

War and Change in World Politics

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Introduction

During the 1970s and early 1980s a series of dramatic events signaled that international relations were undergoing a significant upheaval. Long-established and seemingly stable sets of relationships and understandings were summarily cast aside. Political leaders, academic observers, and the celebrated “man in the street” were suddenly conscious of the fact that the energy crisis, dramatic events in the Middle East, and tensions in the Communist world were novel developments of a qualitatively different order from those of the preceding decade. These developments and many others in the political, economic, and military realms signaled far-reaching shifts in the international distribution of power, an unleashing of new sociopolitical forces, and the global realignment of diplomatic relations. Above all, these events and developments revealed that the relatively stable international system that the world had known since the end of World War II was entering a period of uncertain political changes.

Ours is not the first age in which a sudden concatenation of dramatic events has revealed underlying shifts in military power, economic interest, and political alignments. In the twentieth century, developments of comparable magnitude had already taken place in the decades preceding World War I and World War II. This awareness of the dangers inherent in periods of political instability and rapid change causes profound unease and apprehension. The fear grows that events may get out of hand and the

the world may once again plunge itself into a global conflagration. Scholars, journalists, and others turn to history for guidance, asking if the current pattern of events resembles the pattern of 1914 or 1939 (Kahler, 1979–80).

These contemporary developments and their dangerous implications raise a number of questions regarding war and change in international relations: How and under what circumstances does change take place at the level of international relations? What are the roles of political, economic, and technological developments in producing change in international systems? Wherein lies the danger of intense military conflict during periods of rapid economic and political upheaval? And, most important of all, are answers that are derived from examination of the past valid for the contemporary world? In other words, to what extent have social, economic, and technological developments such as increasing economic interdependence of nations and the advent of nuclear weapons changed the role of war in the process of international political change? Is there any reason to hope that political change may be more benign in the future than it has been in the past?

The purpose of this book is to explore these issues. In this endeavor we shall seek to develop an understanding of international political change more systematic than the understanding that currently exists. We do not pretend to develop a general theory of international relations that will provide an overarching explanatory statement. Instead, we attempt to provide a framework for thinking about the problem of war and change in world politics. This intellectual framework is intended to be an analytical device that will help to order and explain human experience. It does not constitute a rigorous scientific explanation of political change. The ideas on international political change presented are generalizations based on observations of historical experience rather than a set of hypotheses that have been tested scientifically by historical evidence; they are proposed as a plausible account of how international political change occurs.¹

¹ However, in principle these ideas are translatable into specific testable hypotheses. At least we would argue that this is possible for a substantial fraction of them. The carrying out of this task, or part of it, would require another volume.

To this end we isolate and analyze the more obvious regularities and patterns associated with changes in international systems. However, we make no claim to have discovered the “laws of change” that determine when political change will occur or what course it will take.² On the contrary, the position taken here is that major political changes are the consequences of the conjuncture of unique and unpredictable sets of developments. However, the claim is made that it is possible to identify recurrent patterns, common elements, and general tendencies in the major turning points in international history. As the distinguished economist W. Arthur Lewis put it, “The process of social change is much the same today as it was 2,000 years ago. . . . We can tell how change will occur if it occurs; what we cannot foresee is what change is going to occur” (Lewis, 1970, pp. 17–18).

The conception of political change presented in this book, like almost all social science, is not predictive. Even economics is predictive only within a narrow range of issues (Northrop, 1947, pp. 243–5). Most of the alleged theories in the field of political science and in the sub-field of international relations are in fact analytical, descriptive constructs; they provide at best a conceptual framework and a set of questions that help us to analyze and explain a type of phenomenon (Hoffmann, 1960, p. 40). Thus, Kenneth Waltz, in his stimulating book, *Man, the State and War*, provided an explanation of war in general terms, but not the means for predicting any particular war (1959, p. 232). In similar fashion, this study seeks to explain in general terms the nature of international political change.

The need for a better understanding of political change, especially international political change, was well set forth by Wilbert Moore in the latest edition of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: “Paradoxically, as the rate of social change has accelerated in the real world of experience, the scientific disciplines dealing with man’s actions and products have tended to emphasize orderly interdependence and static continuity” (Moore, 1968, p. 365).

² The term “law” is used several times in this book. In each case, law is to be interpreted as a general tendency that may be counteracted by other developments. This conception of law is taken from Baechler (1975, p. 52).

Moore's judgment concerning the inadequate treatment of political change by social scientists is borne out by analyses of international-relations textbooks and theoretical works. Although there are some recent outstanding exceptions (Choucri and North, 1975; Keohane and Nye, 1977; Waltz, 1979), few of these books have addressed the problem of political change in systematic fashion. As David Easton rightly commented, "students of political life have . . . been prone to forget that the really crucial problems of social research are concerned with the patterns of change" (Easton, 1953, p. 42).³

It is worth noting, as Joseph Schumpeter pointed out, that the natural development of any science is from static analysis to dynamic analysis (1954b, p. 964). Static theory is simpler, and its propositions are easier to prove. Unfortunately, until the statics of a field of inquiry are sufficiently well developed and one has a good grasp of repetitive processes and recurrent phenomena, it is difficult if not impossible to proceed to the study of dynamics. From this perspective, systematic study of international relations is a young field, and much of what passes for dynamics is in reality an effort to understand the statics of interactions of particular international systems: diplomatic bargaining, alliance behavior, crisis management, etc. The question whether or not our current understanding of these static aspects is sufficiently well advanced to aid in the development of a dynamic theory poses a serious challenge to the present enterprise.

A second factor that helps to explain the apparent neglect, until recent years, of the problem of political change is what K. J. Holsti called the decline of "grand theory" (1971, pp. 165–77). The political realism of Hans Morgenthau, the systems theory of Morton Kaplan, and the neofunctionalism of Ernst Haas, as well as numerous other "grand theories," have one element in common: the search for a general theory of international politics. Each in its own way, with varying success, has sought, in the words of Morgenthau, "to reduce the facts of experience to mere

³ It is symptomatic of this continued general neglect that the *Handbook of Political Science* does not contain a section devoted specifically to the problem of political change (Greenstein and Polsby, 1975), nor does the entry "political change" appear in its cumulative index.

specific instances of general propositions" (quoted by Holsti, 1971, p. 167). Yet none of these ambitious efforts to understand the issues (war, imperialism, and political change) has gained general acceptance. Instead, "the major preoccupations of theorists during the past decade have been to explore specific problems, to form hypotheses or generalizations explaining limited ranges of phenomena, and particularly, to obtain data to test those hypotheses"(Holsti, 1971, p. 171). In brief, the more recent emphasis on so-called middle-range theory, though valuable in itself, has had the unfortunate consequence of diverting attention away from more general theoretical problems.⁴

A third reason for neglect of the study of political change is the Western bias in the study of international relations. For a profession whose intellectual commitment is the understanding of the interactions of societies, international relations as a discipline is remarkably parochial and ethnocentric. It is essentially a study of the Western state system, and a sizable fraction of the existing literature is devoted to developments since the end of World War II. Thus the profession has emphasized recent developments within that particular state system. Although there are exceptions, the practitioners of this discipline have not been forced to come to terms with the dynamics of this, or any other, state system.⁵ As Martin Wight suggested (1966), international relations lacks a tradition of political theorizing. In large measure, of course, this is because of the paucity of reliable secondary studies of non-Western systems. This situation in itself is a formidable obstacle to the development of a theory of international political change.

A fourth reason for neglect of the theoretical problem of political change is the widespread conviction of the futility of the task. Prevalent among historians, this view is also held by many social scientists (Hirschman, 1970b). The search for "laws of change" is held to be useless because of the uniqueness and complexity of

⁴ Several important books have recently indicated revival of interest in general theory (Choucri and North, 1975; Bull, 1977; Keohane and Nye, 1977; Hoffmann, 1978; Pettman, 1979; Waltz, 1979). Marxist scholars, of course, never lost interest in "grand theory."

⁵ Three recent exceptions are Luard (1976), Wesson (1978), and Wight (1977).

historical events. Thus the search for generalizations or patterns in human affairs is regarded as a hopeless enterprise. Such a position, if taken at face value, denies the very possibility of a science or history of society; yet one should note its admonitions that there are no immutable laws of change and that although repetitive patterns may exist, social change is ultimately contingent on unique sets of historical events.

Finally, the development of a theory of political change has been inhibited by ideology and emotion. In part this is due to a conservative bias in Western social science. Most academic social scientists have a preference for stability or at least a preference for orderly change. The idea of radical changes that threaten accepted values and interests is not an appealing one. This issue is especially acute for the theorist of international political change, who must confront directly the fundamental problem of international relations: war. The inhibiting effect of this dreadful issue has been well put by John Burton in a sweeping indictment of contemporary international-relations scholarship:

The chief failure of orthodoxy has been in relation to change. The outstanding feature of reality is the dynamic nature of International Relations. No general theory is appropriate which cannot take into consideration the rapidly changing technological, social and political environment in which nations are required to live in peace one with the other. But the only device of fundamental change which is possible in the context of power politics is that of war, for which reason war is recognized as a legitimate instrument of national policy. It is not surprising that International Relations has tended to be discussed in static terms, and that stability has tended to be interpreted in terms of the maintenance of the *status quo*. A dynamic approach to International Relations would immediately confront the analyst with no alternative but to acknowledge war as the only available mechanism for change (Burton, 1965, pp. 71-2).

Burton's challenge to orthodox theory of international relations goes to the heart of the present study. In recent years theorists of international relations have tended to stress the moderating and stabilizing influences of contemporary developments on the behavior of states, especially the increasing economic interdependence among nations and the destructiveness of modern wea-

pons. These important developments have encouraged many individuals to believe that peaceful evolution has replaced military conflict as the principal means of adjusting relations among nation-states in the contemporary world. This assumption has been accompanied by a belief that economic and welfare goals have triumphed over the traditional power and security objectives of states. Thus, many believe that the opportunity for peaceful economic intercourse and the constraints imposed by modern destructive warfare have served to decrease the probability of a major war.

In the present study we take a very different stance, a stance based on the assumption that the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy. The classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century B.C. Yet important changes have taken place. One of the sub-themes of this book, in fact, is that modern statecraft and pre-modern statecraft differ in significant respects, a situation first appreciated by Montesquieu, Edward Gibbon, and other earlier writers on the subject. Nevertheless, we contend that the fundamentals have not been altered.⁶ For this reason, the insights of earlier writers and historical experience are considered relevant to an understanding of the ways in which international systems function and change in the contemporary era.

Thus, although there is obviously an important element of truth in the belief that contemporary economic and technological developments have altered relations among states, events in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in the 1970s and early 1980s force us once again to acknowledge the continuing unsolved problem of war and the role of war in the process of international political change. Even more than in the past, in the last decades of the twentieth century we need to understand the relationship of war and change in the international system. Only in this way can we hope to fashion a more peaceful alternative. As E. H.

⁶ The reasons for this belief are set forth in Chapter 6.

Carr (1951) reminded us, this is the basic task of the study of international relations: "To establish methods of peaceful change is . . . the fundamental problem of international morality and of international politics." But if peace were the ultimate goal of statecraft, then the solution to the problem of peaceful change would be easy. Peace may always be had by surrender to the aggressor state. The real task for the peaceful state is to seek a peace that protects and guarantees its vital interests and its concept of international morality.