
UNIT 4 THEORIES OF WAR

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

War, like diplomacy, propaganda, etc., is an instrument of national policy. It has been used by states to achieve their national goals and aspirations and fulfil their national interests. Questions of war and peace are central to the understanding of international relations; these are questions that involve the problem of survival.

Today the term 'war' is used in many different ways. We speak of cold war, hot war, limited war, total war, conventional and unconventional war, civil war, guerrilla war, preventive war, and so on. Wars have also been labelled as imperialist wars or wars of national liberation depending on the perceptions of the users. A variety of statistical studies will tell you about the repeated recurrence of war in the world over the past several centuries. In the twentieth century, despite the horrors of the two world wars and the nuclear holocaust, the incidence of war has not diminished. Although there has been peace between the great powers in the last half of the 20th century, the number of regional or civil armed conflicts has continued to grow, reaching a peak of 68 in the year 2000. A majority of these were low-intensity and intrastate, and mostly confined to the developing part of the world. In 1968, historians Will and Ariel Durant calculated that there had been only 268 years free of war in the previous 3,421 years. It is most likely, that they undercounted the wars. Certainly there has been no year without war since.

This unit examines two aspects of war: what is war and what are the causes of war by examining the different theories or conceptions of war. The next two units of this course will look at the various types of wars and understand why they are classified in the way that they are.

4.2 WHAT IS WAR?

Today the spectrum of war has expanded from the traditional military dimension to areas like political and economic warfare, psychological warfare, etc. But the traditional definitions of war still use the narrow point of reference. Hoffman Niclerson in the Encyclopaedia Britannica states that 'war is the use of organised force between two human groups pursuing contradictory policies, each group seeking to impose its policies upon the other'. Yet another scholar, Malinowski defines war as an 'armed conflict between two independent political units, by means of organised military force, in pursuit of a tribal or national policy'.

A mention must be made of Karl von Clausewitz's argument that war 'is only a part of political intercourse, therefore by no means an independent thing in itself...war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse with an admixture of other means'. This definition helps in understanding the broader setting in which war is located.

Quincy Wright accepts that war is waged on the diplomatic, economic, and propaganda fronts as well as on the military front and that the art of war coordinates all these elements to the purpose of victory. Yet he argues that in the narrower sense the art is confined to the military aspect. This embraces the organisation, discipline, and the maintenance of morale of the armed forces; the invention, development and procurement of weapons; the provision of transport and movement of forces; strategy of campaigns and tactics of battles etc. The larger problems of military policy, such as, determination of national policy, national public opinion, economy; diplomacy, etc., lie in the realm of international politics.

4.3 THEORIES OF CAUSES OF WAR

There has been a lot of study devoted to analysing the causes of war, but no consensus has emerged on the matter. Some of the confusion lies in the inability to distinguish between immediate and long-term causes or underlying causes. In some cases the analysis is cast in ideological terms and then only a single cause is focussed upon. Some causes are immediate and some are basic; some refer to specific events and acts committed by countries while others may look at various forces and underlying trends. Each of this cause needs to be explored and there can be no one final answer to the question what is the cause of war.

Generally the causes of war are classified under political, economic, social and psychological causes. Quincy Wright points out that causes of war can be looked at from different angles. War has politico-technological, juro-ideological, socio-religious and psycho-economic causes. For Marxists, the roots of war are located in capitalism and imperialism. They also distinguish between certain kinds of wars like imperialist wars, revolutionary wars, and wars of national liberation. Others look for psychological causes and stress on the feeling of insecurity that nations feel. The causes of war are related to war as an instrument of national policy since wars are fought for the safeguard of national objectives, goals and aspirations. This may relate to territory, to identity, or to the very survival of the nation-state.

It is convenient to discuss the theoretical approaches that seek to understand the causes of war at the following levels of analysis: 1) System-level causes, 2) State-level causes, and 3) Individual-level causes.

4.3.1 System-level Analysis

System level analysis adopts a 'top down' approach to the study of world politics. The central argument of this approach is that state and non-state actors operate in a global social, cultural, economic, political, geographic, environment and that the features of the system determine the behaviour of the actors. Four factors determine how a system functions: **structural** characteristics of a system; power relationships of the members within the system; economic realities that impinge upon the system and the norms and conventions that are likely to 'govern' the behaviour of the actors.

The structural factors of a system refer to the organisation of authority **within** the system, the actors and the level of interaction. The **international** system does not have a vertical system of authority. It may best be described as 'anarchic'; where anarchy implies a lack of a **centralised** international authority and the existence of sovereign nation-states pursuing their individual national interests. Traditionally, students of international relations have looked at nation states as the central actors on the global scene. Today one has to **recognise** the existence of non-state actors as having an important role to play in international relations. Some **NGOs** such as the Amnesty **International** or Green Peace have played an important role in international relations. So have some multinational corporations (**MNCs**). Today terrorist organisations would also be classified as non-state actors. Other prominent non-state actors may include such inter-governmental and regional bodies like the **WTO** or **regional economic/trade** blocs **like** the **APEC**, European Union, etc. The level of interaction between both, the state and non-state actors has increased over the years. The intensity of this interaction is seen mainly in **non-military** areas like human rights, economic relations and social sectors.

The power relationship within the system refers to the distribution of power. We have moved from the age of European domination in the pre world war era to US-Soviet bipolarity of the cold war years. Today one talks of the age of American dominance in the post Soviet era. These changing power relationships and the resultant changes in the balance of power in the world have been a continuing reality of international relations.

The economic reality refers to the natural resources that a country has and the level of its economic and industrial development. The North South divide in the world is based on economic realities of a developed world in the North and a developing (or less developed) world in the South. While it is true that we live in an economically interdependent world, the realities of the dominant developed world cannot be wished away. Conflicts are not only over scarce resources, they are also over control of the available resources in the world. The history of colonialism has been understood in terms of economic realities of control; in modern times, oil, for example, has emerged as one of the key economic instruments.

How important are norms and conventions in governing the world order? This is a topic that has been debated by many. The general presumption is that nations would not seek to disturb the order in international relations unless there are some really compelling reasons. The debates over the Iraq war (2003) focused on whether the US and Britain violated

international norms as represented in the United Nations when they went into war against Iraq.

At the system level analysis therefore the following issues are focused on as causes of war:

- i) The distribution of power: Relative power postures and power vacuums, the balance of power politics alliance politics, etc are mentioned as possible causes of war.
- ii) The anarchical nature of the system is also considered a cause of war. The insecurity that is caused amongst nations due to a lack of a **centralised** authority may lead to an **arms race** that eventually may spill into a war. One may explain the need for pursuing nuclear weapons policy by the developing world as a means to overcome this sense of insecurity.
- iii) At the economic level, oil and natural gas, strategic minerals are looked as possible sources of conflict in the modern world. The Iraq-Iran war, American action in Iraq is sometimes looked at within the framework of politics of oil.
- iv) Samuel Huntington's thesis of Clash of Civilizations is yet another systemic perspective of wars. The central argument made refers to the key causes of **future** wars to be ethno-religious and therefore **civilizational** and not state centric.

4.3.2 State-level Analysis

State-level analysis focuses on the nation-state and the internal process of the state as the key determinant of world politics. This is a state-centric approach to international relations. While the earlier system-level analysis believed that the state behaviour is a product of the compulsions of the system, this approach believes that states have a far greater independence in their decision-making.

There would be both structural and non-structural determinants to making of policy. The structural would refer to the nature of government while the latter to the history and **political** culture of the state. Authoritarian governments and democratic **governments** would differ in the way policy is formulated. Similarly, policies in times of crisis and in times of peace would also be different.

At the state-level analysis causes of war are located in the following situations:

- i) Supremacy of national interest has been considered as a central driving force at this level. National interest would operate at two levels: One is a war to ensure the survival of the nation-state if attacked by the enemy. A second **level** is that of an expansionist national interest where extending of **frontiers** is considered a security related national interest. Israel has seen both the situations. The 1948 war may be described as a war for survival while the latter wars of 1967 and 1973 saw the expansion of territory for security reasons.
- ii) A linkage is sought to be established between domestic politics and foreign policy. It is sometimes argued that nations go in for war to divert domestic attention elsewhere.
- iii) There is yet another analysis that focuses on the linkage between the type of country

and the likelihood of becoming aggressive. It has been argued that democratic societies are less likely to opt for war than authoritarian ones,

4.3.3 Individual-level Analysis

The motto of UNESCO is 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'. Individual level analysis focuses on human nature and therefore the psychological factors that contribute to decision-making. It also focuses on the biological factors to understand the aggressive tendency of man. Whether human beings are naturally aggressive is a question that is asked quite often. Biopolitics examines the relationship between physical nature and political behaviour. Mention must be made of the Feminist approaches to international relations that argue that the aggressive human behaviour is essentially a male trait.

Yet another dimension of the individual level analysis is related to group behaviour. Why do mobs turn violent? It is argued that individuals as individuals may not show aggressive behaviour. But when they are part of a riotous mob they are likely to commit atrocities that they in their individual capacities would have never committed.

Perhaps the most significant contribution to this level of analysis is done with reference to leadership behaviour. A study of a John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile crisis, of Lal Bahadur Shastri during the 1965 Indo-Pak war, or Indira Gandhi in the context of Bangladesh war are part of an attempt to understand leadership behaviour. Similarly, peace initiatives such as that of Anwar Sadat towards Israel, the opening up of a dialogue with China by President Richard Nixon, or the shuttle diplomacy of Henry Kissinger are all examples of leadership behaviour.

Causes of war at the individual level analysis are located in the following:

- i) A rational decision taken by the leader, a conscious decision to go for a war for the protection of national interest is cited as one of the important reasons. The argument here is that even if the situation is ripe for a war in the final analysis the decision is made by an individual leader. As President Kennedy would have argued, 'the buck stops here'.
- ii) The opposite of this is a theory that would question the rationality argument. A decision to go for a war may be an entirely irrational decision of the leadership.
- iii) Some biologists seek roots of war in human aggressive tendencies. Much of the thinking in this realm is based on animal experimentation. There has been a lot of literature in this area since the time of Darwin's writing on the subject.
- iv) Psychologists look to frustration, misperception and attitude change to understand stimuli that leads to aggressive behaviour. Freud, for example, stresses his belief in human instinct for violence or destruction, an instinct balanced by one for love or life.

4.4 IDEALIST VIEW OF WAR

Political idealism came to dominate international relations during the interwar years. Political

idealists believed in the inherent goodness of human beings and argued that human beings generally sought welfare of others as well as themselves. The idealists believed that bad structural and institutional arrangements on a world wide basis created bad human behaviour. War, according to them was not inevitable, but was a product of the bad structural arrangements.

The idealists therefore argued that war could be prevented through the creation of proper international structures. These structures were cooperative international institutions; the League of Nations had been one of the most important of them to be established after the First World War. The principle of collective security was the operative methodology through which it would be possible to avoid wars. The principle of collective security required joint action and a commitment on part of all the participating states. Some idealist thinkers argued in favour of the rule of international law as a means of avoiding wars. In this scheme, nations would renounce war as an instrument of national policy. Still other idealist thinkers looked at arms race as the source of conflicts. Consequently they favoured a systematic dismantling of the arms race and supported the policy of disarmament.

4.5 REALIST VIEW OF WAR

The failure of the League of Nations and the slow but inevitable march towards yet another world war brought about a critique of the idealist approach. While the Idealist approach had focussed on the role of international law, international organisation, interdependence and cooperation as the key features of international relations, the Realists focussed on power politics, security dilemmas of the nations, aggression, conflict and war.

Hans Morgenthau's six principles of realism present the most clear articulation of the realist position. These well-known principles, briefly are:

- politics is rooted in a permanent and unchanging human nature which is basically self-centred, self-regarding and self-interested.
- The essence of politics is the struggle for power. Similarly, international politics is characterised by the struggle for national power between states.
- While the forms and nature of state power are not fixed but vary in time, place and context, the concept of interest remains consistent.
- While individuals are influenced by moral and ethical implications, states are not moral agents, since their action has to be judged by the criterion of national survival.
- Though states will endeavour to cover their behaviour in ethical terms, it is designed to confer advantage and legitimacy and to further the national interests of the state.
- The political sphere is autonomous from every other sphere of human concern. It has its own standards of thought and criteria for analysis of state behaviour.

Morgenthau argues that the concept of national interest presupposes neither a naturally harmonious world nor the inevitability of war. If all nations pursued their national interest,

the system would be relatively stable with the 'balance of power' mechanism keeping potential problems in check. The realists advocate the maintenance of capable military force and emphasise on nationalism. Realism asserts the primacy of the nation-state and argues that national security was the most important international issue.

The difference between realism and neo-realism was that neo-realism argues that states are power seeking and security conscious but not because of human nature in itself but because the structure of international system compels them to be so. Thus, while state leaders and their subjective valuations of international relations are at the centre of attention in realist theory, the neo-realism focuses on the structure of the system, in particular the relative distribution of power. Actors are less important because structures **compel** them to act in certain ways.

4.6 MARXIST APPROACH TO WAR

Marxist framework for study does not consider states as autonomous units. Ruling class interests drive the state and capitalist states are primarily driven by interests of their bourgeoisies. This implies that conflict between states must be seen in the economic context of competition between capitalist classes of different states. Marxists consider class conflict more fundamental than conflict between states, per se as the real cause of war.

The Marxist analysis argues that politics is determined by vital interests of different classes evolved by the socio-economic system of the **exploiter** state. It is this system that gives rise to wars. The First and Second World wars were a result of social antagonisms inherent in capitalism and contradictions between the bourgeois states that led to the division of the capitalist world into hostile coalitions. After the world wars the main contradiction was between the two opposing social systems: capitalism and socialism. These were basically class contradictions. Thus, from the Marxist perspective, class contradictions leave a mark on all international events.

The expansionist nature of capitalism is another feature that the Marxist focus on. Such expansion had taken the form of imperialism and colonialism during the earlier century. Today, in the postcolonial age it has **taken form** of economic globalisation led by transnational corporations.

4.7 THE JUST WAR

When is a war justified? Under what circumstances do legal, ethical and moral principles justify aggression? Michael Walzer presents the theory of aggression in the form of six propositions:

- a) There exists an international society of independent states. These states are sovereign entities. These states and not private citizens are members of this international society of nations.
- b) This international society has a law that **establishes the rights** of its members –above all **rights** of territorial integrity and political sovereignty.
- c) Any use of force or imminent threat of force by one state against the political sovereignty or

territorial integrity of another constitutes aggression and is a criminal act. The focus here is on boundary crossings: invasions and physical assaults (in modern times this would also include low-intensity conflict situations, like insurrections and dissent movements turning into localised conflicts).

- d) Aggression justifies two kinds of violent response: a war of self-defence by the victim and a war of law enforcement by the victim and any other member of the international society. The presumption here is that the retaliation against the aggressor may or may not come from the aggrieved party; it may come from any other state that feels compelled to return to the stability of the international society.
- e) Nothing but aggression can justify a war. The central purpose of the theory is to limit the occasion for a war. There must have been a wrong committed and a wrong received by the recipient to justify use of force.
- f) Once the aggressor state has been militarily repulsed, it can also be punished. The conception of just war as an act of punishment is old, but the procedures and forms of punishment have never been established in customary or positive international law. The purposes of such a punishment has also not been spelt out – whether it is for retribution, deterrence against any other state or reform of the original aggressor.

4.8 CHANGING NATURE OF WAR

Two factors have contributed to changes in the approaches to understanding of war: role of nationalism and the revolutions in technology. The former addresses the theoretical concerns about war while the latter addresses the tools used for war. The changes in technology, have had an immediate impact on the strategy and tactics of war and as such are not a matter of discussion in this chapter.

The right to self-determination based on ethnic nationalism had been the source of continuous conflict across Europe in the 19th century. The inter-war years saw the concept of self-determination being used with the explicit recognition given to it by Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points. This concept has secured a renewed legitimacy in the post-Soviet world with new states emerging on this very-theoretical construct. The process of disintegration of the Soviet state and the granting of legitimacy to the new states was done on the basis of the principle of ethnic nationalism and right to self-determination. This construct was also used both for legitimising the disintegration of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the integration of Germany. A variety of secessionist movements across the world use this as a theoretical foundation for describing their struggle as national liberation.

The concept of nationalism cuts across the system, state and individual level analysis of war. It has been a force to reckon with and is likely to dominate the approaches to understanding war in the years to come.

At another level, a war to overthrow an unjust social and economic order is also justified. In this case aggression is not limited to a direct military attack but with internal matters also. This right is legitimate only if it seeks to remedy injustice. Injustice is defined mostly in

terms of violation of human rights. Just Cause theories are based on the need to remedy injustice. They have a strong connection with right to resist tyranny. There is a strong internal connection between right to resist tyranny and self-determination. The right to self-determination is provided for in the framework of human rights. The basis for the exercise of this right is as follows: (a) A group is victimised, systemic discrimination or exploitation takes place, (b) Territory is illegally occupied, (c) There exists a valid claim to the territory, (d) Culture of the community is threatened, (e) Constitutional remedies do not exist.

Some of the approaches mentioned above may be useful in explaining the underlying causes of conflict; other may explain the crisis behaviour. These theoretical approaches provide some understanding of the nature of war.

4.9 SUMMARY

War is conflict between relatively large groups of people, which involves physical force inflicted by the use of weapons. Starting out with the basic premise that war is an instrument of national policy, we observed that while war is waged on the diplomatic, economic, propaganda fronts, the traditional military aspect of war has continued to dominate the discourse in peace and conflict studies. In this unit, we have examined the causes of war at system, state and **individual** levels of analysis. At the systems level, the focus of analysis is on the global social, cultural, economic, political, geographic, environment within which the state and non-state actors operate. State-level analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the nation-state and the internal process of the state. The individual level analysis focuses on human nature and therefore the psychological and biological factors that contribute to decision-making. Cutting across these different levels of analysis is **nationalism**, which remains a powerful force to reckon with. Ethnic nationalism and right of self-determination that became prominent in the early 20th century remain powerful forces and have secured renewed legitimacy in the post Cold war period, both because of the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as because of economic integration of the globe. The idealist, realist and Marxist approaches to war examined in this unit are useful in explaining the underlying causes of war or explaining the crisis behaviour of states.

4.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Define war.
- 2) What are the system level theories about the causes of war?
- 3) What are the state level theories about the causes of war?
- 4) What are the individual level theories about the causes of war?
- 5) How do Idealists view war?
- 6) How do realists view war?
- 7) What is the Marxist approach to war?
- 8) Describe the importance of nationalism.