



- Israeli security wall under construction, 2002.

## Conflict and War

### The Causes of War

The Roman writer Seneca said nearly 2,000 years ago: “Of war men ask the outcome, not the cause.”<sup>1</sup> This is not true of political scientists. They ask two fundamental questions: Why do international actors (states and nonstate actors alike) come into conflict with each other? And why do those conflicts sometimes lead to violence and war? This chapter addresses both questions.

Just as there are many possible outcomes of conflict, many types of war, and varied propensities for violence among states, so too is there great diversity in the ways and means of using force if conflict leads to violence. States develop a wide array of military forces, which vary tremendously in their purposes and capabilities—having in common only that they are instruments used to apply violence in some form. The chapter concludes with a discussion of these forces.

Conflict among states is not an unusual condition but an ordinary one. **Conflict** may be defined as a difference in preferred outcomes in a bargaining situation. International conflicts will always exist. In such conflict bargaining, states develop capabilities that give them leverage to obtain more favorable

<sup>1</sup> Seneca, Hercules Furens. In *Seneca's Tragedies*. vol. 1. Translated by Frank Justus Miller. London: Heinemann, 1917.

- The Causes of War
- Conflicts of Interest
- Conflicts of Ideas
- Means of Leverage
- The Use of Military Force
- Control of Military Forces
- Conventional Forces
- Weapons of Mass Destruction

outcomes than they otherwise would achieve. Whether fair or unfair, the ultimate outcome of the bargaining process is a **settlement** of the particular conflict.

Violence is an effective form of leverage in some bargaining situations. So states develop capabilities for using violence in international conflicts (discussed a bit later). But these capabilities only sometimes come into play in international conflicts. The great majority of international conflicts do not lead to war, but are resolved in other ways. The study of the causes of war, then, is really an effort to understand the *outbreak of war*—the resort to violence as a means of leverage in international conflicts. But understanding the outbreak of war requires studying the underlying conflicts as well.

The question of why war breaks out can be approached in different ways. Descriptive approaches, favored by historians, tend to focus narrowly on specific direct causes of the outbreak of war, which vary from one war to another. For example, one could say that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 “caused” World War I. More theoretical approaches, favored by many political scientists, tend to focus on the search for general explanations, applicable to a variety of contexts, about why wars break out. For example, one can see World War I as caused by shifts in the balance of power among European states, with the assassination being only a catalyst.

## Theories about War

Broad generalizations about the causes of war have been elusive. Wars do not have a single or simple cause. Many theories about war have been put forward, but few have universal validity. Levels of analysis can help us organize these theories.



WEB LINK

Individual  
Level

**The Individual Level** On the *individual* level of analysis, the question of why conflicts turn violent revolves around the familiar issue of rationality. One theory, consistent with realism, holds that the use of war and other violent means of leverage in international conflicts is normal and reflects *rational* decisions of national leaders: that “wars begin with conscious and reasoned decisions based on the calculation, made by *both* parties, that they can achieve more by going to war than by remaining at peace.”<sup>2</sup>

An opposite theory holds that conflicts often escalate to war because of *deviations* from rationality in the individual decision-making processes of national leaders (see Chapter 3)—information screens, cognitive biases, groupthink, and so forth. A related theory holds that the education and mentality of whole populations of individuals determine whether conflicts become violent. Here, public nationalism or ethnic hatred—or even an innate tendency toward violence in human nature—may pressure leaders to solve conflicts violently.

Neither theory holds up very well. Some wars clearly reflect rational calculations of national leaders, whereas others clearly were mistakes and cannot be considered rational. Certainly some individual leaders seem prone to turn to military force to try to settle conflicts on favorable terms. But a man of war can become a man of peace, as did Egypt’s Anwar Sadat. Individuals of many cultural backgrounds and religions lead their states into war, as do both male and female leaders.

<sup>2</sup> Howard, Michael. *The Causes of Wars, and Other Essays*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 22.

**The Domestic Level** The *domestic* level of analysis draws attention to the characteristics of states or societies that may make them more or less prone to use violence in resolving conflicts. During the Cold War, Marxists frequently said that the aggressive and greedy *capitalist* states were prone to use violence in international conflicts, whereas Western leaders claimed that the expansionist, ideological, and totalitarian nature of *communist* states made them especially prone to using violence. In truth, both types of society fought wars regularly.

Likewise, rich industrialized states and poor agrarian ones both go to war. Anthropologists have found that a wide range of *preagricultural* hunter-gatherer societies were prone to warfare under certain circumstances. Thus the potential for warfare seems to be universal across cultures, types of society, and time periods—although the importance and frequency of war vary greatly from case to case.

Some argue that domestic political factors shape a state's outlook on war and peace. For example, the democratic peace suggests that democracies almost never fight other democracies (see Chapter 3), although both democracies and authoritarian states fight wars. Others claim that domestic political parties, interest groups, and legislatures play an important role in whether international conflicts become international wars.

Few useful generalizations can be made about which societies are more prone or less prone to war. The same society may change greatly over time. For example, Japan was prone to using violence in international conflicts before World War II but has been averse to such violence since then. If there are general principles to explain why some societies at some times are more peaceful than others and why they change, political scientists have not yet identified them.

**The Interstate Level** The theories at the *interstate* level explain wars in terms of power relations among major actors in the international system. *Power transition theory* holds that conflicts generate large wars at times when power is relatively equally distributed and a rising power is threatening to overtake a declining hegemon (see pp. 82–83). At this level, too, incompatible theories compete. Deterrence is supposed to stop wars by building up power and threatening its use. But the theory of arms races holds that

---

## WHY WAR?



Political scientists do not agree on a theory of why great wars like World War II occur and cannot predict whether they could happen again. The city of Stalingrad (Volgograd) was decimated during Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, 1943.

---

wars are caused, not prevented, by such actions. No general formula has been discovered to tell us in what circumstances each of these principles holds true.

Current research focuses on the effects of such factors as democracy, government structure, trade, international organizations, in explaining the escalation or settlement of “militarized interstate disputes.” Scholars use quantitative and statistical methods to test various ideas about international conflict, such as analyzing data about wars, weapons, and arms races. The quality of data, however, is a major problem for statistical studies of infrequent occurrences such as wars.

**The Global Level** At the *global* level of analysis, a number of theories of war have been proposed. Of the several variations on the idea that major warfare in the international system is *cyclical*, one approach links large wars with *long economic waves* (also called *Kondratieff cycles*) in the world economy, of about 50 years’ duration. Another approach links the largest wars with a 100-year cycle based on the creation and decay of world orders (see pp. 65–67). These cycle theories at best can explain only general tendencies toward war in the international system over time.

Thus, on all the levels of analysis, competing theories offer very different explanations for why some conflicts become violent and others do not. Political scientists cannot yet predict with confidence which of the world’s many international conflicts will lead to war. Still, thinking about conflicts through the levels of analysis approach is helpful since it reminds us that the simple explanations we give to wars are probably incomplete. We can gain insight, however, by studying various types of conflicts to understand better what states fight about.