

Variables of War

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This essay is one of the many attempts to explain why wars break out. Thus, the *outbreak* of war is the dependent variable in this small study.

War is not in human genes. Armed confrontations between states or social groupings have causes that must be sought in calculations of power and political feasibility, as well as in cultural developments (Prisching 2025). Without this premise, Immanuel Kant could not have written his treatise "Perpetual Peace".

War is, therefore, in principle, abolishable through societal and institutional changes as well as through "politics" – as is slavery or authoritarian rule. In large parts of the world, in North and South America (until Trump's recent assault on Venezuela), and in Central and Western Europe, there have been no interstate wars for many, many decades.

According to Michael Howard, there are two basic motives for initiating a warlike confrontation (Howard 1984):

On the one hand, the urge of actors whose states have strong military potential to expand their sphere of power. Sometimes this is the result of capitalist dynamics: keyword "imperialism".

On the other hand, there is the anxiety and insecurity of leaders whose socio-economic system is faltering. These actors may seek to forestall a feared decline in their own strength relative to competing powers, namely through prevention. Calculations of prevention can become those of pre-emption: when a power in a precarious situation sees itself, for example, in an international crisis, forced to get ahead immediately by military means so as not to fall behind.

These basic motives driving war typically contribute to the development of bellicose cultures. Waging war becomes positively charged and is glorified.

Or at least, war is regarded as something inevitable for which one must prepare well. Accordingly, leaders call on citizens to learn, identify with, and demonstrate soldierly virtues. A "cult of the offensive" in military thinking emerges (Evera 1985), which, in the case of open conflict, promises a rapid victory with relatively few own casualties and has the potential to sweep politics and society along with it.

The complex of basic motivations, together with congenial cultural development, constitutes a necessary condition for the outbreak of war. Thus, the *independent variable* for this study is determined.

Historical experience shows, however, that armed conflicts between states, groupings of states, or even potential civil war parties do not necessarily break out whenever, on at least one side, the basic motivation and bellicose culture are present. One must therefore look for a condition that is *sufficient* to explain our phenomenon. This *sufficient condition* is an intermediate variable that mediates between the independent and dependent variables.

The *sufficient condition* variable involves feasibility calculations. Those ultimately responsible for an attack on another party ask themselves: Is rapid success possible with limited expenditure of resources? Can the number of casualties be kept low? Would all this be tolerable for one's own population or relevant interest groups without protest, and perhaps even worth supporting with enthusiasm?

Against this background, one looks for weak points in the disposition of the possible opposing side: a favorable opportunity for a successful offensive (Unterseher 2024: 9-24): a window of time that can be exploited, an open flank, or a structural vulnerability. If, then, the corresponding questions are answered with "yes", war can begin. The sufficient condition has been met.

The focus then shifts to perceptions of opponents' disposition and presumptions about their response. Cultural factors easily cloud this perception. Bellicose wishful thinking often bedevils perceptions. Moreover, insufficient communication capacity or institutional disorganization may prevent an adequate response to the complexity of the rapidly unfolding events of war. The prehistory of the First World War offers eerie examples

of this.

It may also be that the institutions responsible for "enemy intelligence" provide state leadership with unreliable and misleading information because their purpose has become primarily securing power rather than acquiring and organizing reliable knowledge.

The failure of the Russian intelligence services, which had predicted "a walk in the park" before their country's assault on Ukraine, is a good example. Despite these reservations, the bold hypothesis is ventured here that, beyond distorted perception, there is something like reality, and that the essential contours of it can be brought so close to the decision center (war: yes/no) that they are actionable.

In a historical-empirical study, John Mearsheimer examined under what conditions deterrence fails in confrontations involving conventional military potentials. His sample comprises 12 recent conflicts (in which there were outbreaks of war or substantial escalation within a year). In his sample, at least one party involved met the minimum criteria of modernity (mechanized troops, air support, etc.). In ten cases, deterrence failed. (Mearsheimer 1983).

Why did deterrence fail? Because the parties involved in each case concentrated their military potential for an offensive or counteroffensive, thereby neglecting the defensive coverage of their own space and offering the other side exploitable weak points – open flanks.

Mearsheimer's prime example is the German Wehrmacht's campaign against France in May 1940, which began after an eight-month, uneventful confrontation between the opponents (the *phony war*). The German armored forces used the fact that the Maginot Line at its northwestern end in the Ardennes was not yet complete, and that this wooded, hilly terrain was more "tank-passable" than contemporary military prejudice assumed. The most modern formations of the Allied British and French were unable to rush to the aid of the weak reserve divisions stationed there because they were deployed "forward" as far as the southern Netherlands, as a prerequisite for an offensive toward the North German Plain (Posen 1984).

It is not only parties that are hardly superior in military potential to their

opponent or only about equally strong (as was the case in the confrontation of 1940) who look with care for a favorable opportunity before they start a war or escalate it. Those that are clearly superior in potential also usually act accordingly: to minimize the effort or to demonstrate to the community of states that they can dominate a smaller, possibly insubordinate, power without much trouble. That much weaker actors, if they want to take up arms at all against the stronger, depend on a favorable opportunity is obvious. Two examples will illustrate this:

At the beginning of 1979, mechanized forces of the Chinese People's Liberation Army pushed into northern Vietnam. The goal was limited: to take a strategically important provincial town within a few days and teach the government in Hanoi a lesson. Apparently, the Chinese wanted to make clear to the self-confident Vietnamese leadership – victor in the war against the USA and liberator of Cambodia from the Pol Pot regime – who the real hegemon in the region was. The opportunity seemed favorable, since after the invasion of Cambodia, the bulk of Vietnam's battle-hardened troops were stationed in the south of the country.

But the Chinese leadership had miscalculated: its heavy formations encountered sparsely armed construction troops that defended the northern Vietnam area-wide in a guerrilla fashion. The fighting lasted for over a month. Although the Chinese achieved their military objective, they chose to withdraw after suffering horrendous losses (Jenks 1979).

The terroristic, cruel assault by HAMAS on Israeli collective settlements in the neighborhood of the Gaza Strip in October 2023 is an example of an operation arising from unequivocal weakness. Accordingly, the objectives were limited: shaking Israel's political system and taking hostages to call to the attention of the world the fate of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Essentially, the HAMAS raid operationally succeeded for two reasons (Unterseher 2024: 17):

- First, the neighborhood of the Gaza Strip had shortly before the assault been stripped of military protection, because the actually responsible, manpower-strong, infantry battalion had redeployed to the West Bank.

according to Carl von Clausewitz, being conceived as something active) is more associated with passive femininity.

Accordingly, in a world of men, respect for the structural considerations as well as the concrete technical and tactical solutions of comprehensive defense conceptions is low. In practice, this may mean that the misperception of their ability to frustrate offensive calculations remains unappreciated.

Whoever falls for such misperceptions may find themselves learning the hard way. In this regard, recall the Russian Army's frequent attacks on Ukraine's flexible defense and the demoralizing effect that had on Russian assault troops – abused as cannon fodder!

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