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Why Nations Fight? Past And Future Motives For War

LSE Ideas

By Richard Ned Lebow

Last night at IDEAS, Richard Ned Lebow launched his new book, *Why Nations Fight*. Here he outlines the key argument of the book, which analyses a wholly new data-set of inter-state wars.

Following Plato and Aristotle, I posit spirit, appetite and reason as fundamental drives with distinct goals. They generate different logics concerning cooperation, conflict and risk-taking. They require, and help generate, characteristic forms of hierarchy based on different principles of justice. A fourth motive – fear — enters the picture when reason is unable to constrain appetite or spirit. Fear is a powerful emotion, not an innate drive. In real worlds, multiple motives mix rather than blend, giving rise to a range of behaviors that often appear contradictory.

In modern times the spirit (*thumos*) has largely been ignored by philosophy and social science. I contend it is omnipresent. It gives rise to the universal drive for self-esteem which finds expression in the quest for honor or standing. By excelling at activities valued by our peer group or society, we win the approbation of those who matter and feel good about ourselves. Institutions and states have neither psyches nor emotions. The people who run these collectivities or identify with 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. Transference and esteem by vicarious association are especially pronounced in the age of nationalism where the state has become the relevant unit.

I documented the relevance of the spirit for war in a series of case studies in *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*. In this book, I extend my analysis to war throughout the modern era and analyze war initiation in terms of the relative power of states and their respective motives for war. I derive six propositions from my theory about war initiation concerning the kinds of states that start wars, their motives for going to war, who they fight against, their rate of successes, the extent to which general wars arise from miscalculation and the propensity of weaker states to attack stronger ones. To test these propositions, I constructed a data set of all inter-state wars involving great and aspiring rising powers from 1648 to the present.

Contrary to realist expectations, I find security responsible for only 19 of 94 wars. A significant number of these wars pitted great powers against other great powers and none of them were associated with power transitions. Material interests are also a weak motive for war, being responsible for only 8 wars, and most of those in the eighteenth century. Standing, by contrast, is responsible for 62 wars as a primary or secondary motive. Revenge, also a manifestation of the spirit, is implicated in another 11. There is no evidence for wars between rising and dominant powers, as predicted by power transition theory. There can be little doubt that the spirit is the principal cause of war across the centuries, and that it and its consequences have been almost totally ignored in the international relations literature.

In examining the future of war we need to recognize important changes that are taking place in how actors understand war in relation to their goals. Interest shows a sharp decline as a cause of war once mercantilism gave way to more sophisticated understandings of wealth. Security-motivated wars show no similar decline by century but come in clusters associated with bids for hegemony by great or dominant powers. The most recent clusters of security-related wars were associated with the run up and conduct of the two world wars of the twentieth century. Now that this era has passed in Europe and is receding in much of the Pacific rim, and hegemony achieved by force is now longer considered a legitimate ambition, the security requirements and fears of great powers should decline. Wars of standing can also be expected to decline as successful war initiation no longer enhances standing. It may actually lead to loss of standing in the absence of United Nations' approval of the military initiative in question. The chance of war among great and rising powers is therefore diminishing and we may be cautiously optimistic that interstate war as an institution will see a sharp decline in this century.

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