

# The Past and Future of War

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## Abstract

An original data set of wars from 1648 to the present indicates that security and material interest are rarely the principal motives for war for rising, great or dominant powers. These states far more often go to war for reasons of standing. The empirical evidence offers no support for power transition, balance of power, Marxist or rationalist theories of war. The frequency of war between and among rising, great and dominant powers is likely to decline precipitously because the most important motives for war in the past – standing, security, revenge, material interests and domestic politics – are, for the most part, no longer served effectively by war. Changes in ideas, not changes in material conditions, are primarily responsible for this transformation.

Keywords: *ideas, material interests, revenge, security, standing, war*

The origins of interstate war are of central importance to policymakers and students of international relations alike. Drawing on my theory of international relations I offer a novel approach to this problem that stresses the determining role of human motives and the ways in which those motives reflect deeper cultural orientations. Culture evolves and influences the hierarchy of motives. Culture also channels motives, encouraging and rewarding some kinds of behavior and discouraging others. By approaching war in terms of culture and motives, we can get a better handle on the causes of war in the modern state system and a better understanding of the extent to which it has a future.

*A Cultural Theory of International Relations* develops a theory of international relations based on three universal human motives – appetite, spirit (*thumos*) and reason – and a powerful emotion – fear – which arises when reason loses control over appetite or spirit. It addresses these motives primarily because they are the most relevant to foreign policy and effectively capture most of the variance.<sup>1</sup>

Spirit aside, these concepts are well known to students of international relations. The spirit refers to the universal human drive for self-esteem. By excelling at activities valued by society we win the approbation of those who matter and so feel good about ourselves. Institutions and states have neither psyche nor emotions. However, the people who comprise and run them do. They often project their psychological needs on to their political units, and feel better about themselves when those units win victories or perform well. In classical Greece the polis was the center of political life and a citizen's status was usually a reflection of that of his polis. Something similar happens in the modern world, where the state has replaced the polis as the unit of transference.

The drive for esteem, reflected in the striving for honor or standing, is distinct from appetite and often at odds with it. We routinely refuse food, drink, gifts and sex in circumstances where they would be compromising. The active pursuit of honor and standing by individuals and states is often costly; vast sums have been spent on colonies, national airlines and space exploration, often with no expectation of net material gain. Foolhardy feats in battle, accepting war under unfavorable circumstances or building battle fleets in circumstances where they make no military sense and provoke unnecessary conflicts with neighbors indicate that honor and standing are not infrequently pursued at significant cost to security.

A *Cultural Theory of International Relations* develops ideal-type descriptions of worlds based on each these three motives and on fear. Each world generates a distinct logic of conflict, cooperation and risk-taking and a different kind of hierarchy. The three motives, but not fear, are also associated with distinct conceptions of justice. Real worlds are, of course, mixed in the motives, and fear is usually to some degree present as well. As motives and fear mix rather than blend, all worlds reveal seemingly anomalous forms of behavior and hierarchies that reflect the distribution of motives and the degree of fear. I use a variety of domestic indicators to determine the relative importance of these motives and fear within an elite or society. This distribution in turn predicts patterns of cooperation, conflict and risk-taking in foreign policy, and these predictions are evaluated against empirical evidence in case studies ranging from ancient Greece to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. In this way I attempt to show that my theory does a better job of explaining observable patterns of behavior than other theories.<sup>2</sup>

One form of conflict is war, and most of my case studies attempt to account for wars, the manner in which they are fought and the goals their protagonists sought. In this extension of my theory I offer a general account of war that takes the form of six propositions. They specify the kinds of states most likely to initiate war, who their targets are, and the causes of general or systemic wars. These propositions are evaluated against an original data set of wars since 1648 that involved great or rising powers. My propositions are sharply at odds with realist, power transition, Marxist and rationalist explanations for war. They point to the quest for standing as the primary source of war, and the search for security and affluence as only secondary causes. They further suggest that systemic wars are rarely initiated by choice, but arise from miscalculations about the resolve or military capability of other actors. Evidence from the cases offers strong support for my propositions and compels us to rethink radically our understandings of both the causes of war and the kinds of protagonists who fight them.

### Propositions

*1. The most aggressive states are rising powers seeking recognition as great powers and dominant great powers seeking hegemony*

This pattern reflects the importance of victory in war as the principal means historically of gaining international standing. Many great powers are not content

with their status even when they are generally recognized to be the leading great power. Driven by hubris, their leaders seek hegemony and start wars in the hope of achieving it. Examples include Spain under Philip II, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, imperial and Nazi Germany, and arguably the United States since the end of the Cold War. Rising powers historically seek recognition as great powers and are particularly aggressive for this reason.

Not surprisingly, the great powers were at war 95 percent of the time in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The frequency of war drops to 71 percent in the eighteenth century and to 29 percent in a modified nineteenth century (i.e. 1815–1914). The years between 1815 and 1914 constituted the first century-like span in which there were more years of peace than of war.<sup>3</sup> Nobles also sought honor through war. Rulers such as Louis XIV faced pressures from below to make war. By 1691 at least 3000 nobles were serving in Louis's elite corps, and more than 10 percent of all nobles did military service.<sup>4</sup> In his memoirs, Louis confessed that 'I have officers whom I do not need. But I am sure they need me.'<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries monarchies and dynastic rivalries increasingly gave way to democratic states with foreign policies allegedly governed by national interests. These states were no longer ruled by hereditary aristocrats but by elected officials, bureaucrats and lawyers who were responsible to wider constituencies, many of them motivated by economic interests. Historically we associate the goals of honor and standing with the leaders of dynastic political units, but nationalism indicates that they are at least as important for modern democratic, industrial and post-industrial states. Drawing on psychological research, recent work on nationalism contends that people manifest strong desires for group membership and identification because they provide a 'heightened self of self worth'.<sup>6</sup> My argument goes a step further to contend that people who identify with nationalities or nations to some degree seek vicarious fulfillment and enhanced self-esteem through their victories and suffer a corresponding loss of esteem, even humiliation, when they suffer setbacks.

For these reasons international relations reveals a striking continuity across the centuries. This continuity was also facilitated by the continuing domination of war and diplomacy by aristocrats down to 1914. The quest for honor and standing, initially a preserve of the aristocracy, penetrated deeply into the middle classes, many of whose members took their cues from the aristocracy and sought to assimilate its values and practices. *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* includes case studies of imperialism and World War I to document how the need for self-esteem was deflected outwards in the form of international competition and willingness to use force in defense of the national 'honor'.<sup>7</sup>

## *2. Rising powers and dominant powers rarely make war against each other. When they do, rising powers are allied with at least one great power*

Rising powers seeking status are in essence seeking admission in a high-status group. They need to demonstrate their possession of the qualities that warrant their

acceptance. This creates something of a conundrum as the principal qualification is military success. Attacking and defeating important members of the 'club' would alienate one or more great powers and would be seriously counterproductive to states seeking admission. An attack that led to defeat or a stalemate could prove disproportionately costly to the rising power. Rising powers are most likely to make war against a great power when that power is temporarily vulnerable and preferably as part of a larger coalition. A case in point is Prussia, who, backed by Britain, attacked Saxony in 1763, provoking a war with Austria that escalated into the Seven Years War.

Great powers have little incentive to attack rising powers. Rising powers are generally not strong enough to threaten the security or standing of great powers, and they are for the most part careful not to antagonize them. An important exception is the Franco-Prussian War, provoked by Prussia, a rising power, as a means of unifying Germany. Louis Napoleon's France opposed German unification, in part for security reasons; historically, France had sought to keep Germany divided into many small states and to treat those along the Rhine as semi-protectorates. However, this strategy and French opposition to German unification also reflected the long-standing French commitment, a sign of status and standing, to being the dominant power on the continent. Great powers generally prefer to deflect the aggression of rising powers against third parties and subsequently moderate it by recognizing successful rising powers as great powers. The great powers on the whole responded this way to Prussia and Russia in the eighteenth century, Germany after 1870, the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and Japan after 1905. This pattern is just the reverse of that predicted by power transition theories. An important but limited exception to this rule are great powers who seriously misjudge the military capability of a rising power and mistakenly think they are attacking or provoking a weak third party. The best example is Russia's provocation of Japan in 1904 that triggered the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. France's willingness to go to war in 1870 also involved a serious misjudgment of Prussian military might.<sup>8</sup>

### *3. The preferred military targets of rising and dominant powers are declining once-great powers and weak third parties*

If great and rising powers do not generally attack one another their obvious targets are weaker third parties. Wars against them represent a cheap and seemingly low-risk means of demonstrating military prowess and of gaining additional territory and resources. Once-great but now seriously declining powers are also attractive targets for rising powers, as defeating them has been considered more honorable and impressive than victories over much weaker third parties. In the seventeenth century Sweden became a great power by attacking the Holy Roman Empire, and France by defeating Spain, both declining adversaries. In the eighteenth century Russia became a great power by winning wars against Sweden and the Ottomans. The nineteenth century offers three examples: Prussia's successful challenge of Austria, the United States' victory over Spain, and that of Japan over China. Given the frequency of wars of this kind initiated by upwardly mobile states over the last four centuries, defeat

of a declining great power might be considered an essential prerequisite for gaining recognition as a great power.

*4. So-called hegemonic wars (i.e. those involving most, if not all, of the great powers) are almost all accidental and the result of unintended escalation*

Many realist and power transition theories assume that hegemonic wars reflect determined efforts by dominant powers to attain hegemony or by challengers to replace them as dominant powers. My theory suggests quite a different proposition: hegemonic wars are almost always accidental. This does not mean that dominant powers do not seek hegemony, only that most of them do not try to attain it by means of general war as opposed to war against isolated weaker states. Rather, they attack weak states and declining great powers in the expectation of fighting limited and localized wars. Sometimes these wars escalate into wider conflicts – what some call hegemonic wars – when other states come to the aid of these third parties. The Wars of Spanish and Austrian Succession and the First World War are cases in point. As rising powers are assumed not to attack leading powers, we should not expect them to begin hegemonic wars. The only exception should be an attack by a rising power on a weak or declining great power that provokes an unintended series of escalations that draw in most, if not all, of the great powers. The Seven Years War can be characterized in this way.

*5. Unintended escalation and miscalculation of the balance of power have deeper causes than incomplete information*

Neorealism and many rationalist explanations for war assume that war is the result of imperfect information. I maintain that good information is often available beforehand and that attempts to fight localized wars are unrealistic and likely, if not probable, to lead to wider wars with uncertain outcomes.

Such departures from rational decision-making generally have systematic causes. The first is related to the motive for war: standing and honor. Traditional understandings of honor involve facing risk. Honor seekers, whether individuals or states, are accordingly far more risk-prone than other actors. As Plato noted, the spirit is easily angered by slights, which include failures to honor one appropriately. Anger will be most acute when those responsible for such slights lack standing. Honor seeking, especially when combined with anger, makes leaders dismissive of risks and those who warn them of these risks. Such leaders are unlikely to engage in any serious evaluation of the scenarios by which they seek to gain honor or standing or punish those who have slighted them.

*6. Weak and declining powers not infrequently initiate wars against great powers*

Existing theories of war direct most of their attention to dominant and rising great powers. They ignore weak and declining powers, but I hypothesize that the latter are

a significant cause of interstate war. They act primarily for reasons of revenge. They are particularly sensitive to their honor and standing as they have once been great powers. They are readily angered by predatory attacks on them, especially those that result in loss of territory and standing, and seek revenge. They almost inevitably lose these wars. Examples include Charles XIII's attack on Russia in 1707 and Ottoman attacks on Russia in the nineteenth century.

### Categories of analysis

Peace and war are commonly treated as dichotomous categories, although in practice they represent two ends of a continuum. In between, we encounter various kinds of tensions and violence. The term 'Cold War' was coined to represent one kind of in-between state: a tense, armed peace with periodic military conflicts between superpower client states or between a superpowers and another's ally (e.g. the Chinese-American component of the Korean War). Distinguishing war from peace is further complicated by the fact that they are legal categories, giving states the option of fighting wars without declaring them, as the Soviet Union and Japan did in Mongolia in 1939 and the US and China did in Korea in 1950. I count as a war any interstate conflict that produced over 1000 deaths independently of whether either of the protagonists considered themselves to be at war. This number is, of course, entirely arbitrary, but is almost universally used in the field. By following this convention, my data set is more comparable to others.

My propositions about war describe the behavior of five kinds of actors: great powers, dominant powers, rising powers, declining great powers and weaker states. These categories are widely used in the literature but it is nevertheless difficult to devise operational definitions of them. *Great power* is the most problematic category. The term came into use in the eighteenth century but only received institutional recognition at the Congress of Vienna. It is a status conferred on powerful political states by other powerful states. Great powers chair international conferences, participate in more elite convocations and are expected to assume responsibilities commensurate with their status.<sup>9</sup>

Three problems confound the analytical utility of this category. The first concerns the category itself. My data set covers 360 years, from 1648 to 2008. As great powerdom only became institutionalized in 1815 it is technically an anachronism to project it back to 1648. This is a defensible choice because in the 167 years between Westphalia and Vienna rulers and their advisors consistently made estimates of their own state's strength and that of others. They identified the most powerful actors and treated them differently. Powerful actors in turn demanded privileges and courtesies not granted to others.

The second problem is determining when a state becomes or ceases to be a great power. There is no formal process of application and recognition; a great power is a state treated as a great power by other great powers. This status only becomes apparent through inclusion in select organizations and gatherings, the ability to

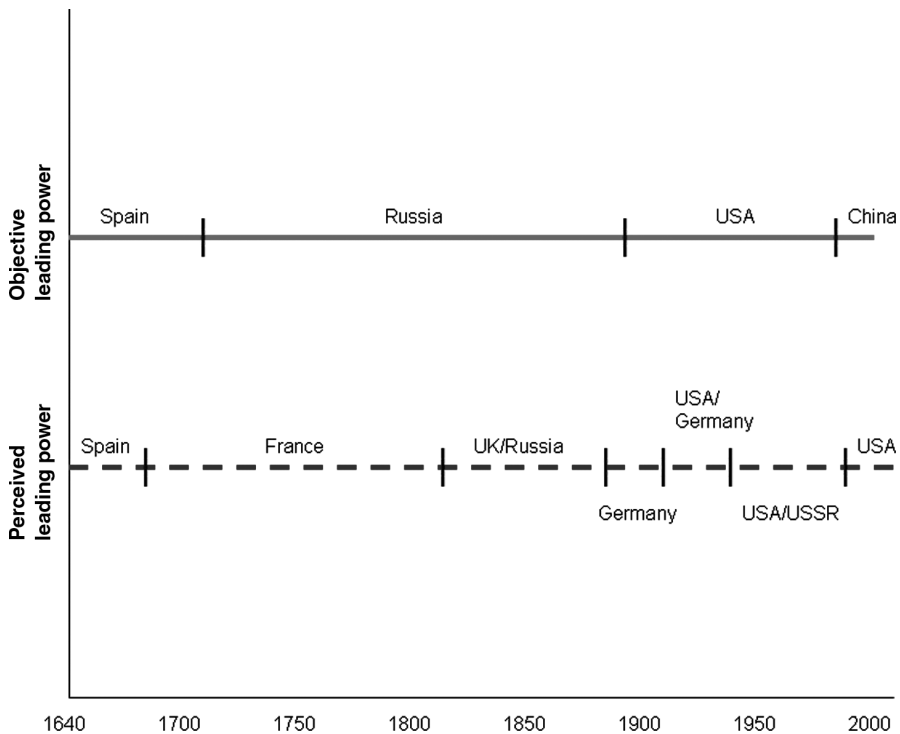
host conferences which great powers attend, and, better yet, leadership of collective efforts to uphold the peace or other norms of the system. It is not always evident when a consensus emerges among the great powers to treat another state as one of them, and at times there are differences among the great powers about who qualifies for admission into their elite circle. This process is complicated by the tendency of great powers, responding to their perceived national interests, to recognize states as great powers who are not as powerful as other members of the 'club' (e.g. Italy after unification, China after 1945) and continue as a matter of courtesy to confer this status on countries whose power has seriously declined (e.g. France post-1945). Fortunately for most of the period in question there was something of a consensus among contemporary observers, and more recently among historians, about who qualified as a great power. There are more differences of opinion about when some of these states ceased to be great powers.

The third problem is ideological. States that should have been great powers on the basis of their military strength and accomplishments were sometimes only belatedly recognized as such because they were non-Christian or non-European (e.g. the Ottoman Empire, Japan). For this reason, there are often differences between when such countries were recognized as great powers by contemporaries and contemporary historians. In every case I have gone with the estimates of the latter.

The category of *dominant power* describes a great power that is significantly more powerful than other great powers. It is a subjective category because it too is based on judgments by policymakers and observers who make their own assessments of power. Not surprisingly, the understandings of policymakers and observers of which state, if any, is a dominant power often bears only a passing resemblance to scholarly efforts to 'objectivize' this category through the application of standard measures of power.

Lebow and Valentino explore these discrepancies.<sup>10</sup> We have created a ranking of state power by multiplying a country's GDP by its total population. Data for both GDP and population came from data compiled by Angus Maddison.<sup>11</sup> In the case of empires, the GDP and populations of contiguous territories were included. Missing data were filled by interpolation. Figure 1 plots the evolving distribution of power in Europe (plus the United States and Japan) from 1640 to 2000. Some might object that our procedure puts too much weight on population, thereby overestimating the power of very populous states such as Russia while underestimating the power of smaller states such as Britain. Indeed, with at least 70 percent more citizens than the next most populous state Russia had by far the largest population in Europe throughout this period. Since at least 1648, GDP and population have been very closely correlated, at least among the great powers. This relationship is robust because prior to 1900 the economic productivity of the major powers, Britain aside, derived principally from agriculture.<sup>11</sup> Russia not only had the largest population in Europe, but the largest GDP from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s. Its GDP never drops below the third highest in Europe (excluding the United States and Japan) during the entire period. Our raw measure of power, based on population and GDP, shows considerable stability in the European rankings of leading powers. Spain's dominance in the post-Westphalia period gave way to Russia in the early 1700s and was not surpassed by the United





**Figure 1** 'Objective' and perceived leading powers

States until 1895. The United States maintained its position as a leading power until China overtook it in the 1980s.

This ranking of leading powers bears at best a passing relationship to contemporary perceptions of leading powers represented by the lower line in Figure 1. By most accounts, France was perceived as the leading power from the early seventeenth century until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, Britain, and later Britain and Germany, were perceived as leading powers. By our measure, Russia remained the leading power for this entire period. The perception that the United States was the world's leading power did not take hold until the end of World War I, almost 30 years after it had become the most powerful state by our measure. It retained its lead until late in the twentieth century when it was surpassed by China.

What accounts for this discrepancy between power and perception? It is undoubtedly due to agency. Different leaders pursue different goals and devote widely varying percentages of their available income to building their armed forces and other activities that signal power or gain prestige. In pursuit of *gloire*, Louis XIV lavished extraordinary resources on his military, putting himself and his country deeply into debt. Prussia under the Hohenzollerns did the same. Frederick the Great



spent over 75 percent of Prussia's income on his military, a figure way out of line with that spent by the other great powers of his day.<sup>13</sup> In 2008, the United States, the modern-day Prussia, spent \$417 billion on defense. This amounted to 47 percent of the world total defense expenditures, although US GDP is only about 20 percent of world GDP.<sup>14</sup> Great powers that spend disproportionately on the military and use it to make conquests stand out among their peers and can attain dominant power status in the eyes of others even if it is not warranted by any measure of their overall material capabilities. For purposes of status and of balancing, perceptions of power appear more important than actual power or capabilities, just as perceptions of threat are more important than perceptions of power. I accordingly use the former to determine who qualifies as a dominant power.

*Rising powers* are states intent on gaining recognition as a great power and recognized as such by their contemporaries. Examples include Prussia and Russia in the eighteenth century, Italy in the nineteenth and the United States and Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For most of the period under study the international system was limited to Europe and its environs and must be considered a regional system. Since World War II distinct regional systems exist within the wider framework of the international system. For the purposes of this study I exclude from consideration powers not considered great internationally, although they strive for or achieve regional dominance (e.g. Iran, Israel, Brazil), although I include India after 1974 by virtue of its nuclear capability, size, population and growing economy.

Historically, recognition as a great power has been gained by demonstrating military prowess. Until recently, rising powers could be identified by the percentage of disposable income they spent on their military. Sweden in the seventeenth century, Russia and Prussia in the eighteenth century and Japan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all spent disproportionately on their armed forces. European rulers in the eighteenth century typically spent between 20 and 40 percent of income on their military establishments, although considerably more during wars. Peter the Great added 40 new regiments to his army during the course of his reign, and during the Northern War allocated up to 80 percent of his revenues for war or war-related industries.<sup>15</sup> In 1786, the last year of his reign, Frederick the Great spent 75 percent of his state's income on the army and directed another 5 percent to his war treasury.<sup>16</sup> Rising powers are often considered disruptive upstarts by great powers, which is another way of identifying them. After Russia's victory over Sweden at Poltava in 1712, Peter the Great was commonly described as a dangerous barbarian; Leibniz referred to him as 'the Turk of the north'.<sup>17</sup> Frederick William I was considered a despot for imprisoning his son and executing his son's lover. With rare exceptions great powers attempt to incorporate into the system those states which consistently demonstrate prowess on the battlefield. Japan was excluded in the nineteenth century but rapidly brought into the system after its defeat of Russia in 1905. The Soviet Union was excluded for ideological reasons, and a cordon sanitaire put in place to isolate it from the rest of Europe. This effort quickly failed and the Soviet Union was brought into the system and invited to join the League of Nations in 1934, but it was expelled in 1939 following its invasion of Finland.<sup>18</sup>

*Declining powers* are once-great powers, perhaps even dominant states, who are understood to be losing power relative to other states. They may still retain the status of a great power, as Spain did throughout the eighteenth century and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are considered vulnerable not only because they are weak relative to other great powers but because they are territorially overextended. Following its defeat by Russia in the Great Northern War (1700–21), Sweden became a declining power in the eighteenth century as did Poland–Lithuania, until it ceased to exist after the last of its three partitions (1771, 1793 and 1795). It is difficult to know at what point a great power becomes a declining power because, unlike the case of Poland, there is usually no sharp and readily identifiable phase transition. The most important marker for most observers is defeat or poor performance in war. Given the goals of my research it would be tautological to use defeat as an indicator. I accordingly fall back on third-party estimates, and even this is problematic because judgments of historians, by definition made in retrospect, are inevitably influenced by their knowledge of the wars these states lost or performed badly in. I rely on the judgments of historians but acknowledge that they are far from perfect. Austria–Hungary is accordingly coded as a great power up until its collapse in 1918, although an argument could be made for describing it as a declining power after its defeat by Prussia in 1866. This alternative coding makes only a marginal difference for our findings as it would result in one less war initiated by a great power and one more by a declining power.

*Weak powers* are states which are widely recognized as militarily weak and easy prey for dominant, great and rising powers. They are most commonly small states with no natural defenses (e.g. the Palatinate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). They can also be large and even populous states that are technologically backward (e.g. nineteenth-century Mexico and China) or developed states that have neglected their defense (Saxony in the eighteenth century).

Figure 2 identifies great, rising and declining powers from 1648 to the present. I rely on multiple, well-regarded historical studies for these codings supplemented by my own judgment in cases where historians disagree.

### Data and coding

Elsewhere I question the utility of statistical studies of the origins of war that rely on correlational analyses.<sup>19</sup> For these reasons I consider this data set a kind of indirect historical poll. Actors are surveyed to ascertain what they did and why they did it. Secondary, and sometimes primary, sources determine who was responsible for war and why they went to war. I observe the frequency and outcomes of these wars, and the data are then related to the motives behind them, but not by means of correlation.

My propositions are evaluated against a data set of interstate wars fought between 1648 and 2008. Before 1648 it is often difficult to distinguish between domestic and international conflicts. Warfare was a principal means by which rulers sought to establish control over territories they inherited or claimed, which provoked resistance

<b>Habsburgs/Austria–Hungary:</b> rising power, 1648–1714; great power, 1714–1918
<b>Brandenburg–Prussia:</b> rising power, 1648–1763; great power, 1763–1871
<b>China,</b> rising power, 1949–90; great power, 1990–
<b>England/Great Britain/UK:</b> rising power, 1648–88; great power, 1688–
<b>France:</b> great power, 1648–59; dominant power, 1659–1815; great power, 1815–1940, 1945–
<b>Germany:</b> great power, 1871–1945; rising power, 1991–
<b>India:</b> rising power, 1974–
<b>Italy:</b> rising power, 1861–1943
<b>Japan:</b> rising power, 1868–1905; great power, 1905–1945; RISING POWER, 1965–90
<b>Ottoman Empire:</b> great power, 1648–83; declining power, 1683–1918
<b>Poland:</b> great power, 1648–1733; declining power, 1733–95
<b>Russia:</b> rising power, 1654–1721; great power, 1721–1917, 1991–
<b>Sardinia–Piedmont:</b> Rising Power, 1814–1861
<b>Soviet Union:</b> rising power, 1920–41; great power, 1942–91
<b>Spain:</b> dominant power, 1648–58; great power, 1658–1713; declining power, 1713–1900
<b>Sweden:</b> great power, 1648–1711; declining power, 1711–1750
<b>United Provinces:</b> great power, 1648–1713; declining power, 1713–92
<b>United States:</b> rising power, 1865–1917; dominant power, 1917– present

**Figure 2** Great, rising and declining powers: 1648–2000

by those who would otherwise be subjugated. International violence could only be distinguished from its domestic counterpart after the emergence of ‘states’ – sovereign political units with a de facto monopoly on the use of force within their borders – and some kind of international ‘system’ to which they belonged. The latter conferred sovereignty on these units and made possible the institution of war.<sup>20</sup> In practice, Westphalia did not set up the modern state system, and we must be careful, Dan Nexon warns, not to confuse the presence of a number of elements we associate with sovereign territorial states with the actual instantiation of such a system.<sup>21</sup> By the eighteenth century, the system had more permanent players, rules and practices and some ability to manage conflicts short of war.<sup>22</sup>

The Westphalian system was initially limited to Western powers and was gradually extended to include non-Christian and non-European states. The nature of the units that made up the system changed dramatically over the course of 350 years. In 1648 almost all the states were monarchies, many of them with few checks on their rulers. Since 1945, many states are democracies, although some more in form than substance. This double transformation of membership and governance has unquestionably had profound implications for the behavior of political units, making comparisons in their behavior across the data set somewhat suspect. For the same reason, any patterns that span these centuries might be considered all the more impressive.

This data set builds on an earlier one constructed in 2007 for an article in which Benjamin Valentino and I evaluated the claims of power transition theories.<sup>23</sup> We assembled a list of all interstate wars fought from 1648 to the present in which there were at least 1000 combat deaths. To do this we consulted widely used data sets (e.g. COW, Rasler and Thompson, Levy) and a number of prominent histories of the period in question. We included only wars in which at least one of the protagonists was a dominant, great or rising power. This gave a total of 93 wars out of the approximately 150 interstate wars that have been fought since 1648.

Historian David Blainey doubts that any study of war aims will yield useful patterns. There is no evidence, he maintains, that that 'the desire for territory or markets or the desire to spread an ideology tended to dominate all other war aims. It is even difficult to argue that certain kinds of aims were dominant in one generation.'<sup>24</sup> I do not contest this judgment, but hasten to point out that my propositions are about motives, not war aims. There is no necessary correlation between the two, as war aims can be compatible with multiple motives and each of the motives I examine can find expression in a variety of war aims. Determining the motives of actors is nevertheless a challenging task and requires careful examination of the relevant documents. They may provide direct evidence about the motives of leaders or indirect evidence that allows them to be inferred with some degree of confidence. Another, complementary strategy, is to reason backwards from behavior to motives, seeking to discover the motives with which the behavior was inconsistent or consistent. Some degree of uncertainty will inevitably remain, especially when the behavior in question is compatible with multiple motives.

To determine the initiators of these conflicts, I consulted highly regarded secondary sources. As Hidemi Suganami cautions, wars usually result from a leadership decision to use force; culpability for them does not always lie with the state that took the last step. A declaration of war or the crossing of a border is usually the result of a long process that involved provocations on both sides. The final step to war may have been forced in light of what preceded it. Suganami offers Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor as a case in point.<sup>25</sup> Identification nevertheless proved a relatively straightforward task in all but a few instances. In the Franco-Prussian War, one of the ambiguous cases, France was goaded into declaring war by Bismarck's famous Ems Dispatch.<sup>26</sup> France was the technical initiator but Germany was the *de facto* initiator. In the 1815 War of the Seventh Coalition, I code the great power coalition as the initiator, although it was Napoleon's return to power and the French army's preemptive march north into Belgium that provoked the renewal of war. The total number of initiators in the data set (107) is larger than the total number of wars because some conflicts, such as the War of Austrian Succession (1740–8), World War I (1914–18) and World War II (1939–45), have multiple initiators even when they are broken down into their components.

We should be interested not only in who started wars but why they did so. To this end I consulted appropriate primary and secondary sources. Some of my codings rely on case studies I have published elsewhere; these include the wars of Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Frederick the Great and both World Wars.<sup>27</sup> A data set is composed of a

large number of cases and individual cases must, of necessity, be summarized in the severely abbreviated form of codings. I restrict myself to five summary categories of motives: security, interest, standing, revenge and other. Security is fear-driven and the motive realists and rationalists (e.g. Powell, Bueno de Mesquita, Fearon) assume to be dominant and responsible for most wars. Concern for security can lead to preventive war, preemption or military action against third parties (e.g. unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany in 1918, the Soviet attack against Finland in 1939–40), thought essential to win a primary conflict. To lean over backwards in fairness to realist claims I construe security broadly to include all kinds of war initiation and code as security any war fought to preserve territory, independence or regimes (if they would be changed by a victorious adversary). The First through Third Coalitions against revolutionary France (1792 and 1798) I accordingly code as security-driven.

Interest is the principal liberal motive and refers to policies intended to maximize wealth. Interest has long been a motive for war and was the dominant or contributing incentive for some eighteenth-century wars. In our era it was undoubtedly a major reason for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Sometimes documentary evidence is available to substantiate the incentive interest provided for war. On other occasions, I rely on secondary sources, as I do with respect to security as a motive. One must exercise great care in this regard because there is a tendency by historians and international relations scholars alike to interpret cases in terms of their intellectual orientations or preferred theories. To minimize this risk, multiple codings were assigned in cases where there are serious controversies. The origin of World War I is a case in point. Initially, there was great controversy over which state or states were responsible, but there is now widespread agreement that Austria and Germany were the initiators but no general agreement about the motives of their leaders. In deference to realists I give security equal billing to standing as a motive, although in my judgment the latter was primary.

Standing describes relative ranking among states and, I contend, is the most important cause of war. It often, but not always, corresponds with relative power. The United States is currently the most powerful state but public opinion polls indicate that its relative standing has plummeted since the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. A 2006 survey across 23 countries revealed a strong preference for Europe to become more influential than the US.<sup>28</sup> Standing is an expression of the spirit, as is anger. Revenge is also an expression of anger, which, I noted earlier, *pace* Aristotle, is often aroused by slights to one's own standing. Wars motivated by revenge are almost always efforts to regain territory lost to a predator in a previous war. In the eighteenth century, the Austrians went to war against Prussia, and the Ottomans against Austria and Russia for this reason. While revenge is an expression of the spirit, I code it as a distinct category because often, I believe, the conditions that trigger it are distinct from those that serve as catalysts for states hoping to improve – rather than maintain – their standing. Occasionally the two combine, which is arguably the case in Louis XIV's Dutch war, Austria in 1914 and the American invasion of Iraq. As I am attempting to demonstrate the importance of standing as motive I have consistently attempted to privilege other motives whenever possible in my codings.

My residual category of 'other' describes cases that cannot readily be subsumed under one of my other categories. Examples include wars where unwilling leaders have been drawn in by unauthorized military action of their subordinates, as in the 1938 attack on Changkufeng by the Japanese Kwantung Army. Other cases include wars motivated by domestic political concerns where regime survival (but not state survival) was not at stake, as in the Prussian–Austrian war against Denmark in 1864. Prussia and Austria sought to improve their standing within the German community, but Bismarck also sought to divide and defeat the National-Liberal opposition in the Prussian legislature. These cases are coded as both standing and other. The coding of other is also used for colonial rebellions against great powers. Finally, there are Hitler's wars of aggression against Western Europe, the Balkan states and Russia. Some realists and others in thrall to the assumption of rationality have unconvincingly, in my view, tried to account for them as rational responses to Germany's national or strategic interests.<sup>29</sup> Prominent biographers of Hitler (e.g. Bullock, Fest) and highly regarded accounts of his foreign policy (e.g. Weinberg, Rich) agree that it defies rational explanation.

I am equally interested in the outcomes of wars. Did initiators win the wars they began? 'Win' has two generally accepted meanings. The first is military victory, which involves a corresponding defeat of the other side. This outcome may be obvious in some situations but not in others. Who, for example won the Chinese–American component of the Korean War or the 1969–70 war of attrition between Egypt and Israel? The second, more Clausewitzian meaning of win is in reference to the goals for which the initiator resorted to force. On occasion they can be achieved in the absence of victory. The Egyptians lost the 1973 October War against Israel but the costly nature of Israel's victory paved the way for a peace treaty with Egypt and the return of the Sinai Peninsula. The war accordingly helped Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat to obtain his overall strategic goal.<sup>30</sup> In 2003, the US invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein, achieving its proclaimed political goals. However, the Bush administration then faced an insurgency, growing military casualties and loss of support at home and abroad. In retrospect, military victory appears to have undermined, not advanced, the security or material interests of the US and its international standing. In retrospect, the invasion appears to be a political defeat. To avoid the problem of interpretation at multiple layers of analysis, I have chosen to use the most superficial definition of victory, the military one.

Military victory or defeat (or stalemate) more often than not correlates with the success or failure of a state's political goals, but only in circumstances where actors are motivated by interest or fear. This does not necessarily hold true for leaders motivated by the spirit. Honor can only be won by bravely facing risk, and better yet surmounting it. Facing up to a challenge without hesitation may be more important than winning, even when defeat can entail the death of the actors in question or of their state. Germany and Austria in 1914 offer a telling example. Franz Josef, the Austro-Hungarian emperor and, even more, chief of the general staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf and the war hawks in the army and foreign office, considered the assassinations in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie as a



challenge by Serbia that could not be resolved diplomatically. They wanted war regardless of the consequences. Wilhelm, the German Kaiser, framed the conflict as a duel and his role that of 'second' to Franz Josef. Honor, as these monarchs understood it, had to be satisfied.<sup>31</sup>

Austrian and German prosecution of the war was also strongly influenced by considerations of honor. Conrad deployed the lion's share of his forces on the southern flank, and began an offensive against Serbia even though the principal threat to Austria-Hungary came from the expected Russian invasion of Galicia in the northeast.<sup>32</sup> As early as August 1916 Field Marshal Hindenburg acknowledged the strategic need to withdraw from Verdun and more generally to stop the war of attrition on the western front. He nevertheless insisted on persevering because 'the honor of Germany was at stake'.<sup>33</sup> In November 1918, Prince Max of Baden's cabinet considered an armistice in the hope of protecting important national interests. Admiral Tirpitz and General Ludendorff were violently opposed and argued for a 'last battle', to be fought on German soil to uphold the country's honor. They had no expectation of victory – quite the reverse. The allies required Germany to hand over its High Seas Fleet, but instead Admiral von Reuter had it scuttled at the British naval base in Scapa Flow. This affront to the British came at the same time as the Germans were presented with a draft peace at Versailles, and the angered allies were unwilling to make many of the concessions the Germans desperately wanted.<sup>34</sup>

World War I is not an isolated case. From Louis XIV to George Bush, leaders have pursued honor or standing that was at the expense of important security and material interests. This is most likely to happen in two circumstances: when leaders are attempting to augment their honor or standing or preserve it in a war of revenge. Honor-driven leaders are angry leaders and, contrary to the expectations of prospect theory, are willing to take equally high risks in pursuit of gain or the avoidance of loss.<sup>35</sup>

## Findings

My data set is not a sample as it includes all wars in the categories relevant to my propositions so there is no need for tests for statistical significance. Some researchers interested in making predictions on the basis of their data nevertheless employ such tests. They treat their universe of cases as a sample of the universe of all possible cases. This is unnecessary in this instance because there was no state system before 1648 and in this earlier period interstate wars are difficult to separate from intra-state violence. The present is another cut-off point because I do not project my results forward. Rather, I argue that the international system is undergoing a transformation that is changing the distribution of motives for war and the association of these motives with war.<sup>36</sup>

It would be equally fruitless to use statistical tests to establish the substantive importance of my findings. For such an analysis to be meaningful it requires appropriate benchmarks and they do not exist. If I assert that standing is an important motive for war, in how many wars, or in what percentage of them, must it be



implicated as a motive to validate or lend some degree of credence to my claim? Would 30 percent be significant, or ought it to be 50 percent or more? As there is no accepted standard, I report my findings in the form of descriptive statistics, offer arguments for why these percentages are or are not substantively important and let readers draw their own conclusions. I do this for all claims except for those where comparisons are complicated by the asymmetrical distribution of the several kinds of states whose behavior I describe. Here, weighted comparisons are necessary.

The data on the whole offer support, and generally offer strong support, for my propositions. They indicate patterns of war initiation strikingly at odds with the expectations of realist, power transition and rational theories of war. They offer limited support at best for the balance of power.

*1. The most aggressive states are rising powers seeking recognition as great powers and dominant great powers seeking hegemony*

There were 120 initiators of 94 wars, as some wars had multiple initiators or multiple components with different initiators. Dominant powers account for 24 initiations and rising powers for 29. Together they are responsible for 53 of the 94 wars (there were co-initiators of four wars), or 56 percent of the wars fought between 1648 and 2003. Great powers initiated 49 wars (52 percent), less than half of which were against a dominant or another great power. Great power wars against dominant powers were most often in alliance with other great powers and part of a collective effort to keep a dominant power from achieving hegemony. The several coalitions against Napoleon in 1815 constitute a case in point.

As there are many fewer dominant and rising powers than there are great powers in the system at any given time, we need a weighted measure to compare their respective aggressiveness. To do this, I calculated the total number of years for each of my four categories of initiators: dominant, great, rising and declining powers. France was a dominant power for 156 years, between 1659 and 1815, and the US for 91 years, from 1918 to the present. This produces a total of 247 dominant power state years, which represents 9 percent of the total state years. Great power state years equal 1259 (48 percent), and is the largest category, as there were more great powers than other categories of states during this period and many of them stayed great powers for a long period of time. Great Britain (later the United Kingdom) was a great power from 1688 to the present, for 320 years, while Austria-Hungary was a great power for 204 years, from 1714 to 1918. Rising powers total 643 state years (24 percent) and declining powers 498 (19 percent). In effect, dominant and rising powers, which account for only 33 percent of state years, were collectively responsible for almost half (47 percent) of all wars. By contrast, great powers initiated 38 percent of wars but represent almost half (48 percent) of state years.

Equally revealing are the motives states have for starting wars. As some initiators had multiple motives, there are more motives (107) than wars (94). Standing, which I credit as the motive for 62 wars, or 58 percent of the total, is by far the most common motive. It is followed by security (19 cases = 18 percent), revenge (11 = 10 percent), interest (8 = 7 percent) and other (7 = 7 percent). The eighteenth century is

commonly considered the great era of dynastic rivalry in which rulers went to war for honor and standing. However, there is only irregular variation in the percentage of wars caused by standing across the centuries. Eleven of 16 wars were motivated by standing in the eighteenth century, 21 of 24 in the nineteenth century and 17 of 31 in the twentieth. Standing is consistently a leading motive, something not true of other motives. Security was a decidedly more important motive for war in the twentieth century, where it was a dominant or contributing motive for 10 wars, than it was in earlier centuries. Six of nine wars motivated by interest took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when mercantilism was the accepted economic wisdom and leaders believed that the wealth of the world was finite.<sup>37</sup> Once economic thinking about wealth changed, and trade and investment came to be regarded as mutually beneficial, interest declined as a motive for war.<sup>38</sup> The most unambiguous instance of interest as a motive for war was the Anglo-French takeover of Egypt in 1882, but even in this case standing was an important secondary motive.<sup>39</sup> Most wars of revenge took place in the eighteenth century. The category of other is relatively uniform and no generalizations can be offered about its diverse causes, although, as I noted earlier, most, if not all, of these causes can ultimately be reduced to fear, interest or standing.

While standing is a consistent motive for war it is not uniform in its manifestations. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it took place within a context of dynastic rivalry; rulers sought to achieve *gloire* through conquest. Many of the rulers of this era personally led their armies into battle (e.g. Louis XIV, Fredericks I and II, Peter the Great), greatly enhancing their claims to *gloire*. By the nineteenth century, this had changed; Napoleon was the last major ruler to appear regularly on the battlefield. The search for standing increasingly became a national concern, even in countries such as Germany and Austria that could hardly be considered democratic. Foreign policymaking elites were still overwhelmingly aristocratic in origin and perhaps more intensely committed to gaining or maintaining national honor now that traditional honor codes held less sway in interpersonal relations. Public opinion identified strongly with national states, especially in countries where the intelligentsia and middle classes were kept at the peripheries of power and the status hierarchy. This phenomenon became more pronounced in the twentieth century and was a principal cause of World War I.<sup>40</sup>

Security has always been an important concern in international relations. My data nevertheless indicate that it is not a major cause of wars among the great powers. Only 18 of 94 wars appear to have been motivated by security concerns. These include the several attacks on revolutionary and Napoleonic France by coalitions of great and other powers fearful for the stability, if not the survival, of their regimes if the French Revolution succeeded. Seven of 18 initiators who appear to have acted out of concern for their security were also motivated by standing. A case in point is the 1898–9 US declaration of war against Spain, which began with an attack on the Spanish colony of Cuba. President McKinley and many Senators were keen to establish America as a great power – which explains why they occupied and annexed Puerto Rico and the Philippines. For reasons of national security they also considered it essential to intervene in the deadlocked civil war in Cuba because deterioration in health conditions on the island had been responsible for a yellow fever epidemic

that spread to the Gulf states.<sup>41</sup> World War I also warrants double coding. I contend that standing was a principal motive for German and Austrian leaders, while more conventional interpretations stress security. As noted earlier, I have accordingly given security equal status. Another case involving multiple motives is the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. For reasons of standing Soviet leaders did not want to lose their political primacy in an adjacent client state. This concern was reinforced by fears that Islamic fundamentalism would spread into their own Muslim periphery.<sup>42</sup> Here too, both motives are credited.

One war appears to have been motivated by security and material interests: the US and coalition attack on Iraq in 1990.<sup>43</sup> Most of the other nine war initiations I code as security-driven can confidently be attributed to this motive. They include the 1939 Soviet invasion of Finland and the Soviet attack in the same year on the Japanese Kwantung Army in Mongolia.<sup>44</sup> A few security-driven wars are open to alternative or multiple interpretations, among them the Japanese attack on the US and Western colonial powers in 1941. Because of the oil embargo organized by Washington, Japanese leaders became increasingly desperate and many considered they had no choice but to go to war before it was no longer possible.<sup>45</sup> This was nevertheless a dilemma of Japan's own making; had the Japanese not invaded China as part of their drive to achieve hegemony in Asia there would have been no embargo. Other cases are the Soviet invasion of Hungary and US intervention in Indochina. As with Afghanistan, these interventions were considered essential to national security by Soviet and American policymakers respectively. In the Vietnamese and Afghan interventions, their understandings can be shown to be flawed, if not paranoid.<sup>46</sup>

The relative insignificance of security as a motive is to some degree an artifact of my data set. I examine war initiation and, as we have seen, security only infrequently motivates initiators. It is undeniably a primary concern for states who are the targets of their attacks. To the extent that rising and dominant powers behave aggressively, security is correspondingly more important for other actors.

*2. Rising powers and dominant powers rarely make war against each other. When they do, rising powers are allied with at least one great power*

The data offer strong support for this proposition. Dominant powers initiated 21 wars and rising powers 16. They fought each other on only two occasions. In an extension of its 1635–48 war against Spain, France attacked Spain again in 1648 and fought a decade-long war to supplant the Habsburgs – in control of Austria, Spain and the Low Countries – as the dominant power in Europe. England, a rising power, joined the struggle against Spain in 1648. The other case is the 1950 attack on US forces in Korea by the People's Republic of China. Beijing tried without success to deter an American invasion of North Korea and, what that failed, intervened to safeguard Manchuria and the Communist revolution.<sup>47</sup> Washington wanted to avoid war with China, but the Truman administration felt compelled to cross the 38th parallel for domestic political reasons and was deliberately misled about the risks of war by field commander General Douglas MacArthur.<sup>48</sup>

*3. The preferred military targets of rising and dominant powers are declining once-great powers and weak third parties*

Weaker parties and declining once-great powers are understood to be relatively 'soft' targets and low-cost means of demonstrating military prowess. Secondly, they are a means of augmenting a state's strategic position or material capabilities through annexation or informal control. The data support this proposition. Of the 16 wars initiated by rising powers, three were against declining powers and six against weak powers. Rising powers initiated six wars against great powers, three in alliance with great or dominant powers. A case in point was Prussia's attack on Austria in 1740 in alliance with France, Bavaria and Saxony, taking advantage not only of allies, but of Salic Law, under which Maria Theresa, as a woman, had no claim to the Austrian throne. Frederick succeeded in detaching the rich Austrian province of Silesia, awarded to Prussia by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. Rising powers often pursue a 'jackal' strategy; they go after the weak or move in for a 'kill' once a more powerful actor has been engaged and weakened by more powerful hunters.

Dominant powers initiated 21 wars, none of them against rising powers. They began 12 wars against weak powers and four against declining powers. Their remaining six wars were against other great powers. In five of these six wars, the great power target was perceived as relatively weak and an easy mark. Louis XIV twice attacked the Spanish Netherlands (in 1672 and 1683), which was an outpost of Spain's European holdings, and at the end of a long supply line known as the 'Spanish Road'. In the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War France attacked a vulnerable Austria. The data indicate that dominant powers are the most disruptive actors. They not only start a large number of wars, but particularly destructive wars which involve other great or dominant powers. They are responsible for every war since 1648 that drew in a majority of the great powers.

*4. So-called hegemonic wars (i.e. those involving most, if not all, of the great powers) are almost all accidental and the result of unintended escalation*

Hegemonic war is a plastic concept that is defined with reference to the power of the warring parties and to a war's outcome for the distribution of power in the system.<sup>49</sup> I avoid using the term for this reason but even more because it is inextricably connected to a set of theories about the causes of war (power transition and neorealism). Hegemonic war assumes particular causes rather than serving as a neutral category for testing competing explanations for war. I rely instead on the more inclusive concept of 'systemic' war. This describes conflicts that draw in a majority of the existing great powers and the dominant power, if there is one at the time. At least one of these powers must be on the opposing side. This requirement allows me to exclude such events as the collaboration by leading European powers to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China. My definition generates nine systemic wars. It excludes two of the wars sometimes described as part of the hegemonic conflict between France and the Hapsburgs (France's 1648 and 1654 wars against Spain) because they did not involve a majority of the great powers. It includes the Crimean War, not considered

WAR	INITIATOR	RESULT	CAUSE
Franco-Dutch (1672–79)	D	I loses	ME
Grand Alliance (1688–97)	D	I loses	ME
Spanish Succession (1701–14)	D	I loses	ME
Austrian Succession (1740–8)	R	R wins	E
Seven Year's (1756–63)	R/D	I's lose	ME
French Revolutionary (1792–1815)	G/D	I's lose	multiple MFs
Crimean (1853–6)	G	I loses	ME
World War I (1914–18)	R/G	I's lose	ME/MF
World War II (1939–45)	G	I's lose	MF

**Figure 3** Systemic wars

D = dominant power; R = rising power; G = great power; I = initiator; ME = miscalculated escalation; E = escalation; MF = military failure

a hegemonic war because the two leading powers – Britain and France – were on the same side. It nevertheless involved a majority of the great powers, Austria and Prussia aside. As in the data set, these wars are broken down into their major component parts. These systemic wars account for about 90 percent of the casualties caused by wars involving great powers over the last five centuries.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of duration and casualties systemic wars are the most costly interstate wars. As Figure 3 indicates, they cannot be explained by so-called rational, strategic arguments. In almost every case the initiators lost the wars they started. Figure 4 indicates that the number of defeated initiators is even larger when we break down the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II into their component conflicts. Every dominant and great power that initiated a systemic war was defeated. While this is true of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a whole, some clarification of their component wars is required. The Fourth Coalition pitted Prussia, Austria and Russia against France, which was the initiator and victor of this round of fighting. In the fifth coalition, Austria and Britain fought France and Bavaria. This war also ended favorably for the French with victory at the Battle of Wagram in July 1809. Not content with control over most of the continent, Napoleon subsequently invaded Russia, which provoked another coalition, a French defeat and the first exile of Napoleon.

There are two principal reasons for this outcome. In six of nine wars (in Figure 3) failure was due to miscalculated escalation. Initiators sought to win short isolated wars against weaker powers. Their aggression provoked the intervention of other powers and ultimately led to their defeat. This happened three times to Louis XIV, and also to subsequent French monarchs in the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War. The Crimean War was brought about by Russia's failure to take seriously the threat of Anglo-French intervention on the side of the Ottoman Empire to preserve its control of Constantinople and the Straits. World War I was the result of Austria's unsuccessful attempt, with German backing, to wage an isolated war against Serbia. It provoked unwanted multiple escalations: Russia supported Serbia, France supported Russia, and Britain supported France. Subsequently, the Ottoman Empire,

WAR	INITIATOR	RESULT	CAUSE
French Revolutionary			
First Coalition	G coalition	I's lose	MF
Second Coalition	G coalition	I's lose	MF
Fourth Coalition	G coalition	I wins	MF
Fifth Coalition	G coalition	I's lose	MF
Invasion of Russia	D	I loses	MF
Seventh Coalition	D	I loses	MF
World War I			
August 1914	G/D	I's lose	ME/MF
Unrestricted sub-warfare	D	I loses	MF
World War II			
Europe	G/R	I's lose	MF
Pacific	G	I loses	MF

**Figure 4** War breakdowns

For coding see Figure 3

Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Japan, the US and other nations entered the war bringing the total number of combatants up to 32. A. J. P. Taylor argued, unpersuasively in my opinion, that World War II was the result of miscalculated escalation; he contends that Anglo-French appeasement with regard to Czechoslovakia convinced Hitler that the Western powers would not come to the defense of Poland in 1939.<sup>51</sup> One war, the Austrian Succession, had a more complicated pattern of escalation that can be described as more willful than miscalculated.<sup>52</sup>

The second generic reason for failure is military: initiators were not powerful enough to defeat the states they attacked or the coalitions they aroused against them. The first four coalitions of the French Revolutionary Wars made the mistake of thinking that the armies of revolutionary France would be in disarray without aristocratic officers and would be overwhelmed by their combined might.<sup>53</sup> Napoleon made the same error in attacking Russia and, later, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, during his hundred-day return to power from exile on Elba. The only success was Prussia's victory over Austria in the War of Austrian Succession. Frederick was foiled, and almost ruined, in his subsequent efforts at aggrandizement. Late in life, he acknowledged that the balance of power and the internal limitations of his state made it increasingly difficult to make additional territorial gains.<sup>54</sup>

##### *5. Unintended escalation and miscalculation of the balance of power have deeper causes than incomplete information*

Rational and neorealist theories acknowledge the role of miscalculation in war initiation. They nevertheless assume that would-be initiators make reasonable efforts to assess the military balance and to devise strategies to design around the military advantages of opponents. Rational actors can still miscalculate because the political–military environment is often difficult to read. Leaders cannot know the resolve and military capability of adversaries with certainty, or the likelihood that public opinion and allies



will rally to the support of states that are attacked. War, as Clausewitz famously observed, is characterized by friction and chance.<sup>55</sup> Even in a world of incomplete information, rational leaders ought to have a better-than-even chance of getting it right if they gather pertinent information, assess its implications, and – preemption aside – start wars only when they consider the likelihood of success to be high. The empirical record tells a different story. All but one initiator of a war that escalated into a systemic war ended up a loser. Data on interstate wars fought since 1945 indicate that this is a more general phenomenon. Some two-thirds of initiators lost the wars they began, and an even higher percentage failed to achieve the goals for which they went to war.<sup>56</sup>

What explains this anomaly? Case studies indicate two principal causes for both kinds of decisional failures. The first is motivated bias. Leaders facing a combination of strategic and domestic threats they believe can only surmounted by war, or a challenge to an adversary that raises the prospect of war, must reduce the anxiety associated with a decision to move forward. They generally do so by denying the risk associated with their policies. They solicit supporting information and encouragement from subordinates and intelligence agencies and become insensitive to information, even warnings, that their policies may, or are likely to, lead to disaster.<sup>57</sup> Janice Stein, Jack Snyder and I documented this kind of motivated bias in a number of crisis decisions, including Germany, Austria and Russia in 1914, the US decision to cross the 38th parallel in Korea in 1950, India in the events leading up to its 1961 border conflict with China, Khrushchev and the 1961 Soviet missile deployment in Cuba, Egypt and Israel in 1973, and Argentina in the run-up to its invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas in 1982.<sup>58</sup> Minimal or self-serving risk assessment is also typical of actors seeking honor or standing, which can only be won by assuming great risks.

Anger can have the same effect. It enters the picture when leaders believe they or their state has been slighted. I have documented several decisions for war (e.g. Germany and Austria in 1914, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2004) where anger, associated with a concern for honor, combined to produce rash and ill-considered initiatives.<sup>59</sup> Historical accounts indicate evidence for this phenomenon in Louis XIV's wars against the Netherlands and the Rhineland-Palatinate, the Wars of the First through Third Coalitions and the Crimean War. Extensive research into the individual cases in the data set might reveal just how often anger and the quest for honor or standing combine to bring about decisions to use force with only minimal evaluation of the risks. It would be interesting to determine the percentage of cases in which information is readily available, or actually on hand – as it was in several of these cases – indicating that expectations of victory were unrealistic. Finally, we might inquire how often superficial risk estimates occur in the absence of either of these conditions or in wars not motivated by standing. Regardless of the possible causes of superficial risk assessment, the demonstrable fact that it is widespread helps explain some of the otherwise anomalous outcomes we observe. It also raises serious problems for rational theories of war.

#### *6. Weak and declining powers not infrequently initiate wars against great powers*

All studies of hegemonic war, and most studies of war initiation, focus on the great powers. They ignore declining powers and weaker states. My data set indicates that



both kinds of actors initiate wars against more powerful states. Declining powers initiated 11 wars and weak powers seven. Great powers were the targets of 13 of these wars. Declining powers initiated three wars against weak powers, while weak powers initiated two against declining powers. Eight of the 11 wars against great powers were wars of revenge in which declining or weak powers sought, without success, to regain territory taken from them in previous wars by great powers (or rising powers who had since become great). Not infrequently, the initiators lost additional territory as a result of these wars, as the Ottomans did in 1812 when they were forced to cede Bessarabia to Russia. Sweden suffered a worse fate when Charles XII attempted to punish the Baltic states in 1700. Russian support for his adversaries led him to launch an ill-prepared and disastrous invasion of Russia that resulted in Sweden's loss of regional hegemony. Wars initiated by weak and declining powers offer more evidence that angry leaders do not make careful estimates of risk. This phenomenon is all the more remarkable in the case of weak and declining powers, whose victory over more powerful states should be seen as problematic from the outset.

## Conclusions

My data suggest that leaders of rising, great and dominant powers are instrumentally rational in the sense that they generally choose declining and weak powers as their adversaries. This has traditionally been the cheapest way to demonstrate military prowess, augment state power and territory and gain standing. Rationalist theories of war have failed to identify this pattern of aggression although it has been remarkably consistent over the centuries.

Rationalist and many realist theories impute too much instrumental reason to actors. Leaders capable of and willing to make the kinds of calculations rational theories require would also attempt to make serious estimates of the risks of war and, extraordinary situations aside, not resort to force unless the evidence indicated they had a high chance of achieving their political goals. In practice, initiators won slightly less than half of the wars they began. They won 46, lost 45, drew 6 and 2 (Afghanistan and Iraq) are ongoing. Of the victories won by rising, great and dominant powers, 26 were against weak or declining powers. Even these wars can escalate into wider, unanticipated and undesired wars against great or dominant powers. In almost every case where such escalation occurred, leaders of the initiator were to varying degrees insensitive to the risks of escalation and ended up losing the war. Initiators lost all nine of the systemic wars they provoked. Initiators of all kinds appear to do a relatively poor job of estimating the military balance. Evidence from case studies indicates a general tendency to overrate one's own military capability and to underestimate that of adversaries. Many initiators also expect their adversary to fight the kind of war they themselves are prepared to fight and win and are surprised when they resort to alternative strategies. The most recent example of this illusion is former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's complaint that 'Our opponents will *not fight* our kind of war'.<sup>60</sup>

The behavior most strikingly at odds with rational theories of war is the aggressiveness of dominant powers. Dominant states are generally not content with

their status and authority. They seek more power through additional conquests and by doing so hope to be able to impose their preferences on others. Habsburg Spain, France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany and the United States in the post-Cold War era are cases in point. None of these states was seriously threatened by rising powers or coalitions of great powers. They went to war because they thought they were powerful enough to become more powerful still. For relatively little prospective gain, they took great risks. These powers consistently defied the expectations of prospect theory. Aggressive dominant powers sought to control the European continent, if not the world. More troubling still for rational theories, their goals were clearly unrealistic. Brooks and Wohlforth rightly observe that one of the enduring tragedies of great power politics 'is precisely when decision-makers believe they can ignore counterbalancing constraints that they are most likely to call them forth with overambitious foreign policies'.<sup>61</sup>

There is no support for power transition theories. They are based on the premise that there is a dominant power with sufficient authority to order the international system in a manner that is beneficial to itself. This order is assumed to operate at the expense of other states, thus arousing their hostility. Rising powers go to war when they believe themselves strong enough to defeat dominant powers and restructure the system to their advantage.<sup>62</sup> Alternatively, dominant powers attack rising powers to prevent them from becoming strong enough to consider challenges.<sup>63</sup> Since 1648 no European power has been in a position to order the system in this way.<sup>64</sup> My data indicate that rising powers and great powers rarely initiate wars against dominant powers. When they do, it is usually as part of a coalition with the goal of preventing an already dominant power from becoming even stronger and perhaps attaining the kind of hegemony power transition stipulates as the norm. Dominant powers in turn only infrequently attack great powers, preferring instead to expand or demonstrate their prowess by attacking weaker parties. The empirical evidence indicates a pattern of conflict the reverse of that predicted by leading power transition theories. Great power wars arise in the absence of hegemony, not because of it. These wars lead to power transitions and peace settlements that often impose new orders – but almost always as a result of a consensus among the leading powers. Postwar orders are never dictated by a single power and endure as long as a consensus holds among the major powers responsible for them.<sup>65</sup>

The realist concept of the security dilemma finds little support. Only 19 wars were motivated by security. War, however, may not be the most appropriate test of the security dilemma. John Herz, who introduced the concept, maintained that states only launched preemptive wars *in extremis*.<sup>66</sup> As Booth and Wheeler note, the security paradox, as they call it, is the result of uncertainty, and can contribute to military build-ups and the conflicts that result, although they make no claims for security dilemma wars.<sup>67</sup> Such a proposition, in any case, could not be evaluated against this data set. The data do suggest that the security dilemma cannot be responsible for many wars, as security concerns account for less than 20 percent of great power wars. During the Cold War, allegedly the only bipolar era in modern times, superpowers were as acutely sensitive to the loss and gain of allies and clients as they were in eras of bipolarity. Such behavior makes sense if we posit great power leaders as at least

as much concerned with the effects on their standing as they are with any military or economic benefits or costs from bandwagoning or defection.

The logic of the security dilemma indicates that the most threatened states should be the weakest ones. More powerful states should feel less threatened, and dominant powers less threatened still. Kenneth Waltz relies on this last inference for his claim that bi-polar systems are more stable and less war-prone than their multi-polar counterparts.<sup>68</sup> Because the two poles are so powerful vis-à-vis everyone else they are that much more secure and less affected by the addition or defection of third parties to or from their respective blocs. The data offer no support for this eminently logical conjecture – quite the reverse. Six of the 19 wars motivated by security took place during the Cold War and all but one of them involved a superpower.

Balance of power theories assume that security is, or should be, the first concern of all states because of the anarchical nature of the international environment. Threat arises from the environment itself in the form of the security dilemma or from the ambitions of predatory states. Either phenomenon encourages states to augment their military capability and form alliances to deter would-be aggressors. Following Morgenthau, realists assume that war is least likely when the status quo powers have a clear military advantage and a demonstrable will to use force to maintain the status quo.<sup>69</sup> Conversely, war is most likely when an ‘imperialist’ power, to use Morgenthau’s language, or a coalition of them, have a military advantage or the status quo powers, for whatever reason, are unable to combine against them.

The data indicate mixed support at best for balance of power theories. Unfavorable balances of power fail to deter states seeking hegemony, but do prevent their victories. This claim must be advanced with some caution because my data set does not include ‘non-wars’ that might have been deterred by an unfavorable balance of power, buttressed perhaps by the effective practice of immediate deterrence. What does emerge from this data set and other studies is a striking pattern of miscalculated escalation by great and dominant powers and their failure to win any of the systemic wars for which they are responsible.<sup>70</sup> This outcome speaks well for balancing as a measure of last resort, but not in preventing war.

The aggressiveness of some declining and weak powers is at odds with both the security dilemma and the balance of power theories. Weaker states should balance or bandwagon, not attack more powerful neighbors. John Herz, however, would not be surprised by the aggressiveness of dominant powers as he recognized that certain states were motivated by interests ‘that go beyond security proper’.<sup>71</sup>

The evidence for standing as a motive for war is strong. Standing ( $n = 62$ ) accounted for 58 percent of the total motives ( $n = 107$ ), putting it far ahead of security ( $n = 19$ , 18 percent), other ( $n = 7$ , 6 percent), revenge ( $n = 11$ , 10 percent) and interest ( $n = 8$ , 7 percent). It is the leading motive in every century of the almost four centuries included in the data set. Revenge, like standing, is an expression of *thumos* or spirit. Together, standing and revenge account for 73 of 107 motives. They are responsible for 68 percent of all wars. These figures strike me as significant. The importance of standing as a motive of war may help explain the marked failure of so many initiators to make reasonable assessments of the military balance and the likelihood of escalation.

From the very beginning of civilization in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean basin individuals and political units have gained honor and standing through military prowess and, secondarily, through what Veblen calls conspicuous consumption.<sup>72</sup> For almost the entire period of the data set, powers became great because of military and economic might. In the late nineteenth century, war began to lose some of its appeal. This process accelerated after both world wars. Various European and non-European rising powers have been attempting, with some success, to claim standing on the basis of other criteria.<sup>73</sup> In the postwar period, Germany, Japan and now China have sought standing primarily by non-military means. This development seems long overdue as one of the defining characteristics of modernity is the opening of multiple pathways to honor and standing. To the extent that war is increasingly held in ill-repute, other means of claiming status will become more prominent and the frequency of war will sharply decline.

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