



Journal of Social and Political Sciences

Abul Hasan, Md; Riberdy, Vivianne; and Rahman, H. M. Towhidur. (2020), The Reasons for War and Social Choice. In: *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, Vol.3, No.3, 725-730.

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.03.03.205

The online version of this article can be found at:
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* is an Open Access publication. It may be read, copied, and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

The Asian Institute of Research *Social and Political Sciences* is a peer-reviewed International Journal. The journal covers scholarly articles in the fields of Social and Political Sciences, which include, but not limited to, Anthropology, Government Studies, Political Sciences, Sociology, International Relations, Public Administration, History, Philosophy, Arts, Education, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies. As the journal is Open Access, it ensures high visibility and the increase of citations for all research articles published. The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* aims to facilitate scholarly work on recent theoretical and practical aspects of Social and Political Sciences.



ASIAN INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH
Connecting Scholars Worldwide



The Reasons for War and Social Choice

Md Abul Hasan¹, Vivianne Riberdy², H. M. Towhidur Rahman³

¹ Post graduation in ‘Politics. Economics. Philosophy’ from the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russia, Email: ahasan91hse.ru@gmail.com (abul91hasan@gmail.com)

² Post graduation in ‘Politics. Economics. Philosophy’ from the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), Moscow, Russia, Email: vivi_riberdy@hotmail.fr

³ Post Graduation in Political Science from the University of Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Email: towhidgppsc@gmail.com

Abstract

War is a hunter of millions of lives, destruction of resources, but war sometimes could be the alternative choice of people, leaders, and policy makers. Wars are mostly responsible for intelligence failure and bad crisis management. Scholars have exposed various propositions as causes of war and debated if war is rational or if it is either miscalculation and misperception, which led to the initiation of war. Leaders, in many cases, have initiated wars either for their own interest (e.g. winning in election) or state’s national sovereignty. In some cases, wars are considered as a public choice whether people are solely aware of the benefits of war or they are misunderstood by the leaders. Our research have found that misunderstanding, intelligence failure and inadequate foreign policy management, as well as standing of a country, are mainly responsible for engaging in war. Findings show that public opinion is volatile, and could be changed over time. That is why war often cannot be considered as a social choice. Therefore, our research proposes a further research on the concept of war as social choice.

Keywords: War, Social Choice, Rational, Irrational, Miscalculation, International law

Introduction

War is a hunter of millions of lives, destruction of resources, but war sometimes could be the alternative choice of people, leaders, and policy makers. General W. T. Sherman famously said “war is Hell, but war is worse than Hell. War is real, and it destroys people’s lives” (Biddle, 2014). War is the consequence of certain ideas and aims, which is sufficiently accepted or refused by people of a given society and gives rise to certain norms and policies that led to war or help to abstain from war. To understand these causes, it is necessary to have the possibility of war or peace. Scholars have exposed various propositions as causes of war and debated if war is rational or if it is either miscalculation which led to the initiation of war. Many leaders have tried to get the public opinion of initiating war against a nation for either their own interest, to ensure their power or state’s

sovereignty. Furthermore, in some cases, war can be considered as a social choice, which is the aggregated decision of the population to engage in war or not. First, it is not a small task to be sure of what the majority public opinion about war is. Second, it is not always the case that political leaders openly inform their population about war declarations as it was the case before 1945. Third, some cases of public opinion majority disagreement on engaging in war were ignored by political leaders, as in the Syrian War. For those reasons, the limits of war as a social choice will be detailed in another section. In this paper, we focus on the fundamental causes of war based on the notion and experiments of war experts and foreign policy makers and analyse the limitations of considering war as an aggregate choice of a nation. Our argument is that misunderstanding, intelligence failure and inadequate foreign policy management, as well as standing of a country, are mainly responsible for engaging in war. In addition, public opinion is volatile, and could be changed over time. Therefore, it is necessary to do further research on the concept of war as social choice.

Research Hypothesis and Methodology

Our hypothesis is twofold: first, causes of war can include certain notions and aims and second that opinion aggregation issues, possibility of policy makers to circumvent public's opinion as well as policy makers possibility to dissimulate their engagement in war because of international laws are limitations to consider war as a social choice. In order to show that the research hypothesis are reasonable, we will be looking at two main questions. First, what caused the great wars in the past and in the modern times. Second, if those causes of wars are rational, could war be considered as the lump choice of a nation. The research is primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature. We will try to give an overview of the causes of wars and analyze if war can be considered social choice in modern conflicts. Historical causes that led states to initiate wars in the past; what caused the present-day wars and the people's opinion about wars as social choice will be provided.

Causes of War

This section will include past historic motives that led nations to initiate wars using the idea from scholarly literature and what caused the great wars of modern times using the analysts' study and our own experiments.

Four generic motives have historically led the countries to begin war: fear, interest, standing and revenge (Richard Ned, 2010). Whereas the majority of wars across three and a half centuries was caused by security or material interests, the majority was caused for standing and revenge reasons. According to the war experts, most of these wars were responsible for intelligence failure and bad crisis management.

In his book *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Past and Future Motives for War* Richard Ned (2010) exposes six propositions as causes of war according to his dataset. His six propositions is first that aggressive states are either rising hegemonies looking for recognition or already dominant powers attempting to consolidate their hegemony. Second, hegemonic and emerging powers are highly unlikely to engage in war against one another. Third, the most likely target of hegemonic and emerging powers would be weaker third parties. Fourth, 'hegemonic wars' are generally the result of unintended escalation or miscalculation. Fifth, unintended conflict escalation and miscalculation are much more often causes of war than 'incomplete information' available. Sixth, declining and weak states are unlikely to declare war against great powers. after reviewing Marxists, realists and other approaches to the causes of war. He considered those six propositions as an answer to only partially satisfying Marxists, realists and international relations scholars' explanations of war. Indeed, many scholars have already put forward the important role of 'status' and 'reputation' as reasons for war. Dafoe, Renshon and Huth (2014) in their article 'Reputation and Status as Motives for War' regard reputation as 'common beliefs about a given state recurrent characteristics or behaviors, such as respecting treaties or not respecting them' whereas they regard status as 'an attribute of an individual or social role that refers to position vis-a-vis a comparison group such as expectations to have about behaviors. In other words, reputation concerns expectations one state or a group of states can have about another state's behavior whereas status concerns its standing in the 'international power hierarchy'. Dafoe, Renshon and Huth (2014) argue that the quest for status is a good enough reason for the state to declare war. Some examples in which status could be consider a good enough reason to engage in war is when a "declining hegemon is unwilling or unable to revise the status hierarchy to accommodate the

challenger; when there is confusion in the international status hierarchy by creating a situation prone to status conflict or when one state is willing to engage in war in order to maintain its hegemony over the international order.

In his work *The causes of war and those of peace* Biddle (2014) asserts five reasons of war are statism, collectivism, altruism, mysticism and evasion. Statism is considered as the primary political cause of war. It is known as a social system based on the notion that the state has a right to force individuals to act against their judgment for the sake of some “greater good,” whether the community (communism), the race (Nazism), the nation (fascism), or “God” (theocracy) (Biddle, 2014). Collectivism is one of the main ideological causes of war. It is the idea that an individual's life is included into some collective group that may force him or her to act according to the instruction of that collective group. Serving others, for example the American's involvement in the Vietnam war, in self-sacrificially is regarded as altruism - the primary moral cause of war. Mysticism is treated as the most fundamental philosophical cause of war: acceptance of the notion that knowledge can be acquired by non-sensory, non-rational means, such as faith, revelation, intuition, or any other form of ‘just knowing’ (Biddle, 2014). The most fundamental psychological cause of war is evasion. It is defined as the refusal to face relevant facts, the act of pretending that reality is other than it is.

Matthew and Massimo (2009) in their article ‘*The reasons for war*’ claimed the “bargaining failure” as mainly the reason for war. In addition, they explored five reasons for bargaining failure. First, asymmetric information about the potential costs and benefits of war. Second, a lack of ability to enforce a bargaining agreement and/or a lack of the ability to credibly commit to abide by an agreement. Third, indivisibilities of resources that might change hands in a war, so that not all potentially mutually beneficial bargaining agreements are feasible. Fourth, agency problems, where the incentives of leaders differ from those of the populations that they represent and finally, multilateral interactions where every potential agreement is blocked by some coalition of states or constituencies who can derail it.

There are also some scholars such as Geller and Singers (1998) who found that miscalculation and misperception are the vital causes of war.

War as social choice

Social choice is considered as ‘the study of collective decision process and procedures’ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013) It must be understood as a ‘cluster of models and results concerning the aggregation of individual inputs, such as votes, preferences, judgments, welfare, into collective outputs, such as collective decisions, preferences, judgments and welfare’ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013) Wars are sometimes supported by masses of initiator countries, because of a feeling of gaining something out of it. Hence, war can be generated by social choice. Social choice is defined as ‘the process by which individual preferences are aggregated into collective choices through group decision processes such as voting’ (Adam, 2014).

Gaubatz (1995) addresses the numerous problems of drawing conclusions about military intervention as a social choice supported by a majority of a given nation in his article ‘*Intervention and Intransitivity: Public Opinion, Social Choice, and the Use of Military Force Abroad*’. He outlined several reasons limiting interpretation of opinion polls as social choice approving of military intervention. The first explanation brings up that the general public is unable to express a shared majority opinion. Aggregation of public opinion is more often than not biased because the public is generally unable to behave in a ‘coherent attitude’. Gaubatz mentions that proponents of this argument believe that ‘foreign policy is simply too complex and too remote for most of them [individuals of a given nation]. Others argue that incoherence of poll results is due to the difficulty of ‘crafting effective polls.’ Proponents of this explanation allude to the sensibility of publics’ answers to sentence formulations and wordings used in polls. Although respondents may be well informed and sincere in their answers, wordings will affect their answers much more than what is thought at first glance. Gaubatz expounds in his words that: ‘Subtle differences can change the way respondents interpret questions, because the words that make up questions carry substantive and emotional contexts and provide cues that will bias the responses’. One striking example of the gap between the percentage of American supporting U.S. airstrikes in Bosnia in between

Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll which published that 36 percent of respondents approved the use of air strikes whereas ABC News poll announced that 65 percent of respondents supported airstrikes. The huge gap between the two journals' news was due to the sentence 'along with its allies in Europe' of the second poll according to Gaubatz. Hence, the context sensitivity of polls is the first problem limiting the generalization of those results and interpreting them as sources validating the use of violence as a social choice. The last explanation to polls' incoherences is due to intransitivity. To illustrate the intransitivity problem, Gaubatz takes the example of three voters A, B and C, who should decide what is their favorite color between white, gray and white. Each voter has a preferred color, a second preferred one and a least preferred one. Even though voters answer genuinely and without changing their minds, generalizing results in an aggregate manner to consider those results as a 'public opinion' would still be difficult. It is so because there is a high probability that if the question: 'What is your favorite color?' is asked that results would be one third for each color; that if the question asked is 'Do you prefer white or black?', two thirds will prefer white to black. If similar questions are asked for preferences over gray to white and black to gray, the results will again be around two thirds. Gaubatz explains that aggregation of these preferences shows intransitivity and that 'Following the voting analogy, we would say that there is a cycle in this structure of preferences: an attempt to find a social preference by majority vote could get stuck cycling through the alternatives indefinitely, since white beats black, and black beats gray, but gray in turn beats white'. The same results would happen with aggregation of different opinion polls. Gaubatz unravels that 'cycles in the majority preference lead to a situation where the order in which alternatives are evaluated determines the outcome. Indeed, McKelvey has shown that with the right order and with a few quite restrictive assumptions about the nature of preference distributions, any alternative can emerge as the social choice'. Thus, the order in which alternatives are compared in an absolute sense and the formulation of questions may distort our perception of public opinion compared to real opinion of each individual. According to Gaubatz, this is the precise reason why aggregations of opinion cannot be considered 'public opinion' of the majority of a given nation for the use of violence as a foreign policy either for declaration of war or for military intervention.

Some recent examples in which public opinion of engaging in war was mitigated are spelled out by Shany Mor (2016) in 'War and democratic decision making: How do democracies argue and decide whether or not to intervene in distant wars?' is the U.S., the U.K., France and Germany's intervention in Iraq War in 2002 and 2003, in Libya War in 2011 and in Syria War in 2013. Mor noticed that public engagement in debate over involvement of each country in the Iraq War was the most important. Public opinion was also much more divided than in the two other wars. Mor pointed out that the Iraq War was the main topic of op-ed newspapers in the four countries mentioned above. Debates dealt with duration and outcome of engaging in war. Public opinion results were the following in the four countries: the U.K. and the U.S. voted for war whereas France and Germany voted against. Plus, almost anti-Iraq War demonstrations including millions of demonstrators took place in Europe and America on the 15th of February 2003. Conversely, such disagreement over war engagement or not did not occur for the Libyan and the Syrian War. Disagreement did not occur because such debates were not directed towards the general public. Mor reveals that '[...] the three countries which led the bombing - France, the U.K., and the U.S. - weren't even really notified that anything more than a 'no-fly zone' was being implemented'. Here comes another issue of 'social choice' in war. In fact, general opinion is often not taken into account when political leaders decide to intervene militarily outside of their borders. The Syrian War made parliamentary forums about war reappear. Some heated parliament debates both in the U.S. and in the U.K. led to the final decision of blocking wars in opposition to previous debates on war occurring in the Commons or in the Congress. This forced the U.S. president to pass upon this opposition. Those three cases can make one wonder if public opinion or parliament as an opposition to war is sufficient to prevent war. Indeed, this was not the case for the Iraq and the Syrian War.

Another reason why it is difficult to consider war as a social choice is that states almost never declare war officially nowadays as clarified by Fazal (2012) in her article 'Why States No Longer Declare War?'. Jus in bello of international laws, or 'the law of war governing belligerent conduct', limits states' incentives to officially declare war. Indeed, half of wars between states were followed by war declaration whereas during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, whereas only three were followed by war declaration since 1950. Nowadays international laws disincentivize political leaders to declare war by escalating the states' costs to comply with those laws. Declarations of wars' costs have risen for two reasons: first, because

of the higher bureaucratic costs, such as military training to respect laws of war enacted in *jus in bellos* and second, because strategic costs are also higher, such as weapons which should be unused that states have already paid for or refraining from opting for certain military strategies. Also, Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Huth noted other costs of *jus in bellos*, which are liability costs, domestic political costs and reputational costs. In an attempt to circumvent international laws *jus in bellos*, modern states would more likely engage in informal wars. In turn, engaging in informal wars makes it harder for the general public to measure its state involvement into this war and also to measure possible outcomes since states are a lot less likely to be accountable to international laws in informal wars.

Conclusion

Many reasons which are used to engage in wars in different conflicts have been presented. Causes of war can include misinterpretation or miscalculation, status or reputation, statism, collectivism, altruism, mysticism, evasion and many others. Although those causes or reasons may seem rational when one takes into account a country's interests, it does not make it reasonable or rational internationally. For this reason, war is mostly considered irrational. Even though war is considered mostly irrational, it does not mean that causes of war should be left unstudied since there are no patterns to be deciphered in order to prevent further wars. Indeed, the more we know about the cause of war, the better able we are to design strategies and policies to reduce its likelihood. The study of war remains important for humanitarian and intellectual reasons. Furthermore, we come to the conclusion that in practice, war can often not be considered as a social choice. First, aggregation public opinion issues are numerous and a small reformulation can change one's answer in a survey and hence the survey's overall outcome. Second, modern wars are different since 1945 since states no longer declare war. For this reason, war is much more disguised than before and less obvious to detect at first glance. Third, examples of modern wars have proven that political leaders may easily pass beyond parliaments and public opinion's disagreement to engage in war, such as during the Syrian War or that public debates about war may not take place, such as it was the case in the Libyan War. All of those reasons limit the possibility to consider war as a social choice approved by a majority of citizens. Political leaders veto power in the military sphere should not be underestimated.

References

- Evera, S. van (1998). *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Itaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lebow, Richard Ned (2010). *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War*. Cambridge University Press
- Matthew O. J and Massimo M (2009). *The reasons for war. Handbook on the Political Economy of War*. Elgar publishing.
- Coates, A.J (1977). *The Ethics of War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Nick F, Bruno C (2008). *Moral Constraints on War: Principles and Cases*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Gat, Azar (2008). *War in Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Black, J (2005). *Why Wars Happen*. Chicago: Reaction books.
- Fiala, Andrew (2008). *The Just War Myth. The Moral Illusions of War*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Rawls, John. *The Law of Peoples*. In John Rawls: *critical assessments of leading political philosophers*. Vol.4: Political liberalism and The law of peoples.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce and Lalman, David. (2014). *Reason and War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Alingham, Michael (2002). *Choice Theory: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Fearon, D. James. (1995). *Rationalist explanations of War*. Cambridge University Press, URL: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E3B716A4034C11ECF8CE8732BC2F80DD/S0020818300033324a.pdf/rationalist-explanations-for-war.pdf>
- Cramer, C. (2002). *Homo Economicus Goes to War: Methodological Individualism, Rational Choice and the Political Economy of War*. World Development, Volume 30, Issue 11, pp. 1845-1864. DOI [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(02\)00120-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(02)00120-1)
- Taylor Gaubatz, Kurt. (1995). *Intervention and Transitivity: Public Opinion, Social Choice, and the use of Military Force Abroad*. Cambridge University Press, Available at:

- <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/intervention-and-intransitivity-public-opinion-social-choice-and-the-use-of-military-force-abroad/213B6D2C5A504E767FD07149D4D6F7AB>
- Elkus, Adam. (2014). *Social Choice: A Personal Theory of Power*. Medium, Available at: <https://medium.com/@Aelkus/social-choice-a-personal-theory-of-power-5d7a19657551>
- Tanisha M. Fazal (2012). *Why States no Longer Declare War*. *Journal Security Studies*, 21:4 (2012), Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09636412.2012.734227?casa_token=uuxtSlsRweUAAAAA:LDgp3k%207lbeYmck_Tm9zjBm6tG0drj18Te1zqIn0CIIbnd3ukYfzagYYyoArA_BuBPngzPQSJQcH0cw
- C. Langlois, Catherine and P. Langlois, Pierre. (2006). *When Fully Informed States Make Good the Threat of War: Rational Escalation and the Failure of Bargaining*. *British Journal of Political Science*, Cambridge University Press, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/when-fully-informed-states-make-good-the-threat-of-war-rational-escalation-and-the-failure-of-bargaining/4BA8792346874325AB74A17A33AD7231>
- Chandler, David (2004). *The Responsibility to Protect? Imposing the 'Liberal peace'*. *Peace Operations and Global Order*, Available at: <http://www.iilj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Chandler-The-Responsibility-to-Protect.-Imposing-a-%E2%80%98Liberal-Peace%E2%80%99-2004.pdf>
- Geller, Daniel S. and J. David Singer (1998). *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://homepage.univie.ac.at/heinz.gaertner/wp-content/foalien-13junipw.pdf>
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2013). *Social Choice Theory*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-choice/>
- Craig, Biddle (2014). *The causes of War and those of peace*. Available at: <https://www.theobjectivestandard.com/2014/10/causes-war-peace/>
- Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth (2014). *Reputation and Status as Motives for War*. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17 (2014): 374-375. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a71eff78dd0418fa3dcb980/t/5a7369710d9297f3f11008de/1517513075870/ARPS.pdf>
- Mor, Shany. (2016). *War and Democratic Decision Making How do democracies argue and decide whether or not to intervene in distant wars?* *Éditoriaux de l'IFRI*. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/edito_ifri_shany_mor_26.10.2016_0.pdf