7 Armed Conflict, Part 1: Causes and Outbreak

Chapter Summary

The focus of this first of two chapters on **armed conflict** is on the origins and causes of war, as well as the rules of international law designed to regulate the outbreak of war. Two case studies of recent wars are presented, applying the earlier conceptual discussions to the real world. **War** is properly defined and key distinctions are explained, such as between **civil war** and **classic international warfare**, and also **symmetrical** and **asymmetrical warfare**. The human casualties of warfare are then outlined, with the economic costs examined via reference to how much it cost America to fight various wars from the twenty-first century onwards.

The cause of war is a complex issue and six different theories are discussed, each addressing the causal factors behind war and also possible solutions. First, out of the doctrine of **realism**, there is the simple pursuit of power. Wars happen because countries, groups, and individuals seek power, and they fight each other for more power or to prevent others from gaining more power. Even though this appears to be a very bleak outlook, there is actually a simple solution to stopping wars: a world government capable of settling disputes without resorting to violence (how to create such a government is a different question altogether). Second, the **idealism** doctrine suggests wars break out because of cultural clashes (disagreement over ideals); a solution here would require more worldwide agreement on basic values. Third, if modern wars are waged between groups, these groups tend to be nations and the power of nationalism can be used as a tool by elites to convince people to fight wars. This approach blends both realism's pursuit of power (the elites) and idealism's clash over values (the nation), and requires a mixed solution as well. Fourth, wars may be caused by competition over economic factors, like money or natural resources; the materialist forces of free-market capitalism are integral to wars here (for instance, the influence of the **military-industrial complex**). Solutions would have to involve a fundamental transformation of the economic system. Fifth, wars may be directly related to male aggression and the dominance of men in positions of power; as a result, elevating more women into these positions may help reduce incidences of war. Sixth, unlike the previous approaches that all assumed a certain rational explanation for war, wars may simply be irrational and linked to humanity's innate impulse to destroy.

While there is no outright solution to war, there have been attempts to regulate and control warfare (embodied by a series of treaties called the **laws of war**). The term for determining when, if ever, states may fight wars is ***jus ad bellum*** ("the justice of war"), and includes four criteria (all of which must be met before a country can justifiably embark on a war): just cause, proportionality, public declaration of war by a proper authority (war power), and last resort. These criteria are applied to the case studies of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, with the analysis showing that while the former was

likely legal, the latter was probably not. Finally, challenges to these traditional criteria for going to war are assessed, such as **pre-emptive self-defence** and the **Responsibility to Protect**.

Key Concepts

Aggression: the first, and unjustified, use of force against another country. (p. 238)

al-Qaeda: a radical Islamic extremist group responsible for the 9/11 attacks. (p. 246)

Arab Spring: broad-based social movement, throughout the Arab world, to resist corruption and oppression by traditionally authoritarian governments, and to push for democratic accountability and respect for human rights. It began in 2010 and has had differential results in various Arab countries, ranging from a change in government in Egypt to the civil war in Syria. Its progressive momentum may now be over. (p. 253)

Armed conflict: the use of weapons and physical violence with the intention of inflicting damage and harm upon people in an effort to get them to do what you want. (p. 228)

Asymmetrical warfare: armed conflict between a government and various non-state armed groups, whether insurgents, terrorists, or well-armed and violent criminal enterprises such as drug cartels. (p. 228)

Casus belli: Latin for "a cause for war." (p. 238)

Civil war: war within the borders of one country, as different groups fight for control over the one national government. (p. 228)

Classic international warfare: war between groups of people in different countries. (p. 228)

Collective security: to go to war as an act of aid to any country victimized by aggression. (p. 239)

Crimes against humanity: includes war crimes, but also violations of basic human rights. (p. 253)

Cyberwarfare (cyber-aggression; cyber-attack): the use of advanced computer technologies, often involving the Internet, as a tool within one's foreign policy strategy, and/or military practice, to inflict or enable harm upon one's enemies. Such harms notably include information-gathering via espionage; disinformation-spreading; sabotage (e.g., trying to destroy something through such technologies, like a malware virus). (p. 241)

Ethnic cleansing: occurs when one ethnic group is driven from their home territory to make way for another group to come in and occupy that territory. (p. 253)

Genocide: literally means "the killing of a whole people;" committed when an entire group or population is targeted for murder. (p. 252)

Jus ad bellum: Latin for "the justice of war" and determines when, if ever, states may fight wars. (p. 238)

Last resort: war is only justified after all other reasonable means of problem-solving have been tried and failed. (p. 244)

Laws of war: referring to treaties that together attempt to regulate warfare. For the outbreak of war, the main piece of international law is the UN Charter (1945) and the Hague Conventions (1899–1909), to a lesser extent. For conduct during war, the Geneva Conventions (1949) are the most authoritative. (p. 237)

Mercenaries: professional soldiers hired to fight wars for money. (p. 234)

Military-industrial complex: collectively, those people and companies, both inside and outside the military, with a vested (sometimes greedy) interest in the business of war, including the national army, private military companies, mercenaries, arms manufacturers, etc. (p. 234)

Patriotism: national identification, which could be used as a tool to convince people to fund and fight wars. (p. 232)

Pre-emptive self-defence: an alternative conception of "defence" put forth by the United States to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It challenges traditional definitions of defence (self-defence and collective security), by suggesting defence can be "proactive" or aggressive. (p. 250)

Private military companies (PMCs): a for-profit company that provides military or military-like services to a client country for a hefty fee. (p. 234)

Probability of success: not a legal criterion of *jus ad bellum*, but a customary norm that suggests wars should not be fought if they are doomed to fail (e.g., a waste of resources and lives). (p. 248)

Proportionality: a principle that suggests, in law, there should be a balance between the problem and solution (or the violation and response). (p. 240)

Radical Islamic extremism: a very small minority of believers in Islam, who seek to install strict Islamic theocracies throughout traditional Muslim lands. (p. 245)

Responsibility to Protect (R2P): an alternative to the traditional criteria of *jus ad bellum* that suggests countries can intervene militarily in other countries for humanitarian reasons (armed humanitarian intervention) when those countries commit crimes against their own populations (e.g., genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing). (p. 252)

Right intention: not a legal criterion of *jus ad bellum*, but a customary norm that suggests wars should only be fought with the right intentions (e.g., achieving the just cause), and not some ulterior motive (e.g., commercial gains). (p. 248)

Symmetrical warfare: traditional, large-scale deliberate armed conflict between the national governments and militaries of different countries, such as the two world wars. (p. 228)

Taliban: a militant Islamic political organization that gained control of Afghanistan and installed a theocratic regime there. Supported al-Qaeda because of common cause. (p. 247)

Terrorism: use of random violence, especially killing force, against civilians with the intent to spread fear throughout a population, hoping that this fear will advance a political objective. (p. 245)

Theocracy: a regime where the state uses its power to realize and enforce a religious vision; there is an explicit attempt to blend church and state. (p. 245)

War: an intentional and widespread armed conflict between groups of people. This is true whether these groups are within one country engaged in civil war, or in different countries engaged in classic international warfare. The traditional definition requires a minimum of 1,000 battlefield deaths before something is officially defined as a war. (p. 228)

War crimes: violation of the laws of war. (p. 253)

War power: the authority to order the use of force and warfare; some branch of government in every country possesses this power. In Canada, this power rests with Parliament. (p. 244)

Weapons of mass destruction (WMDs): nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; capable of large-scale destruction of life and property. (pp. 249–250)

Study Questions

Scroll to the end for answers.

1. What is the difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical warfare?

2. What are the six theories on the causes of war?

3. What are the four criteria that must be satisfied for *jus ad bellum*?

Weblinks

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
http://www.globalr2p.org/
- One of the leading organizations promoting the R2P doctrine, and one of the main members of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect

The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto
https://citizenlab.ca/
- An interdisciplinary laboratory at the University of Toronto that conducts research on information communications technologies, human rights, and global security; one of the leading research institutes in this field of study

"War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (book chapter)
https://web.archive.org/web/20060904194113/https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/rohloff/www/war%20ma
king%20and%20state%20making.pdf
- Famed American political sociologist Charles Tilly provides an additional causal factor for war making, namely, its purposes in state formation, especially in the European context; this research would culminate in a monograph on the topic (see Further Readings below)

Further Readings

Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kalyvas offers an insightful analysis of violence in civil wars and specifies a theory of selective violence about why and how such violent acts take place.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2003. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Excellent case study of the El Salvador civil war and the reasons behind different groups' decisions to participate on one side or the other.

Deibert, Ronald J. 2013. *Black Code: Surveillance, Privacy, and the Dark Side of the Internet*. Toronto, ON: Signal.
- Deibert, one of the leading experts on digital technology, discusses the future of cyberspace and state cyberwarfare, particularly with reference to the Stuxnet computer worm that targeted Iran's nuclear facilities, and which was reportedly developed by the United States and Israel; the author is also the Director of the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto (see Weblinks above).

Tilly, Charles. 1993. *Coercion, Capital and European States, A.D. 990–1992*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- A classic work that illustrates a causal linkage between making wars and making states in European history and provides an alternative explanation for what causes wars. The author is a well-known and well-respected American political sociologist, and this book builds on his earlier research (see Weblinks above).

Answers to Study Questions

1. Symmetrical warfare refers to traditional, "old school," government versus government warfare, like the two world wars, fought between national militaries. Asymmetrical warfare refers to armed conflict between a government and various non-state armed groups, whether insurgents trying to overthrow the government, terrorists, or even well-armed and violent criminal enterprises, like drug cartels. (p. 228)

2. The six theories are realism and the pursuit of power; idealism and cultural/value clash; nationalism and elite scheming; natural resources, money, and the military-industrial complex; male violence and the quest for dominance; non-rational group rivalry and/or the impulse to destroy. (p. 231)

3. The four criteria are just cause, proportionality, public declaration of war by a proper authority, and last resort. (p. 238)