed to have said, "Diplomacy without force is like music without instruments."

This argument about the coercive nature of military force applies to nearly all political organizations, including terrorist groups. Terrorism against Israel is almost always motivated by the goal of imposing high enough costs on Israeli society to convince Israeli leaders that the benefits of occupying Arab territories are exceeded by the costs of doing so and that Israel would be better off by changing its policies. In initiating attacks against US military barracks and naval vessels overseas and against the World Trade Center in New York City, al Qaeda had many political goals,

including using the threat of further terrorist attacks to try to persuade the US to remove its troops from Saudi Arabia and to reduce its support for other conservative Arab regimes (Pape, 2005b).¹⁴

Although we have emphasized that the use of military force is generally purposeful, we have not formally incorporated that into our definition of war. This contrasts with the approach of scholars like Malinowski ([1941]1968:523), an anthropologist who defined war as an “armed contest between two independent political units, by means of organized military force, in the pursuit of a tribal or national policy.” Our argument is that cases of sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations that are not driven by a clear sense of the political interests of the organization, but instead by personal or domestic political interests or perhaps by an insubordinate military leader, still qualify as wars. Our definition of war is based on the *behavior* of two adversarial political organizations, not on their motivations. In most cases, we believe that the use of military force is purposeful, but that is ultimately an empirical question rather than a definitional one.¹⁵ Identifying the motivations behind the use of force is a key task in explaining the causes of a particular war.

Finally, let us turn to the “sustained” element of the definition. Our aim is to differentiate war from organized violence that is more limited in its magnitude or impact. A minor border incident involving opposing armies may result in casualties on one or both sides, but we want to preserve the term “war” for those incidents that escalate and cross a certain threshold of violence. Border clashes between Chinese and Indian forces in 1962 continued to escalate and involved sustained fighting, and we refer to the “Sino–Indian War.” Border clashes between Chinese and Soviet forces over disputed areas around the Ussuri River occurred in March 1969 and then again six months later, but successful crisis management soon ended the crisis without further escalation. Thus we generally refer to that conflict as a “border clash” rather than a war (A. Cohen, 1991). States can mass armies on their borders for weeks or months, as each side attempts to demonstrate its resolve while at the same time seeking some formula for de-escalating tensions. The Indo–Pakistani “Brasstacks crisis” in 1986–7 is a good example (Ganguly 2002:85–8). Unless such an incident involves the sustained use of violent force, however, it does not constitute a war.

The question is what threshold of violence to use. Some scholars use the criterion proposed by the “Correlates of War Project” (Singer and Small, 1972). The “COW” project requires at least 1,000 battle-related deaths among all participating states and an annual average of 1,000 battle deaths for wars lasting more than a year. That criterion is quite reasonable for COW’s purposes of analyzing wars during the last two centuries. It is less useful for earlier periods when populations and armies were much smaller and when fewer battle deaths reflected a larger relative proportion of the

army or of the population. Since we want our definition to apply to the organized violence between much earlier political systems as well as contemporary ones, we prefer a different criterion than battle deaths.¹⁶

Note that a precise (or “operational”) threshold is particularly important if the analyst is compiling lists of wars, which requires that s/he has explicit and replicable criteria for determining whether a violent conflict gets included in or excluded from a list of wars. We are not compiling a data set on wars, however, so more general criteria will suffice for our purposes. The main point is that our analysis of the causes of war is limited to those violent conflicts that cross some kind of threshold of magnitude. The fighting must be sustained rather than sporadic in order to differentiate war from “lesser” uses of military force. By sustained we mean not only duration but magnitude. There must be a fairly regular use of force of a certain magnitude during the period of the war.¹⁷

The Changing Nature of Warfare¹⁸

Human warfare has changed significantly over time. There is substantial evidence of warfare going back roughly ten thousand years to the beginning of agricultural societies (Keeley, 1996; Haas, 1999; Cioffi-Revilla, 2000), and growing evidence of war between hunter-gatherer groups before that (Gat, 2006), though archaeological evidence about warfare is more plentiful for the last 5,000 years (Ferrill, 1997). By that time there is evidence of full-fledged armies equipped with armor and organized into formations. Gradually, these armies became larger in size and more lethal in weaponry, and war became increasingly deadly. If we examine major battles, which admittedly are not representative of all wars, deaths per war more than doubled between the fifth century BCE and the fourteenth century CE, more than doubled again between the fourteenth and early nineteenth centuries CE, and then increased by as much as a factor of 10 between the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Levy and Thompson, 2010b).

This enormous increase in the severity of war, defined in terms of battle-related deaths, is countered by another trend, at least for the great powers over the past five centuries. There has been a steady decline in the frequency of great power war during this period, from about 22 in the sixteenth century to five in the nineteenth century and five or six in the twentieth century, depending on one’s precise definitions.¹⁹

These opposite trends for the last five centuries are probably related in a causal sense: the increasing destructiveness of great power wars has reduced the incentives of great powers to fight them. This may help to explain another interesting pattern: the world has experienced no great power war in the last half century. This is by far the longest period of peace

between the great powers in the last five centuries of the modern era. Many scholars trace this absence of great power war to the development of nuclear weapons and their deterrent effects (Jervis, 1989), but other arguments have also been advanced (Gaddis, 1987; Kegley, 1991).

The absence of great power war for over half a century have led some to refer to this period as “the long peace” (Gaddis, 1987). This is quite misleading, since the period since World War II has witnessed a proliferation of smaller wars and other forms of armed conflict.²⁰ Interstate wars have continued to occur, initially at about the same rate as in the period prior to 1945 (Levy and Thompson, 2010b), though in the last two decades the frequency of interstate war has begun to decline (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr, 2008).

One noticeable change in interstate war, however, is where these wars are fought. We do not have a perfectly reliable database on global wars, but what evidence we have suggests that for most of the last five centuries of the modern era a disproportionate number of interstate wars were fought in Europe (Wright, 1965:641–51).²¹ The global system was centered in Europe, and the world’s leading powers were all located in Europe until the beginning of the twentieth century. Those great powers fought each other, expanded by fighting weaker European states, and engaged in colonial wars throughout the world. Since 1945, however, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in warfare (both interstate and civil) away from Europe to other parts of the world (Singer, 1991). The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were the first in Europe since 1945.

Another significant trend is a significant increase in the frequency of civil wars and other forms of intrastate conflict (K. Holsti, 1996).²² The ratio of internal to external wars increased from about two to one before 1945 to nearly five to one after 1945 (Levy and Thompson, 2010b). There was a particularly strong increase in the number of civil wars beginning in the 1970s after the period of decolonization, and civil wars continued at a relatively high frequency until the late 1990s. After that, there has been a decline in the frequency of civil wars. This pattern may be surprising given the constant images of warfare seen on the television and elsewhere, but it is well-documented (Hewitt, Wilkenfeld, and Gurr, 2008; Human Security Centre, 2005; Harbom and Sundberg, 2008). Whether this decline in civil wars and other forms of armed conflict is likely to continue is a source of considerable debate (Gleditsch, 2008).

These patterns suggest that there has been a shift in the nature of warfare over time – away from the great powers, away from Europe, and, increasingly, away from state-to-state conflict and toward civil war, insurgency, and other forms of intrastate and trans-state warfare. It is a kind of warfare that differs in many respects from the wars that have dominated the past five centuries of the modern international system. The wars of most interest

to scholars have been interstate wars that were “symmetric” in the sense that the two sides were of roughly equal strength and fought with similar types of weapons. The primary actors were states that possessed a monopoly of legitimate force within their borders, a description that characterized most of the leading states of Europe by the mid-seventeenth century. This was the basis for Clausewitz’s ([1832]1976) image of war as militarized conflict between state armies, directed by state leaders on behalf of state interests, and resolved by decisive battles.²³

With the increasing shift from interstate war to civil wars, and with the changing character of civil wars themselves, scholars have begun to question whether the conventional “Westphalian” model of warfare continues to be relevant for the contemporary era.²⁴ Fewer and fewer wars involve conventional clashes of two opposing armies. The Russian–Georgian war of 2008 is a recent exception, though it was a highly asymmetric conflict.

Civil wars themselves have changed. Unlike the American civil war of the nineteenth century, the army of the state often faces not a single rebel army but instead a coalition of rebel soldiers representing different groups with different interests (Horowitz, 1985). Many of these central players in civil wars are ethnic or religious groups, and the wars are sometimes referred to as “ethnic wars” or “identity wars.” Some question, however, whether most of these wars are primarily about ethnicity or identity, or whether ethnicity and identity mask underlying conflicts that are driven primarily by security goals, economic resources, political power, or private interest (Gagnon, 2004).²⁵ Warlords, aiming to protect or advance their own parochial interests, play a key role in many of these conflicts (Marten, 2006/07). Globalized criminal networks have also come to play a significant role in the funding of civil wars and insurgencies, and wars are often sustained by illicit black markets (Mueller, 2004; Andreas, 2008). Armies have increasingly “outsourced” many of their traditional functions, and in many respects wars have become more privatized (Avant, 2005).

Strategy and tactics have also changed, along with the norms of warfare. Warfare is increasingly “asymmetric.” Rebel groups are often outmatched by the state in organization and military technology, and they respond by adopting strategies of guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and terrorism. Tactics increasingly include the direct targeting of civilians, and massacre and ethnic cleansing have become more common. This has led some to talk of the increasing “barbarization of warfare” (Kassimeris, 2006). Most of this behavior is purposeful, driven by the aim of persuading and coercing people to shift their political loyalties by demonstrating that the state is unable to protect its citizens. Contemporary civil wars are rarely settled by decisive battles, but instead by protracted struggles.

This is the image of the “new wars,” which are often contrasted with the “old wars” of the Westphalian era (van Creveld, 1991; Kaldor, 1999;

Münkler, 2004). A major debate has emerged, however, as to whether the “new wars” are really new, or whether elements of the new wars can be found in past historical periods (Kalyvas, 2001; Duyvesteyn and Angstrom, 2005; Malešević, 2008).²⁶ That debate focuses more on how war is conducted than on the varied causes of war, which is our primary concern in this book, with primary attention to interstate war but with some attention to civil war, which we address in chapter 7.

The Levels-of-Analysis Framework

Any survey of the causes of war needs an organizing framework that helps to make sense of the many varied causes of war. We need a typology that groups similar causes together. One framework that many international relations theorists have found useful for the analysis of war and of foreign policy behavior is the “levels-of-analysis” framework. This framework goes back to Kenneth Waltz’s book *Man, the State, and War* (1959), which identified three “images” of war. These images referred to sources of causation associated with individuals, the nation-state, and the international system, respectively. Following Singer (1961), scholars began to refer to these images as “levels” of analysis. The levels-of-analysis framework is not a theory of war but instead a typology of the causes of war. More accurately and more generally, it is a framework for classifying the different causal factors influencing the policies and actions of states and of other actors.²⁷

The individual level of analysis aims to explain the foreign policy decisions made by the political leaders of the state (or other political unit). It includes characteristics shared by all individuals, such as “human nature” and its hypothesized predispositions toward aggression. The individual level also includes factors that vary across individuals, including belief systems, personalities, psychological processes, political socialization, lessons learned from history, management styles, and similar variables. The presumption of individual-level theories is that the particular individual or individuals in power have an important causal impact. The implication is that if another individual had been in power the outcome might have been different. Many interpretations of World War II, for example, focus on German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, and argue that if Hitler had not come to power the war might have been avoided (Mueller, 1989).

The national level or nation-state level of analysis includes both factors associated with the government and factors associated with society. The former include variables like the institutional structure of the political system and the nature of the policy-making process, and the latter include variables like the structure of the economic system, the influence of economic and noneconomic interest groups, the role of public opinion, and

political culture and ideology. At the national level, for example, there is considerable evidence that because of democratic institutions and political cultures, democracies behave differently than authoritarian regimes with respect to war. At a minimum, democracies rarely if ever go to war with each other (Doyle, 1983). At the societal level, one hypothesis is that some political cultures are more warlike than others, although many scholars have concluded that there is not much evidence to support this argument (Wright, 1965). Diversionary theory suggests that political leaders sometimes decide on war when they anticipate that war against an external adversary will increase their domestic political support by generating a “rally round the flag” effect. Certain governmental bureaucracies may push for higher military budgets as part of a strategy to increase their power and influence within the government, or domestic economic groups may push for more aggressive foreign policies because it serves their own parochial interests. Each of these factors would be encompassed by the nation-state level of analysis.

System-level causes include the anarchic structure of the international system,²⁸ the number of major powers in the system, the distribution of military and economic power among them, the pattern of alliances, and other factors that are closely related to the distribution of power, including the structure of the system’s political economy.²⁹ Most realist theories, including balance of power theory, are system-level theories, as are theories of hegemonic order and power transitions. The system level also includes other factors in the external environment common to all states, including the structure of international institutions, the nature of international norms, or system-wide ideologies or cultures.³⁰

Waltz’s (1959) conception of three images or levels has been extremely influential in the study of international relations and foreign policy. While many scholars adopt Waltz’s three-level framework, others modify it. Following Rosenau (1966), some scholars disaggregate state (or governmental) and societal sources of causation into two separate levels. Jervis (1976: chap. 1) modifies Waltz’s framework by distinguishing the levels of decision-making, the bureaucracy, the state and domestic politics, and the international environment. Others simplify Waltz’s framework and identify two levels of causation, one internal to the state (which Waltz (1979) labels “unit level”) and one external.³¹

There is no single “correct” number of levels. Levels-of-analysis frameworks are analytic constructions to help us make sense of the world, and they are best evaluated in terms of their theoretical utility rather than seen as a direct reflection of “reality.” For the purposes of summarizing theories of the causes of war, we find it most useful to distinguish among theories that emphasize sources of causation at the system, state and societal, and decision-making levels of analysis, and to divide the latter into individual and organizational levels.³²

We also introduce an additional level, commonly referred to as the “dyadic” or “interactional” level, which reflects the bilateral interactions between pairs of states. The past history of interactions between two states would be included in this category, as would territorial conflicts and bilateral bargaining between states. Some scholars include this factor in their system-level category, and thus define the system level broadly to include everything in a state’s external environment. We find it more useful to distinguish between causal variables that reflect the entire international system (polarity, for example) and those that reflect the relationship and interactions within a particular pair of states within that system.³³ It is also useful, for certain questions, to distinguish between the international system and various regional systems nested within it. The Middle East system and the South American system have different characteristics and dynamics, though both exist within a single global system. Crisis dynamics between two states can be influenced by the structure of power in the global system, by the structure and culture of the regional system within which they interact, and by the characteristics and history of the dyad itself.

The levels-of-analysis question has important normative implications, particularly in terms of evaluating moral responsibility. If the primary causal factors leading to war or a state’s decision for war arise from systemic or dyadic-level threats to the national interest, so that any reasonable state or individual in that situation would have responded in roughly the same way, we would not ordinarily attribute moral responsibility for the war to that state or its leaders. Political leaders understand this, of course, and we often hear political leaders say, whether they had a choice or not, that “I had no choice.” Assessing the causal weight of various factors is an important step in evaluating blame, and differences in assessments of causality complicate efforts to attribute blame.

After World War I, for example, the victorious Western allies forced a defeated Germany to sign a “war guilt” clause in the Treaty of Versailles (1919). This may have just been victors’ justice, however, as within a decade many historians began to shift to the view that the primary causes of the war were more systemic, based on the system of power politics and secret alliances (Fay, 1928) and not on the actions of particular governments or states. After Fritz Fischer’s publication of *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* in 1961 and the English translation six years later, and Fischer’s argument that Germany’s aims went beyond security to world power, opinion on responsibility for the war shifted back.³⁴ Political scientists are often less interested in questions of “war guilt,” or moral responsibility for war, than are historians (Schroeder, 2001), but it is clear that any such evaluation rests on an empirical analysis of the causes of the war.

It would be useful to illustrate our levels-of-analysis framework with respect to various explanations that analysts have proposed to explain the

US decision to invade Iraq in 2003. Although some explanations emphasize causal variables at a single level of analysis, others combine variables from several different levels. Some argue that the US intervention was the product of President George W. Bush's worldviews and religious beliefs, his determination to finish the job begun by his father in the 1990–91 Gulf War, or Bush's confidence in the correctness of his beliefs or his disregard for information running contrary to his beliefs and policy preferences. These are all individual-level causal factors, which we discuss in chapter 5 on decision-making at the individual-level. The implication of these theoretical arguments is that if someone else besides Bush had been president, the probability of US military action would have been different.

Others attribute the US decision to the nature of the American political system and society. They emphasize the traditional US commitment to democracy and the promotion of democracy abroad, the impact of the September 11 attacks on American political culture and on public opinion (which created a permissive environment for an aggressive policy toward Iraq), the hesitancy of members of Congress to argue or vote against the war for fear of possible political repercussions,³⁵ and the influence of the US oil industry or perhaps of the "Israeli lobby" (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007) on US policy. Still others focus on decision-making at the bureaucratic/organizational level, and emphasize the influence of neoconservatives on the policy-making process, the influence of Vice-President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and the political marginalization of Secretary of State Colin Powell from the inner circle of decision-making, and the flaws in an intelligence process (including the "politicization of intelligence") that generated grossly misleading estimates about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.³⁶

Another set of interpretations argue that the US intervention was driven primarily by system-level threats and opportunities (at the regional as well as global level) and the calculations about the national interest related to them. They point to the George W. Bush Administration's aim to destroy what they perceived as Iraq's existing or developing weapons of mass destruction, which was the administration's primary public rationale for the war. Other system-level causes include the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on Americans' perceptions of their vulnerability and on the assumed link between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein; the aim of bringing democracy to Iraq or perhaps to the Middle East as a whole, both as an end in itself and as a means of enhancing US security by creating like-minded regimes; or the permissive conditions created by the collapse of Soviet power and the end of the Cold War over a decade earlier.

The levels-of-analysis framework is normally applied to states and to interstate relations. It can also be applied to the behavior of non-state actors, where it leads us to ask similar questions about the sources of

causality. Does a particular ethnic group act the way it does because of external threats and opportunities in its environment, because of internal politics among various subgroups within it, or because of the particular beliefs and charisma of an individual leader? Similarly, are the actions of a terrorist group aimed primarily to advance the interests of the group as a whole, or are they the product of infighting between competing factions within it or of the beliefs and preferences of a particular leader?

The levels-of-analysis framework is useful for organizing the varied sources of conflict into categories that help simplify and impose some structure on the way we think about war and foreign policy more generally. Although we prefer this framework to others as an organizing device, we should acknowledge some of its limitations. Ideally, a typology should have categories that are both exclusive and exhaustive – causal factors should fit into one and only one category, and there should be some category for all causal factors. The levels-of-analysis framework (like most typologies) falls short of this ideal-type standard. The important factor of misperceptions, for example, can result from system-level uncertainty or adversary strategic deception, national-level ideologies that predispose leaders to interpret the behavior of others in certain ways, and individual-level personalities that contribute to further distortions in incoming information. Economic factors include both national economic interests such as the stability of a society's economic system and the influence of private economic groups (e.g., arms manufacturers) on state foreign policies.

We should also note that the levels-of-analysis framework is better for classifying causal variables than for classifying theories. Although some theories incorporate variables from a single level of analysis (most psychological theories, for example), most theories combine variables from multiple levels of analysis. In these cases, we classify the theory based on the level of its variable of greatest causal weight. For example, although neo-classical realist theory incorporates domestic and individual-level variables, it gives primacy to the international system, and we classify it accordingly. Multiple-level theories sometimes complicate the use of the level-of-analysis framework. At the same time, however, by distinguishing among different levels the framework is useful in identifying the different kinds of factors that operate within a particular theory and how they interact with each other in the processes leading to war and peace.

Although causal variables at any level of analysis can be used to help explain individual beliefs, state behavior, and dyadic or systemic outcomes, we need to point out a potential logical problem associated with certain types of explanations for war. One concerns individual-level explanations for war. Although analysts often trace the outbreak of a particular war to the beliefs or personalities of a single individual (Hitler and World War II, for example), that does not constitute a logically complete explanation of war.

We have defined war in terms of the behavior of political organizations, whether the state, a rebel group, or a terrorist organization. War is institutionalized, not individual. This means that to explain a state's decision to adopt a strategy of war, we need to know more than the preferences, beliefs, and personality of the leader. It is incumbent upon us to explain how the leader's preferences, along with the preferences of other decision-makers, are translated into a foreign policy decision for the state. Since war is made by states, not individuals, an individual-level theory of war has to be linked to a broader theory of foreign policy.

It might seem that in a dictatorship such additional variables might not be necessary for a complete explanation for war, but in fact the dictatorial structure of the regime is part of the explanation. The politically centralized nature of the regime helps to explain how a leader who wants war actually gets war implemented as policy.³⁷ In more decentralized regimes, including democratic regimes (especially parliamentary regimes), sometimes political leaders who want war are prevented from implementing that strategy by domestic constituencies or by the cabinet. Alternatively (but less frequently), political leaders who believe that war is contrary to the national interest and who prefer to avoid war are sometimes pushed into war by a xenophobic public opinion or by powerful domestic groups. US president William McKinley hoped to avoid war with Spain in 1898, but because of domestic pressures McKinley "led his country unhesitatingly toward a war which he did not want for a cause in which he did not believe" (May, 1961:189).

There is a second logical problem. War involves violence *between* political organizations. A theory of war must explain how both sides get to the brink of war in the first place and why both are willing to fight. Since war is a dyadic or system-level outcome resulting from the joint actions of two or more states, understanding the causes of war requires an explanation of the strategic interaction of the two (or more) adversaries. For this reason individual-, societal-, and state-level causal factors cannot by themselves provide a logically complete explanation for the outbreak of war. That is, they are not jointly sufficient for war. We need to include dyadic or system-level causal variables (a theory of bargaining, for example) for a complete explanation. This does not necessarily mean that dyadic and system-level variables have a greater causal influence than do individual or domestic variables, only that the former cannot be logically excluded from the analysis.

An example will help illustrate the point. Consider the hypothesis that the primary cause of a particular war is the existence of a state or political leader with particularly aggressive intentions. This hypothesis is not a logically complete explanation for war. Nazi Germany, for example, behaved quite aggressively in the mid-1930s. It violated international treaties by

rearming, remilitarizing the Rhineland, annexing Austria, and demanding the incorporation into Germany of the Sudetenland. For several years, however, none of these actions led to war, because the West chose to pursue a policy of appeasement rather than stand up to Germany and thereby risk war. Many historians conclude that Hitler actually wanted war over Czechoslovakia, and was forced to abandon that goal, at least temporarily, when the West responded with enough concessions to make war politically infeasible (Taylor, 1961). War eventually came, of course, but only after the West changed course after further aggression by Hitler. A complete explanation for World War II, and for any war, requires that we not restrict the analysis to the behavior of a single individual or state.

Similarly, it is not enough to explain a peaceful outcome by showing that one side pursues a conciliatory policy. A strategy of extensive concessions often leads to a peaceful outcome, but it is also possible that it might create the image of weakness and lead the adversary to increase its demands in the hope of coercing further concessions. British and French appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s illustrates this point as well. Britain and France each sought peace, but peace was not the outcome because Hitler responded to their concessions with further aggressive moves and demands for further concessions. In fact, some argue that appeasement actually made war more likely, though that proposition makes the problematic assumption that a more confrontational policy would have deterred Hitler. Again, the broader theoretical argument is that theory of war requires a theory of bargaining or strategic interaction that explains how states respond to each other's actions and how they act in anticipation of each other's responses.

Other Conceptual Issues in the Analysis of War

Another conceptual issue relates to our earlier discussion of the changes in war over time, which reminds us that war is a variable, not a constant. War varies in terms of who fights, where they fight, how often they fight, with what intensity, and so on. Thus the primary phenomenon that most international relations scholars want to explain is variations in war and peace over time and space. Why does war occur between some states rather than other states, at some times rather than other times, under some conditions rather than other conditions, by some political leaders rather than other leaders. As Bremer (2000) asked, "Who Fights Whom, Where, When, and Why?"

The variable nature of war and peace has important but often-neglected implications for the study of war. Any theory that predicts that war is a constant must be rejected, or at least modified to include additional variables that explain variations in war. An "independent variable" that is constant cannot explain a "dependent variable" that varies.

This logic is what led Waltz (1959), in his discussion of “first image” or individual-level explanations, to reject *human nature* as a cause of war. If human nature is conceived as a set of traits or predispositions common to all people at all times, it is a constant and it cannot explain variations in war and peace. We can “unpack” human nature into a number of more specific factors, such as cognitive ability, personality, emotional makeup, propensity to take risks, etc. These factors do vary across individuals and thus can in principle explain some of the variation in war and peace. Even if this were true – and it would have to be demonstrated empirically – the source of causality would be these specific variables, not “human nature” in the aggregate.³⁸

An aggregate concept of human nature might serve as a “permissive condition” for war, in the sense that it allows war to happen, but that does not tell us too much. Despite the frequent recurrence of war in human history, and the fact that somebody is at war with somebody somewhere most of the time, in fact peace is more common than war. Considering the number of dyads in the international system, most of these dyads are at peace most of the time.³⁹ Does human nature explain peace as well as war? Does it explain the long great power peace since World War II, or the sustained peace between the United States and Canada? The argument that human nature explains both war and peace is unsatisfactory (unless it could explain the conditions under which each outcome is likely to occur).

A central characteristic of a scientific theory is that it be “testable,” in the sense that there must be some empirical evidence that would lead us to conclude that the theory is false.⁴⁰ Theories that cannot be tested have little explanatory or predictive power, and they cannot differentiate between what actually happens and what might have happened but did not.

The idea that one cannot explain variations in war and peace with a constant has other implications as well. If a factor persists over a period of time that includes periods of peace as well as periods of war, we cannot include that factor in an explanation for war without including other variables that explain when the factor contributes to peace and when it contributes to war. For example, it has become popular to explain the explosion of ethnic violence in the past two decades in terms of “ancient hatreds” between rival ethnic or religious groups. While this factor might contribute to ethnic wars, it does not provide a sufficient explanation. It does not explain why wars have broken out between some ethnic communities but not between others who also have “ancient hatreds” (Kalyvas, 2006). Nor does it explain the timing or severity of those wars. The ancient hatreds factor might serve as an underlying cause of the war, and perhaps a necessary condition for war, but it is not sufficient for war, and whether or not war occurs depends on more proximate variables or trigger causes.⁴¹

Consider the Bosnian wars of the 1990s. Serbs and Croats had a long-standing rivalry, but prior to the twentieth century they had fought

relatively few wars. We must include additional variables to explain why they fought each other during the 1990s and not before (Gagnon, 2004; Woodward, 1995). The Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) is another example. Some explain the war by emphasizing the long-standing ethnic differences between Persians and Arabs. Yet there was relatively little armed conflict between Arabs and Persians during the previous two centuries. There was even a treaty in 1975 that settled many outstanding issues. Thus a satisfactory interpretation of the Iran–Iraq War must explain what specific factors, by themselves or in combination with the underlying ethnic rivalry, occurred after 1975 to trigger the war.⁴²

The fact that many important wars are preceded by lengthy periods of peace also raises a methodological issue about how we should study war. For those who analyze individual historical cases or who compare several historical cases, it is important to examine the wars that do not occur as well as those that do occur. For one thing, as Sherlock Holmes suggested, the dogs that don't bark may reveal as much information as those that do. In addition, looking at cases with different values on the key variables is critical for any comparative methodology. If a hypothesized causal factor (ethnic differences, for example) is present in two crises that occur under very similar circumstances, and if the outcome is war in one crisis and peace in the other, then under most circumstances that factor is not a primary cause of war.⁴³

Having put our study of the causes of war in context, and considered some of the conceptual problems that complicate the study of war, we turn in subsequent chapters to a review of the leading theories of the causes of war, organized by the levels-of-analysis framework outlined in this chapter. We begin with theories of interstate war, starting with a discussion of leading system-level theories and continuing with dyadic-level interactions. After examining state- and societal-level causes of war, we turn to the role of decision-making at the individual, organizational, and small-group levels. We then look at some of the leading theories of civil war. We conclude our study with reflections on the levels-of-analysis framework, causation, and war.

Notes

1. We discuss prevention and preemption in chapter 2.
2. For surveys of definitions of war see Levy (1983b:50–3) and Vasquez (1993: chap. 2). On civil wars see Sambanis (2004).
3. The Congo and Yugoslav wars each had an international component, and might be called “internationalized civil wars.” Another example of an internationalized civil war was the Russian Revolution in 1917, which attracted outside intervention by the United States and other great powers.

4. The two other elements of Clausewitz's trinity are "chance and probability" (the "fog of war") and the primacy of politics. We discuss the second of these below, and the first later in the book. For interpretations of Clausewitz, see Paret (1976), Howard (1983), Aron (1985), and Strachan and Herberg-Rothe (2007). Clausewitz is sometimes compared to Sun Tzu (1963), the Chinese military theorist who wrote *The Art of War* over 2,000 years ago. Some observers regard them as history's two greatest military theorists.
5. We discuss international rivalries in chapter 3.
6. The US and the USSR each funded and equipped the military forces of other countries to fight some of their battles for them, and thus supported "proxy wars," but the organized military forces of the two superpowers did not engage each other in sustained combat.
7. For three different conceptions of the great powers, see Levy (1983b: chap. 2), Thompson (1988), and Black (2008).
8. Although Clausewitz ([1832]1976) wrote mainly about large wars, he was also intrigued by the guerrilla campaign in Spain against the French invaders during the Napoleonic Wars, and he wrote several works on small or "irregular" wars (Daase, 2007). That aspect of Clausewitz is neglected by most of his interpreters. For a useful analysis of the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz, see Strachan and Herberg-Rothe (2007).
9. Some might question whether hunting-foraging bands can be viewed as political organizations. But once they acquire group identities and some type of leadership hierarchy, these bands have a rudimentary level of political organization. Scholars debate exactly how to define "political," but one standard definition refers to politics as the authoritative allocation of resources for a society (Easton, 1953). By that definition, hunter-gatherer groups qualify.
10. On the changing nature of warfare, see Archer et al. (2002), Gat (2006), and Levy and Thompson (2010b).
11. To say that an action is purposeful does not necessarily imply that it is rational. We discuss the criteria for rationality in chapter 5 on theories of individual decision-making.
12. Military outcomes are sometimes ambiguous, leading to domestic political debates over how to interpret the outcome of the war (Johnson and Tierney, 2006). See also Martel (2007) on the meaning of victory.
13. Some use the term "brute force" to refer to the use of force to degrade an adversary's military power and potential (Schelling, 1966: chap. 1). Brute force is defined in terms of the immediate objectives of military force rather than in terms of its resulting destruction.
14. Some of the 9/11 hijackers may have had more nihilistic goals of damaging a way of life they despised, without having any specific political objectives in terms of changing US policy. Given our definition of war in terms of a violent conflict between political organizations, it is the goals of the al Qaeda leadership that count, not those of individuals whom it recruits to serve its interests.
15. By purposeful, we mean purposeful for the political organization. As we will see later in this book, war can also be purposeful for an individual leader or for an organization or group within the state, but not for the state itself.

16. For similar reasons, we prefer to avoid a legalistic definition that separates war from the use of force short of war depending on whether there is a declaration of war (for example, Wright 1965:8). Declarations of war were common for several centuries, and were consistent with the norms of the European system, but were less common in earlier historical eras and even today. None of the many American wars since 1945 have been accompanied by a formal declaration of war. Plus, declarations of war were limited to interstate wars and were not used for civil wars or other forms of organized violence.
17. Duration by itself is not an adequate criterion. Egypt and Libya had artillery exchanges for four days in 1977, while Egypt and Israel fought for six days in 1967, but only the second (the Six Day War) is treated as a war.
18. This section builds on Levy and Thompson (2010b).
19. It is important to note that the substantial increase in the number of battle-related deaths from war is not matched by a comparable trend in the relative number of deaths as a proportion of population, which is the *intensity* of war. Among all interstate wars, the intensity of war has actually declined slightly during the past five centuries (Levy, 1983b:124). The Thirty Years' War (1618–48) resulted in a decline of 15–20 percent in the population of Germany, and far more in particular German states (Parker, 1984). By this measure, the intensity of war for many wars among hunter-gatherer groups was much greater (Keeley, 1996). See Levy (1983b: chap. 3) for data and for a discussion of problems of exactly which wars to count as great power wars in the twentieth century. Note that there is a more general tendency for the frequency of wars to be inversely related to their severity (Morgan and Levy, 1990).
20. The “long great power peace” might be a more appropriate label, though this was a “cold” peace, characterized by the ongoing Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR and the constant threat of war, rather than a stable peace (Boulding 1978; Kacowicz et al., 2000) or a “warm” peace (Miller, 2007).
21. We need to qualify this statement by noting that the identification of wars gets more and more difficult as we go back in time because of the limitations of information, especially for wars outside of Europe. Consequently, Wright's ([1942]1965) data reflects a European bias, one that is exacerbated further by the fact that the data on interstate wars were undoubtedly based on a Eurocentric conception of what constitutes a “state.” As a result, Wright probably underestimates the number of non-European interstate wars and consequently overestimates the ratio of European to non-European interstate wars. In the absence of a reliable database on global wars, however, we cannot know the extent of this distortion. (But see Zhang et al. (2007:19215) and its link to the article's supplemental material, which refers to a broader database.) We suspect, however, that the bias is not great enough to affect our statement that a disproportionate number of interstate wars in the early years of the modern system (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) were fought in Europe.

Note that these biases diminish as wars become more serious and consequently more visible. Thus our earlier statement about the increase in major battles is less affected by measurement error, and our statement about great powers wars is minimally affected by measurement error because most great powers in the modern system have been European. Other regional systems had their own great powers (Black 2008) but, unlike Europe, other regions did not have a spiral of intensive wars between multiple great powers between 1500 and 1945.

22. The traditional distinction between interstate wars and civil wars, while never perfect, is beginning to blur. The Bosnian wars of the 1990s, for example, were both civil wars within a disintegrating Yugoslavia and interstate wars between Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia (Woodward, 1995).
23. As we noted earlier, Clausewitz also wrote about small wars.
24. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 formalized the sovereign state system, and the several centuries since then are often referred to as the Westphalian era.
25. These factors are not necessarily independent. Laitin (2007) and others argue that national cultural homogeneity helps produce public goods and economic growth. Leaders attempt to influence the formation of identities in order to mobilize their peoples for war and/or to enhance their own hold on political power.
26. The privatization of war, for example, is not entirely new. See Howard's (1976: chap. 2) discussion of the "wars of the mercenaries" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As to the "barbarization of warfare," one can certainly find systematic violations of the norms of war, in terms of the proper treatment of prisoners of war and of civilians, in the two World Wars of the twentieth century (Hull, 2005) and in pre-historic warfare (Gat, 2006).
27. Some scholars in other disciplines utilize similar frameworks. Hinde (1993) organizes his study of aggression and war around "levels of social complexity." The historian A.J.P. Taylor (1961) offers an interesting analogy by referring to an automobile accident. Taylor suggests that we can classify causes in terms of the individual driver, the car, or the road and other environmental conditions. The driver may have fallen asleep or been otherwise impaired. The car may have had poor brakes or other defects. Alternatively, the weather may have been poor or the road may have been treacherous.
28. International relations scholars refer to anarchy as the absence of a legitimate authority in the international system. Whereas states have governments, the legitimate authority to resolve conflicts between domestic groups and/or citizens, and a monopoly of force within its borders, there is no legitimate authority to adjudicate disputes between states or other actors in the international system. If states cannot resolve their disputes peacefully (as they usually prefer to do), they must rely on their own military forces, or those of their allies, to protect them from another state's attempt to resolve conflicts through the use of force. This is why power is regarded as so important in international politics. Anarchy and power are central to realist theories of international conflict, which we discuss in chapter 2.

29. Closely related to the distribution of power in the system is the polarity of the system. Scholars distinguish among unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems, and argue that each generates a different set of strategic dynamics.
30. Some historians, for example, trace World War I to the role of Social Darwinist ideology (Koch, 1984) or to the “unspoken assumptions” and the “mood of 1914” (Joll, 1984: chap. 8).
31. See also Singer (1961) and Wolfers (1962: chap. 1).
32. In chapter 6 we include a brief discussion of the “small group” level of analysis, which emphasizes the social–psychological dynamics of interaction among individuals in small decision-making units.
33. While we use the levels-of-analysis framework to classify the causal variables influencing decisions and outcomes, some scholars use the framework in a different way. Instead of using the level of analysis to refer to the independent causal variable, they use it to refer to the unit whose policy preferences or actions are being explained, or the dependent variable. Rather than treat individual-level beliefs and policy preferences as the independent variable, they treat it as the dependent variable to be explained. In this usage the individual level refers to the beliefs or actions of individuals; the organizational level refers to the behavior of organizations; and the state level refers to state foreign policies. The dyadic level refers to patterns of interaction of two states, and the system level refers to broader patterns in the international system. Sometimes the state level is called the “monadic level.”

These two different uses of the levels of analysis have created a great deal of confusion in the field. To minimize this confusion, we use the term “level” of analysis to refer to causal variables and the term “unit” of analysis to refer to what we are trying to explain. Note that causal variables from one level can be used to explain unit behavior at another level. Thus nation-state level democratic institutions or cultures can be used to explain the preferences of individual political leaders, the behavior of organizations, the foreign policies of democratic states, and the patterns of interactions of democratic states. The only constraint is that any outcome at one level must incorporate a variable at that unit or higher level of aggregation. We explain the rationale for this later in the chapter.

34. Albertini ([1942]1957) made a strong case for a similar argument in 1941. For a recent review of what we know and what we do not know about World War I, see Williamson and May (2007).
35. Some Democrats who had voted against the authorization US intervention in the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 were defeated in the 1994 Congressional election.
36. Powell was skeptical about the wisdom of the war (DeYoung, 2006). On intelligence see Pfiffner and Phythian (2008). For various interpretations, see Mann (2004), Gordon and Trainor (2006), Ricks (2006), and Haass (2009).
37. Saddam Hussein’s beliefs and personality may be central to an explanation of the origins of the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, but only in conjunction with the highly centralized structure of the Iraqi regime that allowed Saddam Hussein to make policy in the absence of any significant internal constraints. The same argument applies to Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s.

38. The concept of human nature is over-aggregated in another sense – it treats male and female as indistinguishable and neglects any possible impact of gender on the causes of war. As suggested by a book entitled *Demonic Males* (Wrangham and Peterson, 1996), perhaps males are programmed for violence through an evolutionary process. The traits that helped hunter-gatherers survive and reproduce are the traits that evolved and that characterize modern man, since the hunter-gatherer period constitutes over 99% of human existence. Perhaps, but this would not explain variations in war and peace over time and space during the past 5,000 years. It might explain different proclivities toward violence in different species (Wrangham, 2006), but that is not our focus here. The relationship between gender and war (which is not identical to the relationship between gender and aggression) is an extraordinarily complex question, one that attracted interest from evolutionary theorists, primatologists, feminist theorists, and other scholars from a variety of disciplines. For a nice summary of evolutionary perspectives, see Gat (2006: Part I). For work in political science see Elshtain (1987), Cohn (1987), Tickner (2001), Goldstein (2001), and Rosen (2005).
39. Bennett and Stam (2004:204) estimate that the “base-line” frequency of interstate war per dyad per year in the international system is about 1 per 14,000.
40. On the “falsifiability” of theories, see Popper (1989) and King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). Evidence to falsify or disconfirm a theory must exist in principle, but it need not be immediately available. When Einstein developed his theory of general relativity, scientists had to wait several years until certain astronomical conditions (a solar eclipse) were present to allow the collection of evidence (about light bending around the sun) that confirmed the theory.
41. On necessary and sufficient conditions and different forms of causal explanation see Goertz and Levy (2007) and Mahoney, Kimball, and Koivu (2009).
42. One key factor was the Iranian revolution, which brought a fundamentalist Islamic regime to power and threatened the domestic security of the secular Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Hiro, 1991).
43. On the methodology of “controlled comparison,” see George and Bennett (2005).

2

System-Level Theories

The study of the causes of war in political science has traditionally been dominated by realist theories, which emphasize states' competition for power and security in a high-threat international environment. In this chapter we summarize some of the key concepts in realist theories of international conflict, including anarchy, the security dilemma, the spiral model, and the deterrence model. We then identify varieties of realist theories and their hypotheses about the causes of war. These theories include classical realism, neorealism, defensive realism, offensive realism, and neoclassical realism. After examining balance of power theory in greater detail, we turn to hegemonic theories of conflict, including power transition theory, hypotheses on preventive war, and long-cycle theory.

Realist Theories

The realist school of thought goes back to Thucydides' (1996) account of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BCE. Realist international theories were further shaped by Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, and a number of other prominent philosophers and social theorists.¹ After the rise of idealism and an emphasis on international law after World War I, and after the failure of those efforts to prevent the aggressions of the 1930s, Morgenthau's book *Politics Among Nations*, first published in 1948, led a resurgence of realist thinking after World War II.

Realism is not a single theory but instead a constellation of theories, each of which shares a common set of assumptions but also includes some distinctive elements.² All realist theories emphasize that the key actors in world politics are sovereign states (or other territorially defined groups) that act rationally to advance their security, power, and wealth in an anarchic international system.³ Realists (and most other international relations

theorists) define anarchy in structural terms as the absence of a legitimate governmental authority to regulate disputes and enforce agreements between states or other actors.

For most realists, anarchy, in conjunction with uncertainty about the intentions of other states, has enormous consequences. It induces insecurity and a continuous competition for power, which makes the international system inherently conflictual. Given omnipresent threats, political leaders tend to focus on short-term security needs and adopt worst-case thinking. They often utilize coercive threats to advance their interests, influence the adversary, and maintain their reputations. Anarchy does not automatically lead to war, but it creates a permissive environment for war by creating a system of insecurity, conflicts of interest, and international rivalries. Realists tend to have a pessimistic worldview, and they tend to be skeptical of grand schemes for creating and maintaining a peaceful international order.⁴

Realists generally accept the core hypothesis that a primary determinant of international outcomes, including both wars and the peaceful settlement of crises and disputes, is the distribution of power in the international system or within a particular dyad. As Thucydides (1996:352 [5.89]) famously said in the “Melian dialogue,” “... the strong take what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Different conceptions of power and of the specific dynamics of power relationships, however, lead to different realist theories and to different predictions about the results of particular distributions of power.

Another thing that nearly all realist theorists agree upon is the view that wars can occur both through deliberate and inadvertent processes, though different strands of realism differ on which of these processes occurs most often. In the first path to war, two states have a direct conflict of interests and at least one decides that it is more likely to achieve its interests through military force than through a negotiated settlement. The image here is one of predatory states. Most historical conquests fit this model of deliberate, unprovoked aggression. Hitler’s initiation of a European war in 1939 is a classic example (Weinberg, 1994), as is Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Freedman and Karsh, 1993). In this view, a predatory, “revisionist” state makes a deliberate decision to initiate war to change the status quo in its favor.

Equally important, however, is a second path to war that involves states that are content with the status quo and that are more interested in maintaining their current positions than in extending their influence. Such “security-seeking” states can end up in war, often an *inadvertent war* that neither side wants or expects at the onset of the crisis. International anarchy induces a competition for power driven by the inherent uncertainty about the intentions of others (Jervis, 1976: chap. 2) and by the fear that others might engage in predatory behavior. If one’s adversary is growing in strength

or forming alliances, the inherent uncertainty about the adversary's intentions often leads one to conclude that the worst outcome is the failure to build up one's own power, leaving one's interests exposed if the adversary turns out to have aggressive intentions.

States may take these actions for purely defensive purposes, but adversary states often perceive these actions as threatening. Compounding this is the fact that most weapons systems can serve offensive as well as defensive functions. The result is a tendency toward worst-case analysis in the context of extreme uncertainty. The threatened state responds with measures to protect itself, and those measures are in turn perceived as threatening by the other. This can generate an action–reaction cycle and a conflict spiral that leaves all states worse off and that can sometimes escalate to war. This is the core of the *security dilemma*: actions that states take to increase their security often induce a response by adversaries and actually result in a decrease in their security (Herz, 1959; Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1997). It is worth noting that although an inadvertent war is inadvertent in the sense that neither side wants war or expects war in the early stage of a crisis, such wars can actually begin with a deliberate step at the end of an inadvertent process (George, 1991).⁵

The security dilemma and conflict spiral are the core of the *spiral model* of war and peace (Jervis, 1976: chap. 3). These concepts are important in part because they explain how wars can occur even if states prefer peace to war and even if they behave rationally, since conflict spirals can be structurally induced by the system. Conflict spirals can also be exacerbated further by non-rational psychological processes, which we describe in chapter 5 on individual decision-making and war. Spiral theorists often point to World War I or to the 1967 Arab–Israeli War as examples of spiral dynamics that escalated to war when one side decided to take preemptive action.⁶ Another good example of a conflict spiral is the process leading up to the Seven Years' War between Britain and France in North America (1756–63), which Americans know as the “French and Indian War” and which Smoke (1977: chap. 8) describes as involving “no offensive steps by any player at any time.”

The spiral model is sometimes contrasted with the *deterrence model*, which suggests that wars occur when deterrence fails – when one side either lacks the military capabilities to threaten a sufficiently costly response to aggression, or when its threat lacks credibility (Jervis, 1976: chap. 3).⁷ Deterrence theorists generally assume that predatory behavior is the primary path to war and minimize the importance of inadvertent processes. They adopt the adage “*si vis pacem para bellum*” (if you seek peace, prepare for war), argue that military build-ups and coercive strategies reinforce deterrence and maintain the peace, and contend that the appeasement of aggressors only encourages future aggression. Deterrence theorists often invoke

the British and French attempt to appease Hitler at Munich as an example of the futility of appeasement.⁸

Spiral and deterrence theorists each argue that the policy prescriptions of the other make war more likely rather than less likely. Deterrence theorists argue that the more conciliatory policies advocated by spiral theorists increase the probability of war by undermining deterrence, and spiral theorists argue that the hardline policies advocated by spiral theorists only provoke conflict spirals and war. Each theory is flawed, however, because each makes unconditional predictions that ignore the specific contexts of a dispute or crisis. In some situations, hardline policies work to induce compliance, whereas in other situations they backfire and provoke counter-responses and escalation. The key question is the conditions under which coercive threats are effective and the conditions under which they are not (Jervis, 1976: chap. 3).

We noted earlier that realist international theory is more of a school of thought than a single theory, and that there are a number of varieties of realism. Scholars divide up realist theories in different ways, but one common distinction is between “classical” realism and “structural” realism. Structural realism is often equated with the “neorealism” of Waltz, but it also includes “defensive” realism and “offensive” realism. A fifth variation of realism, which formed in response to structural realism, is “neoclassical” realism.

Classical realism

Classical (or traditional) realists believed that there are multiple sources of state behavior and hence of the causes of war. In addition to the importance of the absence of central authority in the international system, which was central to the theories of Hobbes and to a certain extent of Rousseau (Doyle, 1997), classical realists emphasized the role of human nature as a source of aggressive behavior and war. They pointed to aggressive instincts, selfishness, greed, pride, and passion as key factors leading to human aggression. It is also important to note that classical realists were interested in explaining not only wars and other international outcomes, but also the foreign policies and grand strategies of states and the art of statecraft. This led them to develop more detailed but less “parsimonious” theories of international relations.⁹

Waltzian neorealism

As we noted in chapter 1, Waltz (1959) was very critical of the classical realist idea of attributing causality to “human nature,” since a constant human nature cannot explain the obvious variations in war and peace over

time and space. In a later book, Waltz (1979) argued more strongly that classical realists did not adhere to social science methodology, and that they were not interested in constructing theories and hypotheses that were mutually consistent and subject to empirical test against the empirical evidence. These considerations led Waltz (1979) to develop neorealism as an alternative realist theory.¹⁰ His aim was to give realism a stronger social science orientation and to construct a parsimonious realist theory.

Whereas traditional realists emphasized the pursuit of power as an end in itself, Waltz (1979) emphasized the pursuit of security, with power serving as a means rather than an end. Waltz placed particular emphasis on international anarchy and the distribution of power in the system. Given the limited variation in anarchy across time and across international systems, and hence its inability to explain the enormous variation in war and peace over time and space, the distribution of power in the system, especially among the leading powers, carries most of the explanatory power in Waltzian neorealism. Waltz argued that the distribution of power has far more impact on state behaviors and international outcomes than do the internal characteristics of states or the characteristics of individual political leaders. Differently constituted states under similar configurations of power will act similarly, and similarly constituted states under different configurations of power will act differently.

Waltzian neorealism is a form of balance of power theory. Waltz (1979) posited that hegemonies rarely form in international systems and that balances of power are the norm throughout most of international history. He also argued that the anarchic and competitive nature of the international system leads most states to emulate the successful practices of other states in providing for their security. Those who are unable to provide for their security are vulnerable to conquest by others. Thus the anarchic and competitive international system socializes states and induces certain kinds of beliefs and behaviors (a “realist culture,” some might say) that reinforce the nature of the system.¹¹

In his analysis of the distribution of power in the system, Waltz (1979) stressed the central importance of the “polarity” of the international system, a factor that had engaged earlier realists as well.¹² Realists argue that systems of different polarity create different threats and opportunities for states and generate different foreign policy behaviors, particularly for the great powers. Realists often disagree, however, as to the specific relationship between the polarity of the system and its stability, which is defined different ways but which usually refers to a low probability of a major war in the system.

For many years the primary debate was about the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems.¹³ Morgenthau (1967), Gulick (1955), and other classical realists, along with Deutsch and Singer (1964) and some

other non-realists, generally argued that multipolar systems were more stable than bipolar systems. They argued that multipolarity created a greater number of possible coalitions that might form against any possible aggressor, thus reinforcing deterrence against aggression. In bipolarity, by contrast, the allies of the leading powers were too weak to play a significant role in balancing against an aggressor. In addition, with several strong powers in multipolarity, each was less likely to focus all of its energies on any single rival, and cross-cutting cleavages over multiple issues tended to diffuse conflicts from escalating along a single axis. In bipolar systems, on the other hand, there is a tendency toward the polarization of the alliance system around the two leading powers, increasing the risks of escalation.¹⁴

Waltz (1979) and most neorealists disagreed, arguing that bipolar systems are more stable than multiple systems. There is less uncertainty under bipolarity, and thus less of a risk of war through miscalculation.¹⁵ Each adversary is clearly focused on the other, monitors its behavior, and responds appropriately. In bipolarity, one leading power has no choice but to balance against the other. Multipolarity raises “collective action” problems (Olson, 1971), since each state has incentives to “free ride” and let others pay the costs of balancing against an aggressor. As a result, balances often fail to form against aggression, which undermines deterrence.

Theoretically, each side of the debate suggests plausible arguments, which raises the empirical question of which of these effects dominates. Historical evidence on the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems is mixed. The multipolar system of the nineteenth century witnessed relatively few major wars, but that of the first half of the twentieth century included two world wars. The bipolarity of ancient Greece witnessed the Peloponnesian War, and the French–Habsburg bipolarity of the early sixteenth century was quite conflictual, but the bipolar Cold War period was stable (though many argue that had more to do with the deterrence effects of nuclear weapons than with bipolarity). Mearsheimer (2001a) examines a number of historical case studies and finds that “unbalanced multipolarity” is the most war-prone type of system, but statistical analyses yield no evidence that one type of system is significantly more or less war-prone than the other (Sabrosky, 1985; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992; Bennett and Stam, 2004).

Waltzian neorealism is one of the most influential international relations theories of the last half century. It reinvigorated the realist research program and gave it a more solid social scientific grounding. The norms of the field soon required that any new theory be tested against a realist alternative. At the same time, however, Waltz’s theory became a central target for criticism. One of the most basic criticisms was that the key explanatory variable, the distribution of power in the system, does not vary enough to explain

the enormous variations in war and peace. Nor can neorealist theory explain fundamental changes in key structural characteristics of the international system (its polarity, for example) or in the behavior of the actors in that system.¹⁶ Thus critics charged that neorealism could make very general predictions, but not more specific predictions, about international politics (Keohane, 1986; Buzan, Jones, and Little, 1993; Ruggie, 1998).

Waltz (1979) conceded this point to a certain extent. He acknowledged that his theory is limited to explaining international outcomes, and that it cannot explain the specific foreign policy behaviors of states or specific wars. He said that “although neorealist theory does not explain why particular wars are fought, it does explain war’s dismal recurrence through the millennia” (Waltz, 1988:620). Most scholars argue that this is too limiting, and that we need a theory that explains both international outcomes and foreign policy behaviors (Elman, 1996) and the conditions under which wars are most likely. Most recent developments in realist theory can be seen as attempts to introduce additional causal variables in order to formulate a more nuanced theory (though admittedly a less parsimonious one) that explains more of the complexity of international relations. The different ways they do this has defined different variations of realist theory. In addition, contemporary realists have made a much greater effort than earlier realists to test their theories against the empirical evidence, largely through historical case studies (e.g., Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001a; Elman, 2004).¹⁷

Defensive realism

Defensive realists agree with neorealists that the anarchic structure of the international system creates potential security threats, but they do not believe that anarchy in itself forces states into conflict and war. If all states seek only security, and if there are no predatory states seeking expansion, and if all states know that, then states can avoid war. This raises the question of the importance of perceptions of the intentions of other states. Whereas Waltz (1979) emphasized the central importance of power and argued that states balance against the leading power in the system, defensive realists emphasize the importance of actual threats, of which intentions are an important component. Some strong powers can be benign. Following Stephen Walt’s (1987) development of “balance of threat” theory, defensive realists argue that states balance against the greatest threats to their interests rather than against the strongest power in the system.

Defensive realists also depart from Waltzian realism in their conception of power. Whereas Waltz (1979) focused primarily on the overall distribution of power, defensive realists emphasize a more “fine-grained structure of power” (Van Evera, 1999). One key component of threat is geography.

The impact of military power declines over distance (the “loss of strength gradient” (Boulding, 1962:262)), and spatially distant states pose less of a threat than do proximate states. Defensive realists also emphasize the importance of technology, particularly as it affects the “offensive–defensive balance” (Jervis, 1978; Van Evera, 1999). The more technology contributes to the ease of conquest and gives an advantage to those who strike first, and the greater the proximity of strong states, the greater the threat to the security of others, the greater the competition for power and security, and the higher the probability of conflicts and war. If strong states are distant and if military technology favors the defense, however, security competition is less intense and the probability of war declines. Similarly, the probability of war is reduced if states adopt defensive doctrines and military postures. This relates to state intentions and perceptions of intentions. Through defensive doctrines states can signal their peaceful intentions to their adversaries (Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1997; Kydd, 1997).

Of all realists, defensive realists are the most confident about the effectiveness of balance of power mechanisms in restraining aggression. This combines with other factors to limit the utility of territorial expansion except under relatively rare conditions. All of this makes defensive realists guardedly optimistic about the possibilities for cooperation under anarchy, at least under certain conditions (Jervis, 1988).

Defensive realists recognize, however, that states are sometimes aggressive, that great powers occasionally make bids for hegemony, and that war frequently occurs. To explain this, defensive realists supplement system-level structural variables with domestic variables. If states behave aggressively, it is not because of anarchy-induced systemic pressures but instead because of malevolent leaders, hostile regimes, and decision-making pathologies. Defensive realists argue that war will not arise in a world of purely security-seeking states in the absence of domestically induced revisionist goals or extreme misperceptions of external threats (Snyder, 1991; Glaser, 1997; Kydd, 1997; Van Evera, 1999).

Offensive realism

Offensive realists do not doubt the existence of predatory states and predatory leaders, but they argue that the sources of predation can be traced to the structure of the international system, the inherent uncertainty about adversary intentions, and anarchy-induced tendencies towards worst-case analysis, without invoking domestic variables. The international system is so hostile and unforgiving that uncertainty about the future intentions of the adversary combined with extreme worst-case analysis lead even status quo-oriented states to adopt offensive strategies, which often lead to war (Zakaria, 1992; Labs, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001a; Elman, 2004). Even if

the adversary has currently benign intentions, there is no guarantee that such intentions will not turn belligerent in the future, either through a change in orientation of those in power or a change in regime that brings a more hostile regime to power (Copeland, 2000). States often act aggressively because they perceive that expansion is the best way to provide for security in a competitive and uncertain world. Contrary to defensive realists, offensive realists contend that aggression sometimes pays and contributes to the accumulation of power that facilitates further aggression.¹⁸

Mearsheimer (2001a), for example, contends that the best way for a state to provide for its security is to achieve hegemony. He argues, however, that no state has the resources to create a truly global hegemony, especially given the difficulties of projecting power over the oceans (the “stopping power of water”). Consequently, leading states limit their aims to hegemony over their own region. In contrast to defensive realists, who argue that regional hegemony is unrealistic because of the formation of blocking coalitions, Mearsheimer and other offensive realists argue that balancing often fails. Balancing is costly, and states prefer to “pass the buck” and let others pay the costs of balancing against an aggressor. As a result, balancing coalitions are slow to form, creating opportunities for aggression. Although balancing has ultimately worked to prevent hegemony in Europe, it often arises too late to deter aggression in the first place, as illustrated by the delayed formation of a counterbalancing coalition against Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

The clearest example of a successful bid for regional hegemony, at least in the West during the past five centuries, is the United States in North America. This raises the puzzle of why the United States has been able to succeed while others have not. One answer is that the United States is unique among continental powers because it has faced no peer competitors. The absence of balancing is due to the absence of balancers, and to the fact that potential balancers in other regions, such as France in the early nineteenth century, were more preoccupied with local issues, like the struggle for hegemony in Europe (Elman, 2004).

Another point of contention is the defensive realist emphasis on the offensive–defensive balance of military technology as an important variable. Defensive realists argue that some weapons systems and some military strategies are inherently defensive, and that by carefully developing defensive military postures states can provide for their own security without threatening others. Offensive realists reject that argument. They insist that it is nearly impossible to distinguish defensive weapons from offensive weapons, since weapons systems can serve multiple purposes (Levy, 1989a; Lynn-Jones, 1995; Betts, 1999; Lieber, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001a). They argue that it is also difficult to distinguish aggressive intentions from more defensive intentions, and that the uncertainty inherent in the system induces

a tendency toward worst-case analysis towards both adversary weapons systems and intentions.¹⁹ Thus offensive realists argue that the security dilemma cannot be diminished, and that any weapons build-up is likely to generate counter-responses and conflict spirals.

To summarize, offensive realists offer a strictly structural theory of war and peace and emphasize the role of the pursuit of power in the context of anarchy and uncertainty. Defensive realists emphasize the pursuit of security in a context in which anarchy is present but not always compelling and where technology, geography, and state strategies can mitigate the effects of anarchy. Defensive realists also depart from a strict structuralist perspective and incorporate domestic variables in an attempt to explain why wars occur. What defensive realists fail to do, however, is to offer a complete theory of exactly *how* domestic factors influence decisions for war and peace, in what kinds of states and under what conditions. During the past 10 years or so, another variation of realism has emerged, one that departs from structural realism by constructing a more complete theory of foreign policy behavior that pays more attention to domestic structures and processes. This is neoclassical realism.

Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realists (Rose, 1998; Schweller 2006; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009) recognize the importance of anarchy, argue that material capabilities are the single most important determinant of state strategies, and give causal primacy to system structure. They emphasize, however, that there is an imperfect “transmission belt” between systemic opportunities and constraints and the foreign policy decisions of states. System-level pressures affect foreign policy choices through intervening domestic processes. Most important are political leaders’ perceptions and misperceptions of the distribution of material capabilities; the autonomy of the state from society; the state’s capacity to extract resources from society and to build military power, which often involves bargaining with societal actors; and the influence of domestic societal actors and interest groups on the process (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009).

Whereas structural realists and some classical realists implicitly assume that a country’s human and economic resources translate directly into national power, neoclassical realists emphasize the need of state leaders to mobilize societal resources and convert them into power that can be used to support security policies of the state (Christensen, 1996; Zakaria, 1998; Schweller, 2006). The ability of state leaders to extract and mobilize societal resources varies as a function of state strength and its autonomy from society. Weak states are more divided, influenced more strongly by societal groups, less expansive in the scope of their responsibilities, and poorer.

Thus Zakaria (1998) argues that the rise of the United States to great power status in the world was delayed because of the relative weakness of its state structures relative to societal groups, resulting in a lag between the rapid expansion of American economic resources and its effective power from 1865 to 1889.²⁰

This example suggests a challenge for neoclassical realist theory. Neoclassical realists emphasize that they give causal primacy to system structure and that material capabilities are the primary determinant of state strategies. It is not clear how the causal primacy argument can be reconciled with the propositions that weak state structures limit the ability of political leaders to mobilize societal resources to create effective national power, that political leaders need to bargain with social groups, and that political leaders' perceptions of military power often play an important role in the formation of state grand strategies. It is not clear where to draw the line between a neoclassical realist model that emphasizes the primacy of system structures and material capabilities – as they are perceived by domestic actors and operate through domestic processes – and an “*innenpolitik*” model that emphasizes the primacy of domestic politics (Kerr, 1965).

Since each of these realist theories emphasizes to varying degrees the centrality of the balance of power in their theories of conflict and war, we now turn to a more detailed look at balance of power theory. Before doing so, we should note that while nearly all balance theories are realist theories, not all realist theories are balance of power theories. Although “balance of power realism” is the most common form of realist thought, one can also identify a form of “hegemonic realism” (Levy, 2003b). Whereas balance of power realism posits that hegemony is rare but dangerous and that the avoidance of hegemony is the highest goal of states, hegemonic theories (realist and otherwise) posit that hegemony or hierarchy, not balance, is commonplace and in fact less war-prone than other distributions of power. After examining balance of power theories, we then turn to hegemonic theories.

Balance of Power Theory

The balance of power is one of the oldest concepts in international politics. Historians and political scientists often speak of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the “golden age” of the balance of power, and they occasionally apply the concept to other historical systems and to the contemporary era as well. The concept, however, is quite ambiguous (Claude, 1962). The balance of power has been used to refer to the actual distribution of power in the international system, to a distribution of power favorable to one's own state, or to any distribution of power. That usage refers

to the balance of power as an international outcome. Some scholars use the balance of power as a synonym for power politics or *realpolitik*, and thus refer to the balance of power as a state strategy. Others treat the balance of power as a theory, but those who do so disagree on what the key assumptions and propositions of balance of power theory are and on what the theory claims to explain. The different ways scholars use the term balance of power led Richard Cobden ([1903]1969) to describe it as “a chimera – an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing.”²¹

Here we treat balance of power as a theory, and use the term distribution of power to refer to the actual or desired distribution of power in the system. We do not try to summarize all of the many versions of balance of power theory, but to identify what they share in common and to specify the core propositions that all balance of power theorists would accept. This facilitates a minimal empirical test of balance of power theory. All balance of power theories share the basic core assumptions of realist theory: the system is anarchic, the key actors are territorial states (or other territorially based groups) who aim to maximize their power and/or security, and they act reasonably rationally to promote those goals.²² Different balance of power theorists then add empirical content to these basic assumptions by suggesting additional assumptions and hypotheses. This leads to different versions of balance of power theory, some with conflicting propositions (about the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems, for example).

Although some balance of power theorists argue that balance of power systems have the goal of maintaining the peace (Wolfers, 1962: chap. 8; Claude, 1962:55), that view is problematic. First of all, systems do not have goals. Only actors (individuals, organizations, states) have goals. Second, balance of power theories generally posit that most states, particularly the great powers, define other goals as more important than peace and regard war as an acceptable instrument of policy to achieve those goals if other strategies fail to achieve them.

The primary aim of all states is their own survival, defined as a combination of territorial integrity and autonomy from outside rule. States also have a nested hierarchy of additional goals that are instrumental goals for survival. The most important of these is the avoidance of hegemony, a situation in which one state amasses so much power that it is able to dominate over the rest and thus put an end to the multistate system. Polybius (1960) wrote that “we should never contribute to the attainment by one state of a power so preponderant, that none dare dispute with it. ...” Vattel ([1758] wrote that, “The balance of power is an arrangement of affairs so that no State shall be in a position to have absolute mastery and dominate over others.” Finally, Winston Churchill (1948: 207) stated that, “For four hundred years the foreign policy of England has been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive most dominating Power on the Continent. ...”

Other state goals are instrumental to the prevention of hegemony. One is maintaining the independence of other states in the system, or at least the independence of the other great powers, which facilitates the formation of balancing coalitions against potential aggressors. Another is maintaining an approximately equal distribution of power in the system, defined in terms of some combination of individual state capabilities and the aggregation of state capabilities in coalitions. This also facilitates the formation of a number of possible blocking coalitions if one state grows too strong.

Peace is also an important goal of states. It usually advances security, prosperity, social welfare, justice, and a range of other goals. In balance of power theory, however, the goal of peace is conditional on the avoidance of hegemony and perhaps the achievement of other instrumental goals. If those goals are threatened, states are often willing to go to war if necessary to secure their interests.

Balance of power theorists specify two general strategies that states can adopt in their efforts to prevent hegemonies from forming. Waltz (1979) distinguishes between “external balancing” and “internal balancing.” The former involves the formation of counterbalancing alliances in order to block the expansion of an aggressor or to deter a potential aggressor from initiating aggressive policies.²³ Internal balancing is the internal mobilization of military power and a build-up of the economic and industrial foundations of military strength.

Balance of power theorists are far from agreement on which strategies states adopt under what conditions, though many argue that external balancing is often the preferred strategy in multipolar systems, in part because for many states alliances are cheaper than the mobilization of men, money, and materials (Barnett and Levy, 1991). Internal balancing is generally preferred in bipolar systems, since there are no other states to serve as potential allies. Although some have argued that states tend to adopt one strategy or another, there is little evidence of the “substitutability” of arms and alliances (Most and Starr, 1987; Palmer and Morgan, 2006), and these strategies can be mutually reinforcing. The pre-World War I period was characterized by both coalition formation (the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance) and by arms races on land and on sea (Kennedy, 1982; Stevenson, 1996). In the Cold War, the United States balanced against the Soviet Union both by forming the NATO alliance and also by building up its own military capabilities.

It is useful to recall that balance of power theory is a theory of system-level outcomes. Sometimes scholars confuse balance of power theory with the *power parity hypothesis*, which predicts that an equality of power between two states is more likely than a preponderance of power to lead to peace. The power parity hypothesis is a dyadic-level hypothesis that assumes that alliances play no role, while balance of power theory is a

systemic-level theory in which alliances are central. A finding at one level does not always hold at the other level.

In fact, most quantitative studies of the relationship between the dyadic distribution of power and war/peace demonstrate that a preponderance of power is more likely than an equality of power to be associated with peace (Kugler and Lemke, 1996; Bennett and Stam, 2004). This is the *power preponderance hypothesis*. The logic is that under preponderance the strong are satisfied and do not have the incentives for war, and the weak, though dissatisfied, lack the capability for war. Evidence that parity is conducive to war at the dyadic level does not logically imply that an equality of power is conducive to war at the system level.

Balance of power theorists also argue about the impact of alliances on war and peace. Some argue that alliances deter war by increasing the probability of balancing against an aggressor (Gulick, 1955:61), while others argue that alliances generate counter-alliances that sometimes lead to conflict spirals and war.²⁴ In terms of overall tendencies, there is some evidence that alliances on average tend to increase the probability of war (Senese and Vasquez, 2008). Indeed, alliances have historically often been followed by war. That does not necessarily mean, however, that alliances cause war. An alternative interpretation for the correlation between alliances and war is that alliances form when states anticipate that war is likely, so that underlying conditions are the cause both of alliance formation and the outbreak of war, with alliances themselves having little causal impact (Levy, 1989b).²⁵

Despite their many disagreements, most balance of power theorists make some common predictions. Two propositions in particular stand out. (1) If any state threatens to gain a position of hegemony over the system that would enable it to dominate over others, a balancing coalition of other states will form against it. As a result, (2) hegemonies rarely if ever form in world politics. The first is a proposition about state strategies, and the second is a proposition about international outcomes (Levy, 2003a).

With regard to the first, balance of power theorists point to the balancing coalitions that formed against a succession of states that grew so strong that they threatened to dominate Europe: Spain under Philip II in the sixteenth century, France under Louis XIV in the seventeenth century, France under Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Germany under the Kaiser and then under Hitler in the twentieth century. Each led to a “hegemonic war” involving most of the great powers in the system and lasting many years.

The above-mentioned propositions and examples all refer to threats of hegemony over the system and to “counter-hegemonic balancing” by great powers in response. Balance of power theorists are divided over the question of balancing against other kinds of threats. Most classical realists and

neorealists argue that states balance against the strongest power in the system, without explicitly specifying whether or not there is a threat of hegemony; defensive realists argue that states balance against the greatest threat (but not necessarily a hegemonic threat); and offensive realists emphasize balancing against power but argue that balancing often breaks down. Few theorize about the balancing behavior of weaker states vis-à-vis stronger powers. Given the vulnerability of weaker states, particularly those sharing borders with stronger states, and given their lesser impact on outcomes, weaker states are likely to join the strongest coalition.

One thing all balance of power theorists agree upon, however, is that great powers generally balance against hegemonic threats. Offensive realists, who argue that states balance against the strongest power, and defensive realists, who argue that states balance against the strongest threat, both reach this conclusion. Only the strongest power in the system can threaten hegemony, and the threat of hegemony is almost always the strongest threat to other states, certainly to other great powers. In fact, there is systematic statistical evidence that great powers usually balance against a leading state that is strong enough to threaten hegemony but not against a leading state that has lesser margins of advantage, at least for the last five centuries of the European system (Levy and Thompson, 2005).

At this point in the discussion of balance of power theory and the absence of hegemony, some readers will be thinking “what about the United States today?” The relative economic and military power of the United States is historically unprecedented,²⁶ yet no great power balancing coalition has formed against it. This is a puzzle for many scholars, who argue that balance of power theory predicts balancing in such situations (Zakaria 2001; Ikenberry 2002:3; Walt, 2005).

Realists disagree on how to explain the absence of absence of “hard balancing” against the United States, defined as the formation of formal military alliances or substantial increases in military spending, but their explanations can be grouped into five categories.²⁷ Some argue that balancing will still occur and argue that it is just a matter of time before it does (Waltz, 2000; Layne, 2006). A second group argues that states, and particularly the great powers, have not balanced against the United States because they recognize that the US has benign intentions and does not pose a threat to the vital interests of other states.²⁸ They claim that the US differs from the dominant powers of the past because it has no interest in territorial conquest, in part because of its geographical isolation from other leading powers (Pape 2005a; Paul, 2005a; Walt, 2005).

Brooks and Wohlforth (2008:35) offer a third explanation: that balance of power theory predicts balancing against an aspiring hegemon but not against a state that has already achieved a hegemonic position, and that consequently the theory does not apply to the United States in the period following end of the Cold War. They trace the absence of balancing to the

enormous material capabilities of the United States, both military and economic, which make it too dangerous to balance against the US.

Mearsheimer (2001a) advances a fourth explanation. He argues that states that have achieved regional hegemony (global hegemony being out of reach) attempt to prevent the rise of peer competitors in other regions by playing the role of an “offshore balancer.”²⁹ Weaker states in these other regions are more worried about threats to their interests emanating from within their region than from outside the region, and hence do not generally see the offshore balancer as the primary threat to their interests. These considerations lead Mearsheimer (2001b:49) to conclude that “Offshore balancers do not provoke balancing coalitions against themselves.” The United States plays the role of an offshore balancer in other regions, and hence does not provoke balancing coalitions.³⁰

Levy and Thompson (2005, 2010a) offer an alternative interpretation for the absence of great power balancing against the US, one that overlaps with Mearsheimer’s (2001a) view but that (we think) goes beyond it. The failure of a balancing coalition to form against the United States does not contradict balance of power theory because the theory, as it has been developed in the West over the last three centuries, has generally been applied to land-based continental systems but not to maritime systems. Dominant land powers with large armies are far more threatening to other leading states than are dominant sea powers with large navies, and consequently great power coalitions tend to form against the former but not against the latter.³¹ Just as other great powers rarely balanced against Britain at the peak of its global power in the nineteenth century, or against the Dutch when they were the leading global power in the late seventeenth century, great powers do not balance against the United States in the contemporary system.³² Thus the absence of balancing is not a puzzle for balance of power theory.³³

While some argue that balance of power theory works well in explaining the dynamics of past international systems but not the contemporary system, others argue that the theory fails in earlier periods as well. They argue that an alternative theory, based on the idea that hierarchy and hegemony are more common than balance, more accurately captures the strategic dynamics both of the contemporary world and the world of the past. To these we now turn.

Hegemonic Theories

Whereas balance of power theories posit that states fear hegemony, that they balance against any state threatening hegemony, and that counter-hegemonic balancing makes hegemony rare and great power war common, hegemonic theories argue that strong concentrations of power in the hands

of a single power in the international system are historically common and stabilizing. Hegemonic theories share realist assumptions about the primacy of rational and unitary states and their primary concern with power, but they de-emphasize the importance of anarchy while emphasizing the leading state's management of the system within a hierarchical order.

Power transition theory

Organski (1958) was the first modern scholar to advance a hegemonic theory (though he avoided the term *hegemon*). Organski believed that balance of power theory was too static, too narrowly focused on military power, and inattentive to the sources of changes in relative power. He argued that international systems are frequently dominated by a single powerful state that uses its strength to create a set of political and economic structures and norms of behavior that enhance both the security of the lead state and the stability of the system as a whole. Some other states are satisfied with the existing order, ally with the leading state, and receive economic and security benefits from doing so. Other states are dissatisfied, but they are usually too weak to challenge the dominant state.

In this dynamic theory, differential rates of growth, based largely on different rates of industrialization, lead to the rise and fall of states (Organski and Kugler, 1980).³⁴ The most dangerous and war-prone situation is one in which a state that is rising and dissatisfied with the status quo begins to approach the strength of the leading state in the system and threatens to surpass it in power. The rising challenger has a motivation to overturn the existing order, which was set up by the dominant state when it was at the peak of its power and which serves the interests of the dominant state and its allies. Power transition theorists argue that the challenger initiates a war in order to accelerate the power transition and bring its benefits from the system into line with its rising military power (Organski and Kugler, 1980; Kugler and Lemke, 1996, 2000; Tammen et al., 2000). Thus the three key conditions for war in power transition theory are power shifts, approximate equality of power, and dissatisfaction with the status quo. War is unlikely to occur before the challenger approaches the strength of the leading state (operationally defined as 80 percent of the strength of the leader) and after it has surpassed the former leader (by 20 percent).

Unlike balance of power theorists, who focus primarily on military power, power transition theorists define power as the product of population, economic productivity, and the political capacity of the state to mobilize the resources of society to support its international policies.³⁵ A state's power follows an S-shaped growth curve. Power grows rapidly during industrialization and then levels off to a more modest but sustained growth. This growth of power is irreversible, and consequently power transitions

are unavoidable. The only question is whether the transformation of the international order is peaceful or violent.

Many attempts to explain power dynamics in the contemporary world, even by scholars who do not define themselves as power transition theorists, adopt many key elements of the theory. Many scholars writing about the causes and consequences of unipolarity, for example, argue that American hegemony contributes to stability in the contemporary world, although there is disagreement as to how long American hegemony will last. Posen (2003) and Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) each argue that American hegemony is fairly stable, while Layne (2006) argues that the current unipolar system is transitory and that differential rates of growth will eventually lead to the rise of new leading powers, with destabilizing consequences for the international system.³⁶

Power transition theory is also the basis of many arguments about the rise of China and its consequences for the international system. In particular, many fear the consequences of the continued rise of Chinese power and the dangers of a Sino–American conflict as the point of power transition approaches. Based on contemporary growth rates, that point was estimated to occur in about three decades, though it is not clear how that prediction will be affected by the global economic crisis that began in 2008. Scholars debate the ability of the Chinese economy to sustain its recent growth rate and whether its political system will be conducive to the kinds of technological innovation that are necessary for a lead economy (Rapkin and Thompson, 2003). Thus the likelihood and timing of a future Sino–American transition are more uncertain than power transition theorists imply.

One theme of power transition theory that many find useful, however, is that the key variable determining the peaceful or violent nature of any transition is the extent to which China will be satisfied or dissatisfied with the international system during and after the power transition. Many argue that the more China is engaged in an interdependent world economy, the more satisfied it will be with the current international system, and the lower the probability of a militarized Sino–American conflict over Taiwan or some other issue. Less useful, however, is the argument by power transition theorists that nuclear weapons have no deterrent effect on conflict. Most theorists argue that nuclear deterrence was a central stabilizing feature of the Cold War (Jervis, 1989) and that nuclear weapons will also significantly reduce (though not eliminate) the danger of a Sino–American war in the future.

Let us return to the question of the *timing* of war during a power transition. Power transition theorists have not reached a consensus on this important question. Organski (1958) initially argued that the rising power initiates a war before the point of transition, for the purpose of accelerating the

transition. Organski and Kugler's (1980) empirical analysis suggested that the war was likely to occur after the point of transition, but Kugler and Lemke (2000) question that finding.³⁷ A more recent formulation of power transition theory (Tammen, et al., 2000) suggests instead that the challenger initiates a war after the point of transition.

The hypothesized timing of the war has important theoretical implications and requires further research. Organski's argument that the rising state initiates a war before a power transition is problematic because at that point the rising power is weaker and it is likely to lose any war. It would make more sense for it to wait and initiate the war when it is stronger and more likely to win, as Tammen et al. (2000) argue. But if that were the case, why would the declining state wait for challenger to increase in strength and fight on the challenger's terms? Why wouldn't the declining state initiate a war to defeat its rising challenger while the opportunity is still available?

Such a war is often referred to as a *preventive war*, a concept familiar to historians and to balance of power theorists. A preventive war is motivated by the perception of a rising adversary, a shift in power, and by the fear that once the adversary is stronger it will attempt to exploit its advantage through coercion or war (Van Evera, 1999; Copeland, 2000; Levy, 2008a), and is driven by "better-now-than-later" logic. Faced with a rising adversary, especially a potentially hostile one, a state may be tempted to fight now, when it is stronger, rather than later, when conditions are less favorable. The danger of waiting, however, is not just the risk of a future war. States fear a decline in bargaining leverage associated with their relative decline in power. If the adversary makes greater demands once it is stronger – and most realists argue that state interests expand with the relative power of the state – the question is the extent of the concessions the declining state would have to make in the future in order to avoid the unwanted war.

It is important to emphasize that strategies of prevention are different than strategies of preemption. Preemption involves a military attack in response to the virtual certainty that the adversary is about to strike and by the motivation of gaining the advantages of striking first. Prevention is motivated not by the anticipation of an imminent attack, but instead by the anticipation of an adverse power shift over the next few years and the fear of its consequences. Israel launched a preemptive strike against Egypt to begin the 1967 war and a preventive strike against Iraqi nuclear facilities in 1981.³⁸

Historians and political scientists have identified numerous cases in which power shifts and better-now-than-later logic have led to war. When Thucydides (1996:16) argued that the "real cause" of the Peloponnesian War was "the growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this caused in Sparta," he was invoking preventive logic. The historian A.J.P.

Taylor (1954:166) claimed that, “Every war between Great Powers [in the 1848–1918 period] started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest.” Scholars have given particular attention to the role of the preventive motivation in the outbreak of World War I. The argument is that German leaders, recognizing the rising power of Russia and the likelihood any war with Russia would invoke the Franco–Russian alliance, and fearing that by 1917 Germany could no longer be confident of winning such a war, acted preventively to fight before its relative power continued to slide (Levy, 1990/91; Van Evera, 1999; Copeland, 2000; Stevenson, 2004).

Perhaps the clearest example of a preventively motivated attack is the Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. Israel was driven by the fear that Iraq was on the way to acquiring a nuclear capability that would enormously increase its ability to damage or coerce Israel (Nakdimon, 1987).³⁹ Similarly, the fear of many in the second Bush Administration that Iraq was about to cross the nuclear threshold was one important factor leading to the US-led war in Iraq in 2003. Although the causes of the war are quite complex, the preventive motivation was the main rationale the administration used to help mobilize American public opinion in support of the war (Rich, 2006; Levy, 2008a).⁴⁰

Although impending shifts in relative power sometimes lead to war through preventive logic, more often such power shifts do not lead to war.⁴¹ The United States surpassed Britain as a global power at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the transition was peaceful. Few states have grown in power as rapidly as Nazi Germany in the 1930s, but Britain and France responded with a strategy of appeasement rather than preventive war (Ripsman and Levy, 2007, 2008). This raises the critical question of the conditions under which adverse power shifts (and perceptions of such) do and do not lead declining states to adopt preventive war strategies. This is a major task for scholars interested in the question of preventive war strategies.

We now return to power transition theory’s hypothesis that strong concentrations of power in the international system (or in a dyad) inhibit war. 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. The two theories therefore appear to be diametrically opposed. One can argue, however, that these theories are more “incommensurable” (Kuhn, 1962) than contradictory, in the sense that they provide different answers to slightly different questions than different answers to the same question. Balance of power theory and power transition theory are each theories of power dynamics within international systems, but they focus on different systems and different kinds of power (Rasler and Thompson, 1994; Levy, 2003a; Levy and Thompson, 2005).

Most balance of power theories implicitly conceive of power in terms of land-based military power, and their examples of hegemonic threats and balancing are generally based on the European experience, where high concentrations of power often triggered balancing coalitions and major wars. Applications of power transition theory, on the other hand, tend to focus on the global system and define power in terms of wealth and other forms of economic dominance (though it is worth noting that Lemke (2001) applies power transition theory to regional systems). Their standard indicator of power, for example, is gross national product (Kugler and Lemke, 1996, 2000). They predict that concentrations of power and wealth in the global system are stabilizing, while power transitions in that system are destabilizing. The same is true for other hegemonic theories. Most versions of “hegemonic stability theory” (Keohane, 1984), for example, are theories of the stability of the international political economy and say little about war and peace.

Since they focus on different systems and on different bases of power in the system, balance of power theory and power transition theory could each be correct within its own domain. It is conceivable, for example, that the European system has been most stable under an equilibrium of military power and that hegemonies rarely if ever form in that system, whereas the global system is most stable in the presence of a single dominant economic and naval power (which occurs frequently). The most destabilizing situation would be one characterized by the combination of the diffusion of power at the global level (to the point of an impending global power transition) and an increasing concentration of power in Europe (Rasler and Thompson, 1994).

Several of history’s “hegemonic wars” fit this pattern. The two world wars of the twentieth century (1914–18 and 1939–45) occurred as Britain’s global dominance was rapidly waning while Germany’s power on the European continent was rapidly increasing. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) occurred after an earlier eclipse of Britain’s global power while France was growing on the Continent. These patterns are predicted by long-cycle theory, to which we now turn.

Long-cycle theory

Long-cycle theory, as developed by Modelski and his colleagues, was not designed for the primary purpose of explaining warfare. It is a theory about the emergence of global leadership or management of trans-regional interactions such as trade.⁴² Global war does, however, have a prominent place in the theory because it has been a mechanism for consolidating new leadership over the last 500 years. Global wars – which have been fought in 1494–1516, 1588–1608, 1688–1713, 1792–1815, and 1914–1945 – are

lengthy periods of crisis and conflict, generally lasting between 20 and 30 years, that draw in most the major powers of the era on opposing sides. One side defeats the other and ushers in a new period of global system leadership. These periods of intensive combat serve as selection devices for leadership in the global system, with the leading state in the victorious alliance ascending to a position that facilitates developing new rules and policies for global transactions.

To explain the infrequent but increasingly intensive global wars (Rasler and Thompson, 1994, 2000b; Modelski and Thompson, 1996), the theory relies primarily on two structural dynamics: regional–global dissynchronization and the “twin peaks” model. An important distinction is first made between global and regional politics. Global politics are about managing long-distance commerce, especially after the 1490s, while regional politics center around attempts to create and stave off continental hegemonies. Over the past 500 years, the elite states in the world system have tended to give greater priority to one or the other of these two types of activity. Sea powers have specialized in intercontinental trade and, later, industry, while land powers, particularly those based in Europe, have focused on territorial expansion in the home region. The dissynchronization element is that deconcentration of resources and leadership in the global system encourages concentration of power in the regional system and vice versa. Thus, European land powers have tended to be at their strongest when global sea powers have been at their weakest.

Territorial expansion in Europe threatens leading global powers either directly or indirectly, depending largely on the location of the global powers in question and how much insulation they possess from land attacks. For instance, Portugal (sixteenth century) and the Netherlands (seventeenth century) were adjacent to expanding Spain and France, respectively. Britain (eighteenth and early twentieth centuries) and the United States (late twentieth century) enjoyed some maritime insulation from French, German, and Soviet attack. Regardless of the insulation, the threat of hegemonic expansion in Europe galvanizes the leading sea powers into organizing a coalition of land and sea powers to thwart the threat and into rebuilding the capabilities of global powers to withstand expansionary attack.

The “twin peaks” model refers to the assertions that long-term economic growth is discontinuous. It comes in spurts, tends to be monopolized initially by a single state from the global power ranks, and is most evidently manifested in commercial (prior to the late eighteenth century) and industrial “leading sectors” that, once introduced, tend to radically change the way the world economy works. The economy that pioneers the innovation of these leading sectors is rewarded by a predominant position in global politics because it possesses the system’s strongest economy and technology and is able to develop great wealth as a consequence.

Each of these lead economies experiences at least two growth spurts. The first one destabilizes the pecking order of the world economy but also generates the resources needed to finance the suppression of the threat of regional expansion (as in Western Europe between 1494 and 1945). Victory in global war exhausts the opposition but tends to be beneficial to the relative position of the leading global power. Resources are highly concentrated in the global sphere of activities immediately post-global war and highly deconcentrated in the primary region. Conditions are right for a second growth spurt in the post-war era. But this state of affairs is highly transitional. The leading global power's relative position tends to decay. New (and sometimes old) regional challengers and global rivals emerge with the passage of time. The structural combination of global decline and regional ascents tend to re-create the potential for global war – a war fought to determine who will make post-war rules and policy in global politics.

Balance of power theory, power transition theory, and long-cycle theory are clearly system-level theories that emphasize the importance of the overall structure of the international system for state behaviors and international outcomes.⁴³ The same is true for offensive and defensive realism, though the latter introduces a dyadic component by focusing on the intentions and proximity of the adversary, and in the end it invokes domestic causal variables to help explain variations in war and peace. Other realist theories are more difficult to classify. Classical and neoclassical realism each incorporate individual-, state-, and societal-level factors, though neoclassical realists insist that the system level is still primary. Each is as interested in explaining state strategies as well as international outcomes like wars. The spiral model and deterrence model focus primarily on the interactions between pairs of states and consequently are more properly seen as dyadic-level theories, but we introduced them in this chapter because they are central to structural realist theories of war and peace. There are other theories of war and peace that focus primarily on the dyadic-level interactions of states, though sometimes within a systemic context. We turn to those theories in the next chapter.

Notes

1. On the realist tradition in international politics, see Doyle (1997) and Haslam (2002). For alternative interpretations of the Peloponnesian War, see Lebow (2001) and Kagan (2003).
2. Realism is a label, not a fact. To call a theory “realist” does not necessarily imply that it is a “realistic” theory in the sense that it accurately describes and explains international behavior. That must be determined by theoretical and empirical investigation.

3. This is a conventional view of realism, but particular realist theories loosen some of these assumptions. Some realists downplay the importance of anarchy and emphasize the hierarchical nature of the international order within a nominally anarchic system, as we will see in our analysis of “hegemonic theories” later in this chapter. Many contemporary realists who study civil war have relaxed the state-centric assumption by applying the concept of the ethnic security dilemma to intrastate communal conflicts (Posen, 1993; Snyder and Jervis, 1999).
4. For good summaries and assessments of realist theory see James (1995), Keohane (1986a), Gilpin (1986), Brooks (1997), Jervis (1998), Van Evera (1999), and Walt (2002). For a summary of early philosophical theories of the conditions conducive to a peaceful international order, see Hinsley (1967: part I).
5. The inadvertent war concept also applies to some civil wars. This is reflected in the view of the American Civil War advanced by Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865): “All dreaded it, all sought to avert it ... And the war came.”
6. Views of World War I are changing, and many historians and political scientists now emphasize Germany’s deliberate drive for Continental or world power (Fischer, 1967, 1974; Levy, 1990/91; Copeland, 2000). For a summary of changing interpretations of World War I, see Mombauer (2002). For alternative interpretations of the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, see Stein (1991), Oren (2002), and Segev (2007). On the puzzle that preemptive strikes are relatively rare, see Reiter (1995).
7. The spiral model and deterrence model might be better classified at the dyadic–interactional level, since the key variables are the interactions between two states rather than the properties of the international system as a whole. These concepts are central to realist theories, however, and they are best discussed here.
8. This assumes that a strong stand by Britain and France would have led to a conciliatory response by Hitler and to peace. Most historians question this counterfactual assumption (Murray, 1984).
9. The parsimony of a theory is best conceived in relational terms. One theory is more parsimonious than another if it explains the same empirical phenomena but with fewer theoretical assumptions, or explains more with the same number of assumptions. The parsimony criterion calls for “explaining more with less.” Scholars disagree on the importance of parsimony compared with other criteria for evaluating theories. For an alternative conception of parsimony, one based on the idea that the world is simple, see King, Keohane, and Verba (1994).
10. Neorealism is sometimes called “structural realism,” but other scholars have constructed alternative versions of structural realism (Buzan, Jones, and Little, 1993).
11. On realist cultures, see Johnston (1995) and Wendt (1999). See also Vasquez (1993). For an argument about how belief change can lead to systems change, see Schroeder (1994).
12. If power is concentrated in the hands of a single state in an international system, the system is unipolar. If two states of roughly comparable capability

stand far above the rest, the system is bipolar. If power is more widely distributed, the system is multipolar. The nineteenth century European system was multipolar; the Cold War period (1945–89) was bipolar; and the contemporary system of American dominance is unipolar.

13. Until the end of the Cold War and the American dominance, Waltz and other realists gave relatively little attention to unipolarity. They drew largely on the European experience of the past several centuries, which had not witnessed unipolarity.
14. Here we distinguish between polarity, or the number of major centers of power, and polarization, which refers to the clustering of alliance patterns around those centers of power (Rapkin and Thompson, with Christopherson, 1979).
15. The implication here is that uncertainty is destabilizing, while proponents of multipolarity suggest that uncertainty is stabilizing, since uncertainty about coalition formation to oppose aggression helps to deter aggression. This suggests that risk propensity and hence responses to uncertainty are key variables intervening between polarity and war-proneness (Bueno de Mesquita, 2003). We return to risk propensity in chapter 5.
16. Thus many criticize realist theory for its failure to predict the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transformation from bipolarity to unipolarity (English, 2000). A leading historian (Gaddis, 1992/93) makes the same criticism of international relations theory as a whole. For a realist explanation of the end of the Cold War, see Wohlforth (1994/95).
17. The introduction of additional causal variables to explain the enormous variation in war, peace, and other aspects of international politics has led some critics to argue that realism is a “degenerative research program” in the sense that the additional variables simply patch up theoretical and empirical inconsistencies in existing theory without adding new explanatory power (Vasquez, 1997). For debates on this issue, see Vasquez and Elman (2003). On the concept of “degenerative” and “progressive” research programs see Lakatos (1970). Another line of criticism is that neorealist theory remains a narrowly materialist theory that neglects important cultural variables (Wendt, 1999).
18. While some have argued that territorial conquest became less and less useful in an era of industrial economies and mass politics (Knorr, 1966), Liberman (1996) presents evidence to the contrary for German expansion in the 1930s.
19. Even an immobile fort might facilitate a state’s offensive actions by reducing the costs to the state of a counter-offensive by the adversary. For perspectives on “offense–defense theory,” see Brown et al. (2004). In the Cold War the United States started to build an anti-ballistic missile system designed to intercept incoming Soviet missiles. Many Americans saw this as a purely defensive weapons system. To the Soviet Union, however, it was an offensive security threat because it created the possibility that an effective missile defense might eliminate the Soviet retaliatory threat and therefore undermine Soviet deterrence against a US first strike.
20. As we discuss in a later chapter, state weakness is seen as a major cause of civil wars because it denies states a monopoly of violence, undercuts a state’s ability to satisfy the needs of its people, and creates an opportunity for rebel groups.

21. For useful treatments of the balance of power, see Gulick (1955), Claude (1962), Morgenthau (1967), Bull (1977), Waltz (1979), Sheehan (1996), Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann (2004), and Little (2007). Our interpretation draws on Levy (2003a).
22. There are important exceptions. Hegemonic realists like Gilpin (1981) give little weight to anarchy. Morgenthau (1967) and Waltz (1979) each reject the rationality assumption, but for different reasons.
23. External balancing includes other strategies as well, such territorial compensations or partitioning states for the purposes of redistributing power and satisfying grievances. It can also include military intervention or preventive war (Gulick, 1955).
24. Alliances also increase the likelihood that if war occurs it will spread to include additional actors (Vasquez, 1993).
25. Whereas balance of power theorists emphasize the “capability aggregation” function of alliances, Schroeder ([1976]2004) and Pressman (2008) each argue that states use alliances to restrain their allies. This suggests an additional possible path between alliances and war or peace. Alliance norms (Kegley and Raymond, 1990) may also be important.
26. For data, see Brooks and Wohlforth (2008: chap. 2). Posen (2003) emphasizes the United States’ “command of the commons” – air, sea, land, and space. Each argues that US dominance will persist for many years.
27. True, American dominance has led to various forms of resistance to and non-cooperation with the United States, as illustrated by the lack of support by leading European states for the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Such behavior is often referred to as “soft balancing” (Paul, 2005a; Pape, 2005a). Soft balancing is important, but does not fit into the same category as “hard” balancing behavior. For critiques of the concept of soft balancing, see Lieber and Alexander (2005) and Brooks and Wohlforth (2008: chap. 3).
28. The emphasis on intentions reflects a defensive realist view.
29. Britain historically played this role with respect to the continental European system.
30. The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 goes beyond an offshore balancing role.
31. The most widely invoked examples of counter-hegemonic balancing, as noted above, are all against land powers: Spain in the sixteenth century, France in the seventeenth century and late eighteenth century, and Germany in the twentieth century.
32. This hypothesis about land powers and sea powers explains why other great powers in the late 1940s balanced against the Soviet Union, the leading continental power in Eurasia, and not against the United States, the leading global power. It may be true that over time Europe has become less central in global politics, but on the other hand there is little doubt that the future of Germany was the central issue in the Cold War (Trachtenberg, 1999).
33. Levy and Thompson’s (2005, 2010a) broader argument is that the European system upon which balance of power theory is based may not be representative of all international systems, and that hypotheses based on the European experience are not automatically transferable to other historical systems. This point is reinforced by the fact that although a sustained hegemony has not formed in Europe for at least 1,500 years, hegemonies have been more common in

non-Western historical systems (Hui, 2004; Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth, 2007).

34. There are other closely related theories. Gilpin's (1981) "hegemonic transition theory" focuses on the rise and fall of the leading states in the system and their consequence for war and peace. Gilpin's important theoretical contribution did not lead to a sustained research program because it was followed by few empirical studies to test the theory. Doran's (1991) "power cycle theory" developed the argument that states go through a power cycle of rise and decline and that they are more prone to warfare at some stages of the power cycle than at others. Kennedy's (1987) historical treatment of the rise and fall of the great powers during the last five centuries included concepts of "imperial overstretch," relative decline, and the rise and fall of great powers. Long-cycle theory also emphasizes the rise and fall of states, and we discuss it below. For more liberal conceptions of hegemonic order, see Ikenberry (2000) and Lake (2009).
35. One could imagine a power transition theory that gave primary emphasis to military power, but theorists associated with the power transition research program have chosen not to do so.
36. For analyses of the dynamics of the contemporary unipolar system under American primacy, see Ikenberry, Mastanduno, and Wohlforth (2009) and other articles in the January 2009 issue of *World Politics*.
37. In critiques from outside the power transition research program, Thompson (1983:110–11) found wars before transitions and Kadera (2001) generated mixed findings. See also DiCicco and Levy (2003:137–44).
38. Note that prevention as defined here differs from strategies designed to avert war or humanitarian disasters, such as "preventive diplomacy," "preventive deployment," and "preventive intervention."
39. In the 1981 case, the result was not war because Iraq did not respond militarily, in part because it was already involved in a war with Iran. Any future Israeli strike against Iran to interrupt its apparent development of a nuclear program would reflect a strategy of preventive war.
40. The Bush Administration probably referred to its actions as "preemptive" because preemptive attacks in response to imminent threats are easier to justify in international law than are preventive strikes in response to future threats, since the latter but not the former provide some time for the target to implement alternative strategies in response to the threat. On the ethical and legal dimensions of preemption and prevention, see Doyle (2008).
41. For statistical evidence, see Lemke (2003).
42. Goldstein (1988) also proposes a long-cycle theory based on changes in the global political economy, but he gives less attention to system management within a hierarchical order.
43. For a summary of additional system-level theories and evidence on war, see Rasler and Thompson (forthcoming).