International Order and Armed Conflict

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This white paper begins with a straightforward and somewhat surprising observation: Although we are in a period in which the Western liberal international order is in question, we know very little about the implications of changes in international order for global conflict. The argument of the paper, simply, is that we should focus on rectifying that deficit.

An *international order* is a set of laws and practices, reflective of underlying principles of legitimacy and balance of power, to which some set of powerful states submits in exchange for security. Quite a bit has been written by both policy makers and academics about international order (e.g. [1, 2, 3, 4]). While some of this work focuses on the relationship between international order and Great Power wars [1, 35, 5], virtually none of it has anything to say about the broader implications of international order for smaller conflicts around the world. Given that the amount of war in the international system is a question of interest both to the United States government and to the public [6], this is no small omission.

At the other end of the theoretical telescope, students of international conflict have produced an enormous body of literature on the issues that lead states to use force against one another. Examples include arms races and conflict spirals [7, 8, 9], ethnicity and nationalism [10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15], domestic political regime type [16, 17, 18], leadership change [19, 20], economic interdependence and trade [21, 22, 23], territory [24, 25, 26], climate change-induced scarcity [27, 28, 29, 30], and so on.

Other scholars who work in the game-theoretic tradition have refined this understanding of war by portraying it as a bargaining process and focusing on the question, not of which issues lead to conflict, but why those issues could not be settled via negotiation. [31, 32] Accordingly, students of international institutions have begun to focus on the impact of institutions on the sorts of information and commitment problems that can lead to the breakdown of negotiations and war (e.g., [33, 34]).

At present, however, the number of books and articles that links international orders to the calculations that states make when deciding whether or not to go to war is, as far as I've been able to ascertain, precisely zero. While this is an understandable situation given that these lines of research developed separately, it seems fundamentally problematic in an era in which the future of NATO, the European Union, and other key pillars of international order are in question.

Indeed, our lack of understanding of the relationship between international order and conflict is potentially the most serious gap in our understanding of national and international security at this time. Arguably [35, 5], contestation over international order have given rise to the largest wars in modern history. There is no shortage of issues that merit attention; at the same time, with the possible exception of global warming and pandemics, very few of them have the potential to impact as many lives.

Fortunately, the intellectual foundations necessary to answer this question are already well developed, so this is an area in which significant progress could be made in a relatively short period. Unfortunately, a question this broad is unlikely to be addressed either in policy circles or in the relevant branches of academia unless incentives are provided to do so. The policy world, of necessity, typically focuses far more on short-run problems than on broad, long-term issues like these. At the same time, while social science has benefited greatly from advances in political methodology, critics have rightly noted that scholarship increasingly focuses on narrower and narrower questions. While a narrowing of focus is fairly typical, and for the most part healthy, at this stage of the development of a science, it does mean that practitioners tend to lose sight of "big picture" questions like this one.

The Puzzle

To the extent that we can derive any generalization at all on the subject of international order and conflict, it would seem to be that international order fosters peace and its absence is permissive of greater conflict [5, 3]. The case of the Concert of Europe, which produced a period of substantial peace between the Napoleonic Wars and the Crimean War, would seem to support this argument. Yet the Soviet Union established an international order after the first World War and expanded it significantly after the second, and while the dissolution of that international order brought conflict in Yugoslavia, it also improved the prospects for peace around the globe [6]. The order produced by the Treaty of Versailles succeeded to a large extent in the 1920s, but a reasonable argument can be made that the peace that it produced was pregnant with the violence that ultimately undermined it. In short, we simply don't know when the dissolution of an international order will be good or bad for the cause of international peace and security.

On a related note, while international orders can help to ameliorate the issues that cause conflict among their members, they are typically founded on a set of legitimating principles that can themselves constitute new causes of war. In the case of the Western liberal order, for example, the liberal and humanitarian norms at the heart of the order arguably helped to produce and solidify peace among its members [16]. At the same time, however, they gave rise to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which justifies intervention on humanitarian grounds. These would, of course, be wars fought for a good cause, at least by Western standards; but wars are wars, and it's difficult to know *a priori* which will produce less human misery than they prevent.

Moreover, although international orders tend to produce peace among the countries that subscribe to them, there is no consensus as to whether this is the result of a *screening* or a *constraining* effect. Constraining effects actually change the behavior of the states in question, while screening effects simply "screen out" states that would not have complied. [36] Put more simply: we don't know whether NATO and the European Union promoted peace among their members or their members became members because they were already inclined toward peace.

As a result of these and other gaps in our knowledge about the relationship between international order and conflict, it is difficult to make concrete recommendations to policy makers who are divided on the subject. While "America First" probably won't be an attractive idea to those who have devoted their careers to American foreign policy, it's difficult to engage in a coherent policy discussion without a firm historical grounding in the convoluted implications of international order for peace and security.

Directions

The project of better understanding the relationships between international order and peace would benefit greatly from interdisciplinary collaboration. International orders are relatively few in number, so social scientists with a strong historical background and broad theoretical perspective could be exceptionally useful. The creation of political order is an example of a complex system, with states at a lower level of aggregation producing order at a higher level, so insights from students of complexity could be invaluable. The question of whether international orders screen or constrain is one that can be addressed in individual cases by area specialists and in general by statistical methodologists who specialize in causal inference.

Ideally, an effort of this nature would be administered by a national-level funding organization such as the National Science Foundation and executed at both publicly and privately funded research centers. Priority should ideally be given to interdisciplinary research teams that can credibly produce research that is of more value than the sum of its parts, but funding should not exclude individual scholars or intradisciplinary teams that can produce deeper and more focused contributions.

Summary

The question of the implications of international order for peace and security deserves far more attention from scholars and policy makers than it has received. While it is almost certainly the least well understood "big question" of the early 21st century, we know virtually nothing about it.

Fortunately, we understand parts of it very well. The literature on international conflict has produced some nonobvious and empirically well supported results about the origins of conflict among states, and the literature on international order has greatly improved our understanding of how order works at the international level. Bridging the gap between these two bodies of knowledge is a very reasonable goal that could have a very big payoff.

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