

The Origins of Major War

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The Origins of Major War

DALE C. COPELAND

Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON

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*For my parents,
Barbara E. Copeland and Clare G. Copeland*

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D. C. C.

Charlottesville, Virginia

Abbreviations for Primary Documents / Source Material

World War I

- BD *British Documents on the Origins of the War*, 11 vols. London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1926–38.
- CDD *Collected Diplomatic Documents Relating to the Outbreak of the European War*. London: Fischer Unwin, 1915.
- DD *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*, collected by Karl Kautsky, Max Montegalas, and Walther Schucking, eds. *The Outbreak of the World War*, trans. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. New York: Oxford University Press, 1924.
- DDF *Documents Diplomatiques Français (1871–1914)*, Third Series, 11 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1929–36.
- GP *Die Grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914*, 39 vols. Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922–27.
- ÖA *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914*, 8 vols. Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1930.

World War II

- DGFP *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, Series C

and D. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1933-37, 1937-45.

- KTB *Generaloberst Halder: Kriegstagebuch*, 3 vols., ed. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1962-64.
- IMT *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal*, 42 vols. Nuremberg, 1947-49.
- NCA *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, 8 vols., supplementals A and B. Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1946.
- NDR *Nazism, 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, ed. J. Noakes and G. Pridham, 3 vols. Exeter: University of Exeter, 1983-88.
- OKW KTB *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*, ed. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen. Frankfurt: Bernard und Graefe, 1965.

Cold War

- APWASU *America's Plans for War against the Soviet Union, 1945-1950*, 15 vols. New York: Garland, 1989.
- CIA (CC) *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Washington, D.C.: CIA, 1992.
- CWIHP Cold War in International History Project. Washington, D.C.
- CWIHPB *Cold War in International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 1-11. Washington, D.C., 1992-1998.
- DAPS *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy*, ed. Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.
- FRUS *Foreign Relations of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, various years.
- ISR *Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management: An "International Security" Reader*, ed. Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, and Stephen Van Evera. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

Abbreviations

JFKL	John F. Kennedy Library.
JFKL NSF	John F. Kennedy Library, National Security Files.
KR	<i>Khrushchev Remembers</i> , trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott. New York: Little, Brown, 1971.
KR: GT	<i>Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes</i> , trans. and ed. Jerrold Schecter with Vyacheslav Luchkov. New York: Little, Brown, 1990.
KR: LT	<i>Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament</i> , trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott. Boston: Little, Brown, 1974.
KT	<i>The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis</i> , ed. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
LC	Library of Congress.
NA	United States National Archives.
NSA (BC)	National Security Archive, <i>The Berlin Crisis, 1958–1962</i> . Alexandria: Chadwyck-Healey, 1991, microfiche.
NSA (CC)	National Security Archive, <i>The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962</i> . Alexandria: Chadwyck-Healey, 1990, microfiche.
NSA (CMCR)	National Security Archive, Cuban Missile Crisis Releases (documents stored at National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., collected after 1990).
NSA (DOS CMCR)	National Security Archive, Department of State Cuban Missile Crisis Releases (documents stored at National Security Archive, Washington, D.C., collected after 1990).
NSA (DR)	<i>The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader</i> , ed. Lawrence Chang and Peter Kornbluh. New York: New Press, 1992.
NSA (SE)	National Security Archive, <i>The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947–1991</i> . Alexandria: Chadwyck-Healey, 1995, microfiche.

Introduction

Why do major wars occur? Why do international systems move from relative calm to the point where states either initiate system-wide wars or take actions that risk such wars? Since Thucydides, the puzzle of major war has been one of the most important but intractable questions in the study of international relations. Historians tend to view the causes of major war as unique to each case: Hannibal's need for revenge pushed him to attack Rome in 218 B.C.; religious differences between Protestant and Catholic states drove the Thirty Years War (1618–48); Napoleon's charges across Europe reflected his egomania and his lust for power; states stumbled into war in 1914 for fear that others would strike first; Nazi ideology and Hitler's personality caused the Second World War.

This book does not reject the unique aspects of such complicated cases. Instead, it poses this question: Is there a common cause of major wars across the millennia? Many international relations scholars will argue, along with historians, that cases across diverse historical periods must be treated as essentially unique. Cultures and ideas change over time, while the technological and social bases for politics shift. Thus, we should not expect the causes of the First World War or the Second World War to have any necessary relation to the causes of war in the ancient Greek and Roman systems or in early modern Europe. For many, perhaps the only thing common across these cases is "bad thinking": leaders acting from ignorant, misguided, or evil views about the way things are or the way they should be.¹

The realist tradition approaches the question of major war from a different starting point. For realists, there is one factor that cuts across all these wars, one factor that drives states regardless of their particular characteristics: in a word, *power*. All great powers in history (apart from a few universal empires) have had to worry about their power positions relative to oth-

ers. This simple fact has allowed realists to construct general statements about the origins of major war that transcend time and space. Three main realist theories dominate the debate. For classical realism, since balances of power deter aggression, major wars are likely only when one state possesses a preponderance of power. Neorealism accepts this point, but emphasizes that bipolar systems are likely to be more stable than multipolar ones, mainly because bipolarity forces states to be more conscious about maintaining the balance of power. Hegemonic stability theory rejects the classical realist hypothesis. Equality between states is dangerous, since rising and near-equal states will attack to gain the status and rewards denied by the established order. Systems are stable, therefore, only when there is one very large state to keep the peace.

Each of these theories faces some important empirical anomalies. Classical realism cannot explain why war would break out in the three bipolar cases before the nuclear age—Sparta-Athens in 431 B.C., Carthage-Rome in 218 B.C., and France-Hapsburgs in 1521. In each case, there was a rough equality between the two great powers, not a preponderance on one side. War in 1914 is also a puzzle for classical realists because power was roughly balanced between the two alliance blocs. Neorealism not only falls short in explaining war in bipolar cases, but it provides an incomplete argument for war in multipolar situations. The First World War, as we will see, was not a war of miscalculation, as many neorealists assert. Instead, Germany wanted war and drove the system to it. Neorealists also have difficulty providing a primarily power-driven argument for conflicts such as the Second World War and the Napoleonic Wars, and thus often focus on the personal and ideological motives of key leaders.

Hegemonic stability theory is the most problematic of the three. Contrary to its predictions, in five of the six major wars that began in conditions of multipolarity from 1600 to 1945, war was brought on by a state with marked military superiority. Moreover, in every one of the thirteen major wars or major crises across the ten historical periods covered in this book, conflict was initiated by a state fearing decline. This challenges the hegemonic stability assertion that rising states are typically the instigators of conflict.

In this book I seek to overcome the weaknesses of the three main theories by synthesizing their strengths into an alternative, dynamic realist theory of major war. The existing theories are compelling but incomplete. Classical realism and neorealism rightly stress the importance of power differentials and polarity. Some versions of both theories also consider dynamic trends in relative power—in particular, the problem of declining power and the incentive it gives for preventive war. Yet the differing impact of relative decline in bipolar versus multipolar systems has not been adequately studied. Moreover, the more dynamic versions of classical realism and neorealism

have not fully specified the conditions under which decline will lead states to war, to peace, or to something in between. Hegemonic stability theory captures the significance of power trends. By focusing on the rising state, however, the theory misses a basic logical point: rising states should want to avoid war while they are still rising, since by waiting they can fight later with more power.

The theory laid out in this book—what I call dynamic differentials theory—brings together power differentials, polarity, and declining power trends into one cohesive logic. It shows that major wars are typically initiated by dominant military powers that fear significant decline, although, as I explain shortly, polarity places important constraints on this rule. The theory also explains why states might take steps short of war—such as initiating crises or hard-line containment policies—that nonetheless greatly increase the risk of an inadvertent escalation to major war. Most theories treat states as having a dichotomous choice: they either initiate major wars, or they do not. This approach limits the theories' applicability to the modern age of costly warfare. In particular, when both sides have nuclear weapons, states are unlikely to launch premeditated major wars, given the likelihood that their own societies will be destroyed in the process. Yet, leaders understand that they might still fall into war owing to incentives to preempt in a crisis or to the commitment of their reputations. To make a theory of major war relevant to the nuclear era, as well as to the pre-nuclear era, we must explain why states would move from peaceful engagement to a destabilizing cold war rivalry, or from such a rivalry into crises with the type of risks witnessed in the Cuban missile crisis. This book offers such a theory.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ISSUE

Major wars are wars that are characterized by three attributes: all the great powers in a system are involved; the wars are all-out conflicts fought at the highest level of intensity (that is, full military mobilization); and they contain a strong possibility that one or more of the contending great powers could be eliminated as sovereign states. The centrality of the issue is clear: major wars are devastating, as well as system-changing. In the modern world of nuclear weapons, another major war between the great powers could be the last. Although many scholars are confident that major wars are a thing of the past, such optimism is premature. A similar and pervasive optimism continued for more than a decade after the First World War. After 1945, many were surprised that the horrors of the Second World War did not prevent the superpowers from falling into a dangerous cold war. As a new century begins, the rise of China under leaders opposed to U.S. hegemony entails the risk of a new cold war. Such a cold war could pro-

duce crises with the intensity of the Berlin crisis of 1961 or the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Recent revelations about the great risks of superpower war during these crises make avoidance of another cold war a critical policy issue. Underlying the theoretical and historical work in this book, therefore, is a highly practical objective. By understanding the conditions that push states into the rivalries and crises that can lead to major war, we can take steps to mitigate these conditions.

The study of major war also has a number of side benefits for international relations scholarship. Avoiding major war is a universal obsession of great powers, one that affects almost every aspect of their foreign policies. Properly specified theories of major war thus lead to predictions of why states participate in arms races or pursue arms control agreements, why they form alliances, and why they choose deterrence or reassurance strategies to deal with rivals. Accordingly, investigating the origins of major wars is a crucial point of departure in the development of stronger general theories of international politics.²

THE ARGUMENT

This book's argument starts with a basic point drawn from the literature on preventive war: states in decline fear the future. They worry that if they allow a rising state to grow, it will either attack them later with superior power or coerce them into concessions that compromise their security. Even if they are confident that the rising state is currently peaceful, they will be uncertain about its future intentions. After all, minds change, leaders are replaced, and states have revolutions that change their core values and goals. Consequently, states facing decline, if only out of a sense of far-sighted prudence, will contemplate war as one means to uphold their future security.

Decline, however, is a pervasive phenomenon in international relations. Yet major wars, or crises that risk major war, are quite rare. The mere fact of decline is clearly not enough; other systemic conditions must be added to explain these conflicts. The first and most obvious condition is power differentials. Declining states with little power will not risk major war. To paraphrase Bismarck, to provoke such a war would be to commit suicide for fear of death. Hence, we would expect only states at the top of the power hierarchy to contemplate actions that might cause a major war.

Yet polarity and the size of the differentials of power also matter. Decline in a multipolar system is likely to lead to major war only if one state is significantly superior in military power, such that it can take on the system. The declining state in multipolarity cannot expect to fight a war against the rising state alone; the other great powers will likely align against the de-

clining state's attack, since they fear being its next victim. Even when no coalition is expected, however, a declining state only equal to the others in military power must fear long and costly bilateral wars. Such wars, even if victorious, would so reduce the attacker's strength relative to states that remain on the sidelines that initiating war is inherently irrational. In bipolarity, however, the declining great power has to defeat only one other state. Moreover, it does not have to worry about third parties rising to the top by sitting on the sidelines. Hence it can think about fighting a major war even if only essentially equal to the rising state in relative military power. The conditions for the outbreak of major war in multipolarity are therefore less permissive than they are in bipolarity: major war in multipolarity requires a significantly superior state, whereas major war can occur in bipolarity if the declining state is either superior or only equal (indeed, it might even be somewhat inferior).

Combining declining trends, polarity, and power differentials is still not enough to explain the full range of cases. A declining state, even when militarily superior, will not jump into preventive war at the first sign of decline. After all, major wars are highly risky ventures, and the decline may be just a small "blip" in an otherwise stable situation. Two aspects of its decline will be of utmost importance to the declining state's calculus: the depth of decline—how far the state will fall before it bottoms out; and the inevitability of decline—the degree of certainty that the state will fall if it sticks with current policies.

The question of the depth and inevitability of decline forces leaders to examine three general forms of decline. The first is the one analyzed by hundreds of scholars, namely, decline caused by the deterioration of a state's economic, technological, and social base relative to other states. Many reasons for such decline have been identified. The techniques and tools that once sustained a state's superiority may be diffusing outward; the citizens may be increasingly complacent, focusing on consumption over investment in future production; the state may be facing diseconomies of scale as it grows past a certain size (the S-shaped growth curve); and so forth.³ I refer to this ubiquitous form of decline as "entrenched relative stagnation." States facing such stagnation will, of course, struggle to overcome it through a variety of internal reform measures. Yet it may be difficult to reverse. The more difficult the task, the more the leaders will expect decline to be deep and inevitable, and thus the more likely they will be to consider preventive war or risky crisis policies. By 1618–19, for example, two decades of economic stagnation pushed Spain to take actions that escalated a local German conflict into the devastating Thirty Years War.

The second form of decline is much less studied, but typically even more problematic. This comes about when a state is strong in relative military power but is inferior in two other types of power: economic power and

potential power. Economic power is simply a state's total relative economic activity (measured, say, by GNP). Potential power includes all the capital and resources, both physical and human, that could be eventually translated into measurable economic output, but have not yet been so translated for whatever reasons. Potential power would thus include such things as population size, raw materials reserves, technological levels, educational development, and unused fertile territory. A declining state superior in military power, but inferior in the other two forms of power will tend to be very concerned about the future. Simply put, the rising state has a huge long-term advantage: it possesses a far larger base for military growth, and to become preponderant, all it has to do is sit and wait. Increased arms spending by the declining state will not solve the problem. The rising state is better equipped for an arms race over the long haul; indeed, by trying to run such a race, the declining state will only further undermine its economy. In such a situation, then, the declining state is more likely to believe that decline will be deep and inevitable, and to see preventive war as perhaps its only hope. This, as we shall see, was Germany's dilemma vis-à-vis Russia twice in the past century.

The third form of decline is also underplayed by scholars. This is the problem of power oscillations: the military and geopolitical decline caused by the short-term relative success of the other state's arms-racing and alliance-building policies. Both great powers in a rivalry may be making every effort within their spheres to keep up with the other. Over the near term, however, one side's policies may simply prove more successful, or may be expected to be so. This creates the prospect of a loss in relative power, which, if left unchecked, will leave the declining state in a temporarily vulnerable position.⁴ To avoid this situation, the declining state may begin to favor hard-line actions that risk major war. As we shall see, such power oscillations were particularly problematic during the early cold war, leading to crises over Berlin and Cuba.

As I noted, to make a theory of major war equally relevant to the nuclear age, we need to be able to explain not only when a state will deliberately initiate war, but also when it will take steps that greatly increase the risk of such a war through inadvertent means. To tackle this issue, this book builds a decision-making model that presumes leaders understand both the upsides and downsides of hard-line and soft-line policies. In particular, leaders are aware of three key risks: the risk of losing any war that their state starts; the risk of continued decline if they choose accommodative policies; and the risk that hard-line actions short of war, designed to overcome decline, can provoke an inadvertent escalation to major war. Because of the first risk, states in decline will see preventive major war as an option of last resort. If shifting to harder-line policies such as increased arms spending and crisis initiation can mitigate decline, these policies will gen-

erally be preferred. Yet leaders, in adopting such policies, must weigh the long-term benefits of averting decline against the near-term risk of causing an inadvertent slide into war. All things being equal, therefore, they will try to avoid more severe policies if less severe policies can be expected to maintain their state's power position.

This logic, elaborated in chapter 2, allows us to predict when declining states will shift to harder-line actions that risk an inadvertent slide into major war. They will do so when previous (softer-line) policies are insufficient to reverse decline, but when upping the ante holds out the promise of stabilizing the power trends. In 1945, for example, Washington moved from engagement to containment of the Soviet Union in order to restrict Soviet postwar growth. In doing so, Harry Truman understood that he would likely spark a dangerous cold war spiral; yet not acting would have greatly damaged America's long-term power position. In October 1962, John F. Kennedy initiated a crisis over Cuba to compel Nikita Khrushchev to remove Soviet missiles from the island. The risks of inadvertent war were clear, but Kennedy felt that if he did not act, U.S. security would be directly threatened.

The argument here builds on balance-of-power thinking integral to both classical realism and neorealism—states take actions to sustain their current position in the strategic power balance. I contribute to this thinking in the following way. As chapter 2 discusses, realist theorists remain divided: some focus on the importance of maintaining the power balance and avoiding decline; others emphasize the security dilemma and the risks of provoking spiraling by overly hostile actions.³ My argument *combines* the risks of decline and the risks of inadvertent spiraling into one model. The model can thus show the rational trade-offs that states make when they have to decide on the relative severity of their foreign policies. This book, in short, does not introduce new causal variables. Rather, it synthesizes the various strands of current realist approaches into a more integrated realist argument that explains when major wars are likely to occur and when states will take steps that risk such wars.

THE EVIDENCE

This book covers ten periods of history that led either to major wars or to cold wars and crises that carried great risks of major war. Given the availability of documentary evidence, the main focus of the empirical analysis is on three twentieth-century periods: two multipolar (the periods before the First and Second World Wars), and one bipolar (the early cold war up to the Cuban missile crisis). Through an in-depth examination of the primary documents, I seek to provide a parsimonious explanation that challenges

the standard interpretations of events. Notwithstanding some clear differences (to be addressed) between the First and Second World Wars, both conflicts were rooted in a common cause: the German fear of the rise of Russia, a state with three times Germany's population and forty times its land mass. This marked inferiority in potential power led German civilian and military leaders to one conclusion: unless strong action was taken, an industrializing Russia would inevitably overwhelm Europe, and Germany, on the front line, would be its first victim. Thus, twice in a generation German leaders prepared the state for preventive war and launched it soon after military superiority had been maximized.

American thinking after 1944 was driven by the same geopolitical concern—Russian growth. I show that the United States, not the Soviet Union, was most responsible for starting the cold war, since it was the first state to shift to hard-line policies after the war with Germany. As early as mid-1945, Harry Truman moved toward a strong containment policy, despite his awareness that this policy would likely lead to a destabilizing spiral of hostility. He took this action not because he saw Stalin as inherently hostile—in fact, Truman liked Stalin at this time. Rather, Truman recognized that if the United States did *not* act, Russia would grow significantly, and Soviet leaders down the road might not be so moderate. This does not mean that the U.S. leadership ignored the brutal nature of the Soviet dictatorship. Yet future uncertainty and the need for preventive action, rather than fear of present Soviet intentions, were the primary forces leading Washington to accept a marked jump in the probability of major war. The fact that the United States did not initiate preventive war against Russia as had Germany twice earlier reflected less the differences in regime-type or moral principles, and more America's superiority in economic and potential power. Given this superiority, arms racing was a more rational first step.

In the early cold war, there were three crises that led to further large increases in the probability of major war: the two crises over Berlin (1948 and 1961) and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. I show that all three were driven primarily by negative power oscillations caused by the expected relative success of one or the other of the superpowers' policies. Lacking a viable means to mitigate the oscillation by actions within its own bloc, the superpower in decline initiated a crisis to overcome the anticipated downturn. In 1948, Stalin brought on a crisis over Berlin in order to compel Washington to reverse plans that would have unified western Germany and integrated it into the western bloc. In 1961, Khrushchev initiated another crisis over Berlin to stabilize the deterioration of his eastern European sphere. In 1962, in the face of missiles in Cuba that could not simply be countered by more arms racing, Kennedy accepted the risks of a crisis in order to force Khrushchev to withdraw the missiles.

To demonstrate that the argument applies to wars beyond the twentieth

century, the final empirical chapter briefly examines the seven best-known major wars prior to 1900. The three bipolar cases—Sparta-Athens (431–404 B.C.), Carthage-Rome (218–202 B.C.), and France-Hapsburgs (1521–56)—uphold the argument. Sparta, Carthage, and France respectively initiated major war only once they were in long-term decline, and even though they were only essentially equal in military power to the rising states of Athens, Rome, and the Hapsburgs. Moreover, in each case, but especially in those of Carthage-Rome and France-Hapsburgs, the decline was deep and inevitable because of the rising state's superiority in potential power. Three of the four multipolar cases before 1900—the Thirty Years War (1618–48), the wars of Louis XIV (1688–1713), and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15)—also support the theory. War was initiated by a state (respectively, Spain, France, and France again) possessing significantly superior military power, but one that also faced long-term decline, due mostly to entrenched relative stagnation and inferiority in certain dimensions of potential power. The anomaly is the Seven Years War (1756–63). Although decline was critical to Austria's provoking of Prussia into a preemptive war, war broke out in this multipolar system even though the belligerents were essentially equal in military power. In chapter 8, I explore some of the reasons for this deviation from the general argument of the book.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The first two chapters constitute the theoretical core of the book. Chapter 1 critiques the existing realist theories (nonrealist theories are discussed in the empirical chapters).⁶ It also outlines the basic logic of dynamic differentials theory when power is viewed by actors as exogenous—that is, as an external factor they must take as a given. Narrowing the focus in this way not only replicates the approach of most realist theorists; it also exposes the essential problem of decline that states face across bipolar and multipolar systems, especially when decline is seen as deep and inevitable. At the end of chapter 1, I examine issues of methodology. The methodological discussion is critical to the book's overall purpose, namely, the building of a better systemic realist theory of major war. Much confusion surrounds what a systemic theory can and cannot do, how it can be falsified, and even how it should be tested. My discussion seeks to clear up the confusion and, by doing so, to suggest ways in which systemic theories and more domestic- and individual-level ("unit-level") theories work together in explaining international phenomena.⁷

Chapter 2 adds flesh to the bare-bones structure of chapter 1 by relaxing the assumption that power is strictly exogenous. I build a decision-making model that allows leaders to overcome decline by shifting to more severe

policies such as intensified arms racing and crisis initiation, but only as they recognize the risks of provoking war by an inadvertent escalation. The model thus helps to predict shifts in the probability of major war even when leaders are loath to fall into major war, as they are in the nuclear age.

The empirical tests of the book's argument are to be found in chapters 3 through 8. In chapter 9, I conclude by examining the theoretical and practical implications of the argument.⁸

Rethinking Realist Theories of Major War

The three most prominent realist explanations for major war among great powers, as I noted earlier, are classical realism, structural neorealism, and hegemonic stability theory.¹ Classical realism argues that major war is likely when one state is preponderant and unlikely when great powers are relatively equal. A balance of power keeps the peace by convincing potential aggressors that war will have both high costs and a low probability of success. An imbalance provides the key condition for major war, since the superior state is more likely to expand in the belief that war can pay.² As for this superior state's motives, classical realists would agree with Hans Morgenthau that the preponderant state initiates war for unit-level reasons—for greed, glory, or what Morgenthau saw as its "lust for power" manifested in "nationalistic universalism."³

Given the propensity of superior states to attack, classical realists argue that multipolarity should be relatively more stable than bipolarity. Since exact equality cannot always be ensured, alliance restructuring (external balancing) in multipolarity can create the requisite balance of power between blocs, even if individual states are unequal. As long as flexibility is maintained, such that great powers can easily shift alliance ties in response to a stronger power, preponderant states can be deterred from aggression. Conversely, bipolar systems are prone to be unstable since if any inequality between the two great powers opens up, no large alliance partners exist to forge an effective balance of power.⁴

Classical realism's strength is its emphasis on power differentials, which provides a fine-grained sense of the relative weights that go onto the scales of the balance of power.⁵ It also highlights a flaw in theories that argue for the stability of bipolar systems: states in multipolarity have another mechanism—alliances—in addition to arms racing to help deter an aggressor

when rough equality cannot be maintained. In bipolarity, great powers have no viable alliance option to fall back on when arms racing alone is not enough.

Classical realism confronts two main empirical problems, however. First, it cannot explain how multipolar systems with tight alliances against the potential hegemon, such as the one that existed before 1914, can still fall into major war. In such cases, the overall balance of power between the blocs fails to keep the peace.⁶ Second, in the key bipolar cases in history—Sparta-Athens, Carthage-Rome, and France-Hapsburgs—war ensued when the two great powers were essentially equal. Here, the balance of power between the individual great powers did not deter war. The theoretical problem behind these empirical anomalies lies with the largely static nature of classical realism. The theory derives predictions primarily from snapshots of the international systems. The result is the familiar picture of great powers as billiard balls of varying sizes.⁷ The importance of dynamic trends in the differentials of power is understated in such an analysis. Some classical realists such as Morgenthau recognize in passing that preventive wars—wars for fear of decline—are a significant problem in history. Yet the conditions under which preventive war motivations are invoked remain theoretically undeveloped.⁸

The second approach, neorealism, focuses on two enduring structural features of the international system, anarchy and polarity. Anarchy—the absence of a central authority to protect the great powers—produces the recurring pattern of conflict seen in international politics over the millennia.⁹ Across anarchic realms, neorealists assert that bipolar systems are less likely to experience major war than multipolar systems. Three main reasons are given: in bipolarity, great powers avoid being chain-ganged into major war by crises over small powers; they also stand firm, however, to prevent losses on the periphery, thus enhancing deterrence; and finally, the great powers are less inclined to neglect internal military spending that might allow a superior military power to arise.¹⁰

Neorealism's strength is its isolation of the structural effects of anarchy and polarity. This leaves us with a profoundly tragic view of international relations: even when states only seek security, they may still fall into devastating wars that threaten their survival.¹¹ In its Waltzian form, however, neorealism suffers from the same deficiency as classical realism: it is not dynamic enough. With polarity as the key structural variable, there is nothing to vary within either a bipolar or multipolar system to explain why any system should move from peace to war.¹² As Waltz explains, "within a system, [systemic] theory explains recurrences and repetitions, not change." If changes in state behavior "occur within a system that endures, their causes are found at the unit level."¹³ This is an unnecessarily limiting view of the explanatory power of a systemic theory. As I explore below, changes and

trends in the differentials of relative power between states—a systemic variable going beyond the mere number of great powers—can have marked effects on behavior without necessary consideration of unit-level changes.

Other neorealists have sought to go beyond Waltz by incorporating the classical realist point that power inequalities increase the likelihood of major war.¹⁴ Still others emphasize that states face a security dilemma, whereby the actions one state takes to enhance its security end up reducing the security of its adversaries. As a result, states sometimes have preventive incentives to eliminate a growing adversary before it becomes too strong.¹⁵ I build these additional elements into my synthetic argument. Since I examine the effects of power trends in bipolar versus multipolar systems, however, I reach conclusions different from those of neorealism on the conditions for war in the two system-types. Moreover, chapter 2 moves beyond existing structural arguments by fusing within a leader's decision-making logic both the risks of decline and the risks of an inadvertent spiral to major war. Finally, by considering different forms of decline, including power oscillations and decline driven by inferiority in economic and potential power, I provide additional conditions constraining the rational response to decline.

The third realist perspective on major war is the security variant of hegemonic stability theory,¹⁶ represented most prominently by A. F. K. Organski and Robert Gilpin. Turning classical realism on its head, they argue that a hegemonic system with one powerful actor will be stable because of the hegemon's self-interest in maintaining the political-military order. When a second-ranked state rises to near equality with this now former hegemon, however, this ascending state is inclined to initiate war to receive the status and rewards denied by the traditional system.¹⁷ Hence, contrary to the classical realist view that a balance of power keeps the peace, major war is the result of a growing equality of power between the two most powerful states in any system.

The strength of this approach lies in its dynamic nature. Hegemonic stability theory thus provides a more extended analysis of the impact of power changes on great power behavior than is offered in either classical realism or neorealism. Two main problems remain, however. First, hegemonic stability theory has no deductively consistent theory of war initiation. There is no logical reason why a state should attack while it is still rising, since by simply waiting, the state will be able to achieve its objectives more easily, and at less cost.¹⁸ This argument holds even if rising states have goals other than security, such as status and prestige, as hegemonic stability theorists assume they do. Waiting until the state has maximized its power ensures the maximum return on its war investment. After all, even more status and rewards are obtained by fighting when one stands the best chance of winning quickly and at low cost.¹⁹ Hegemonic stability theory

thus cannot explain why German leaders in both World Wars did not initiate war until after they saw that Germany was declining. Moreover, it cannot account for the fact that in the seven other major wars prior to 1900, it was the declining great power that brought on the hostilities. A similar pattern is seen in each of the key crises of the early cold war: it was the state foreseeing decline that initiated the dangerous crisis period.

The second limitation is that hegemonic stability theory's core logic for major war is confined to the two most powerful states in any system—the leading state and the rising challenger. The theory thus minimizes the importance of third-, fourth-, and fifth-ranked great powers on the calculations of the other two.²⁰ This might make some sense in a bipolar system, as I show, but it makes little sense for the multipolar cases of European history from 1556 on. Empirically, for example, the theory has a hard time explaining how one state in each of the two major wars of this century—Germany—was able to take on a coalition of second-, third-, and fourth-ranked great powers, fight a long war, and nearly emerge victoriously, if indeed Germany was only equal to the formerly dominant state in military power.²¹

Interestingly, the evidence provided by hegemonic stability theorists confirms that Germany was in fact preponderant when it took on the system. Organski and Jacek Kugler conclude that by 1913, "Germany [had] clearly surpassed the United Kingdom," the formerly dominant state, while by 1939, Germany had a "significant advantage" over Britain.²² Kugler and William Domke, to explain how Germany could have come so close to winning both wars, show that Germany in 1914 and 1939–40 was significantly superior in actualized military power. In 1914, Germany was almost as powerful as Britain, Russia, and France combined. In 1939–40, Germany was almost twice as strong as France and Britain combined; in 1941–42, it matched the Soviet Union on the eastern front even as it continued to wage war in the west.²³

To accommodate these facts, hegemonic stability theorists adjust the theory: they argue that although equality between individual great powers may not be associated with major war, relative equality between their *alliance blocs* is. Organski and Kugler conclude: "it is clear that [the World Wars] occur after the intersection when the two nations fight alone (which is contrary to what the power-transition model leads us to expect), but before the coalition of the challenger overtakes the coalition of the dominant country."²⁴ Woosang Kim, in an important statistical reworking of Organski's argument, shows that major wars occur at points of essential equality only when power is adjusted to incorporate alliance partners.²⁵ This reformulation still allows hegemonic stability theorists to challenge classical realism: as noted, classical realists cannot explain why in cases like World War I war occurred despite the relative equality between two tight alliances.

Overall, however, the primary challenge of hegemonic stability theory has been dissipated. Classical realists and hegemonic stability theorists now essentially agree that in 1914 and 1939 one state—Germany—was significantly superior to any other individual state, even if Germany (along with minor partners) was opposed by a coalition of equal strength. Military historians, as I discuss in chapters 3 through 5, would agree.²⁶

The agreement between classical realists and hegemonic stability realists on German military superiority in the twentieth century simplifies the task ahead. Yet we still lack a theory that can explain, without invoking ad hoc unit-level factors like “lusting for power” and “dissatisfaction with the status quo,” why preponderant states in multipolarity attack the system in the face of the staggering risks and costs. Moreover, how the pressures to initiate major war change between multipolar and bipolar systems is still underspecified. Providing a comprehensive systemic theory of major war, one that synthesizes the strengths of current realist approaches, is the objective of the rest of this chapter.

DYNAMIC DIFFERENTIALS THEORY

The core causal or independent variable of the argument is the dynamic differential: the simultaneous interaction of the differentials of relative military power between great powers and the expected trend of those differentials, distinguishing between the effects of power changes in bipolarity versus multipolarity.²⁷ In addition, I break the notion of power into three types—military, economic, and potential—to show how decline in the latter two forms affects the behavior of states that may be superior in military power.

The theory makes three main assertions. First, in any system, assuming states are rational security-seeking actors which remain uncertain about others' future intentions,²⁸ it is the dominant but declining military great power that is most likely to begin a major war. Second, the constraints on the dominant state differ in bipolar versus multipolar systems. In multipolarity, major war is likely only if the declining state has a significant level of military superiority. In bipolarity, however, the declining state can attack even when only roughly equal, and sometimes even if it is second-ranked. Third, the probability of major war increases when decline is seen as both deep and inevitable. A consideration of overall economic power and potential power is thus necessary, since the levels and trends of these two other forms of power are crucial in determining the extent and inevitability of military decline.

The first proposition is relatively straightforward: because major wars are so costly, and because they risk the very survival of the state, the initia-

tor of war is more likely to be the dominant military power; smaller military powers simply lack the capability to "take on the system." Moreover, it is irrational for any great power to begin a major war while still rising, since, as noted, waiting allows it to attack later with a higher probability of success, and at less cost. All major wars, if actors meet the requirement of rationality, therefore must be preventive wars.²⁹

The second proposition requires more explication. To state it slightly differently, while near equality between individual great powers is likely to be stabilizing in multipolarity even when some states are declining, near equality in bipolarity can be very unstable when either of the great powers, but especially the dominant power, perceives itself to be declining. Thus, the conditions for major war in multipolarity are less permissive than those in bipolarity, meaning that for any given set of power differentials and trends, war is less likely in multipolar systems.³⁰

The logic behind this assertion is as follows. In multipolar systems, if all states are relatively equal in military power, no state will make a bid for hegemony against the system, for four main reasons. First, even if a state expects the others to remain disunited—that is, even if it does not expect a counter-coalition to form against it—equality with its rivals will likely mean long and costly bilateral wars, wars that will sap the state's ability to continue the fight until hegemony is achieved. If complete hegemony is not achieved, those states sitting on the sidelines will emerge in a stronger position relative to the state that initiates war. Hence launching all-out war in the first place is irrational.³¹

Second, to the extent that a coalition does form against the challenger, there is even less probability that the initiator could emerge in a stronger and more secure position after the war. Coalitions in multipolarity, since they are made up of states with "great power," become formidable fighting forces as their unity increases.³² The third reason follows from the other two. A declining but only equal great power in multipolarity has reason to think that a rising state, as long as it does not grow too preponderant, will also be restrained in its ambitions simply by the presence of so many other great powers. Therefore, a preventive war for security is less imperative.

Fourth, to the extent that an equal but declining power can form alliances against the state that is rising, it will have less concern about being overtaken. This restates classical realism's insight that states in multipolarity, compared to bipolarity, have recourse to an additional means to uphold their security besides internal balancing, namely, external balancing through alliances. Because of the collective action problem that may be present, however, my deductive logic as to why an equal but declining state does not initiate war in multipolarity does not depend on this state's ability to form a tight alliance for its security (although such alliances certainly reinforce the argument). Rather, the argument revolves around the

state's recognition that even if no alliances form against it if it begins a major war, it will not have enough power to win a victory against all the others; and even if no alliances form *with* this state if it chooses to "decline gracefully," the presence of many actors should help deter the rising state from attacking later. Consequently, in multipolarity, only when a given state is clearly superior to any other individual state in military power can it contemplate waging a war for hegemony.

In bipolar systems, however, these arguments push in the opposite direction, and therefore preventive war is likely even when states are near equals. First, a declining and near-equal state realizes that it has to face only one other great power, not many, and therefore even if the war is long and difficult, there are no additional opponents to defeat after the bilateral victory is achieved. A successful bid for hegemony is thus easier to achieve. Moreover, even if the declining state fears a stalemated and inconclusive war with the rising state, it does not have to worry about a relative loss to third party actors that sit on the sidelines to avoid the costs of war. Such actors, since small, are unlikely to gain enough to raise themselves to the top of the system.

Second, the declining state knows that even if a coalition forms against its attack, the small states joining the rising great power are unlikely to alter the expected outcome significantly. In comparison with multipolarity, individual coalitional partners simply have far less weight to throw against the initiator of major war.³³ Third, because the declining state realizes these two factors are in *its* favor when it is slightly superior, it knows that the rising state will not be terribly constrained after it achieves superiority. Fourth, the declining state knows that the other states in the system, even if some are willing to ally against the ascending state, are not substantial enough to shore up its waning security. Hence preventive war before the point of overtaking makes rational sense.

Note that because of the absence of significant third parties, even the second-ranked state in bipolarity can initiate major war when in steep decline. The core logic applies: it has to beat only one other great power, and there is little concern about stalemated wars that allow sideline-sitters to rise to the top.³⁴ Of course, the greater the second-ranked state's level of inferiority, the less confidence it will have in a hard-line policy.

The argument I have outlined is summarized visually in figures 1 and 2. These heuristic diagrams present the main systemic situations that might be faced in either multipolarity or bipolarity.³⁵ Note that at times t_1 , t_4 , and t_5 , the probability of major war should be low for both system-types, since the trends in the military balance are stable; with no state experiencing decline, there is no imperative to go to war for security reasons.³⁶ At time t_2 , however, the impending decline of the dominant state in the bipolar situation (fig. 2) means the likelihood of major war is high, while in the multipolar situation the likelihood is low because of the restraining presence of the

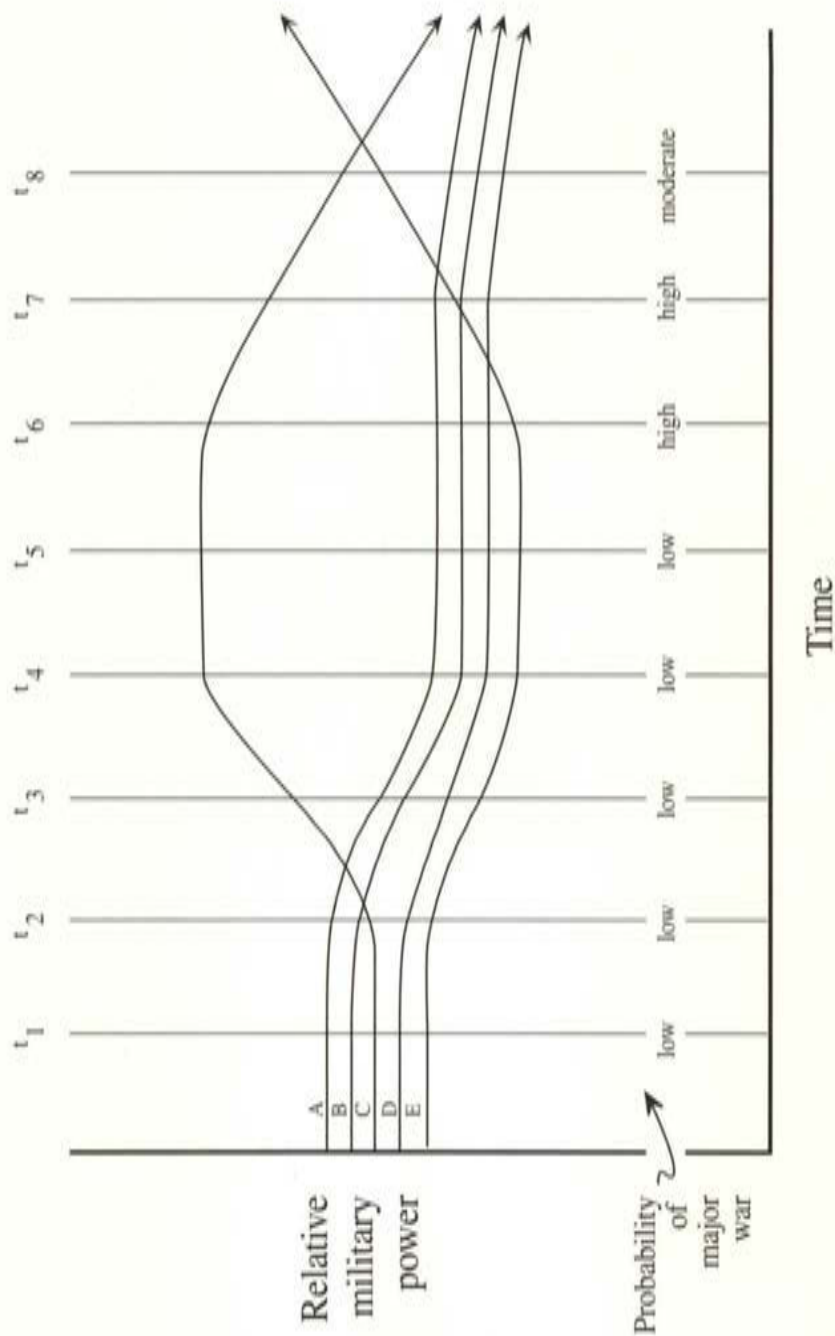


Fig. 1. Relative military power curves and the probability of major war: multipolarity

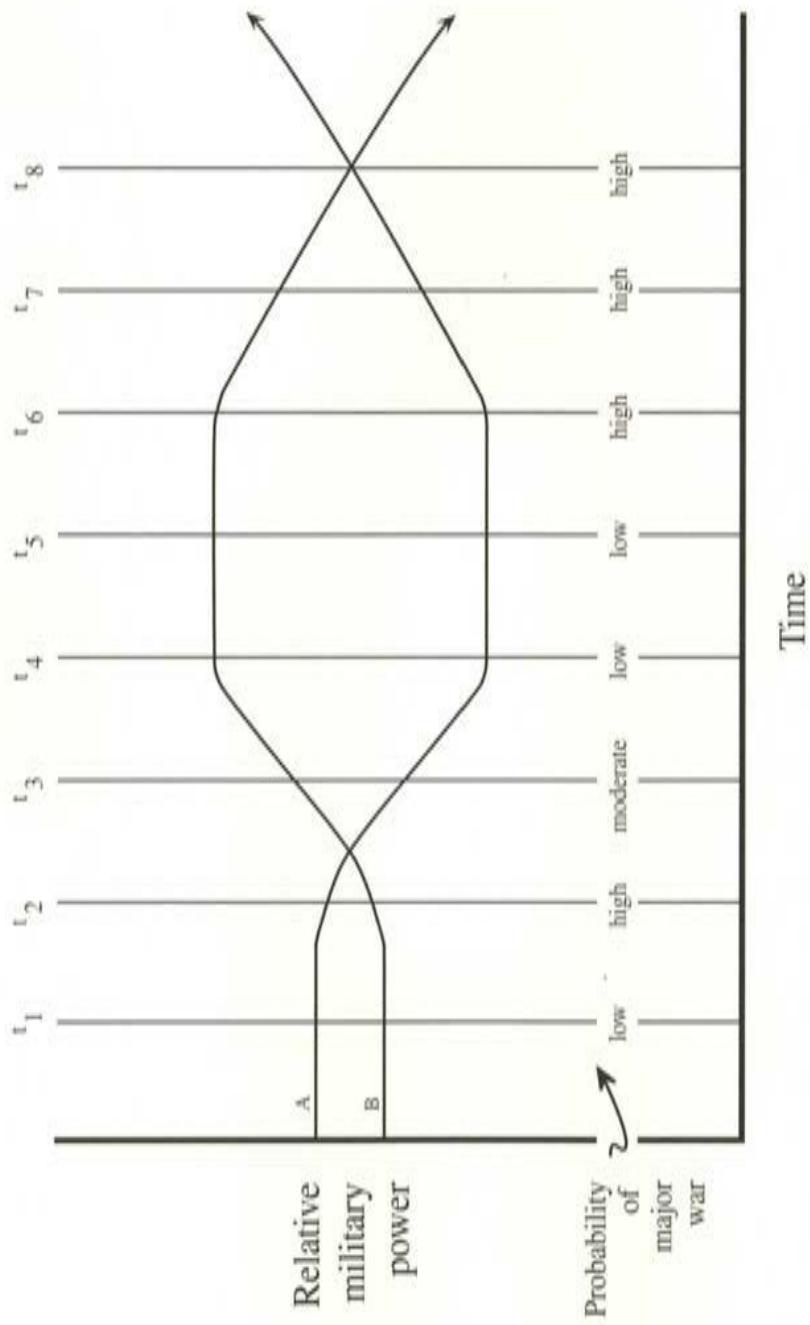


Fig. 2. Relative military power curves and the probability of major war: bipolarity

other equal great powers.³⁷ At times t_6 and t_7 , when there is marked inequality in both bipolar and multipolar systems, impending decline should make major war highly likely in both system-types. At t_8 , however, while the probability of war is again high in the bipolar case, instability in the multipolar case should be tempered somewhat by the existence of the third-, fourth-, and fifth-ranked powers (although since these latter powers are weaker than at time t_2 , the probability of major war is still "moderate").³⁸

In both multipolarity and bipolarity, it is a declining state that initiates war. When it does so depends greatly on its estimation of the inevitability and the extent of its fall: the higher the expectation of an inevitable and deep decline, the more the state will be inclined to preventive war simply for security reasons. If decline is caused by entrenched stagnation relative to the rising state, this will certainly be worrisome; the fewer internal measures available to overcome the stagnation, the more the state will see decline as deep and inevitable. Of even greater significance for the declining state's calculus is its level of economic power and its overall potential power compared to its military power.³⁹ A state in either bipolarity or multipolarity that is superior but declining in military power, but also superior and growing in the other two power dimensions, is unlikely to be that anxious about decline. After all, given that its economic and potential power is strong and ascending, this state should be able to reverse the downward military trend simply by spending more on arms in the future.

A state, however, that is superior in military power but *inferior* in economic and especially potential power is more likely to believe that, once its military power begins to wane, further decline will be inevitable and deep. This is especially so if the trends of relative economic and potential power are downward as well. The state will believe that there is little it can do through arms racing to halt its declining military power: it would simply be spending a greater percentage of an already declining economic base in the attempt to keep up with a rising state that has the resources to outspend it militarily. Moreover, economic restructuring is unlikely to help, since the potential power that is the foundation for economic power is also inferior and declining. Under these circumstances, a dominant military power is likely to be pessimistic about the future and more inclined to initiate major war as a "now-or-never" attempt to shore up its waning security.⁴⁰

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARGUMENT

As noted, this book's goal is to build a theory with greater explanatory and predictive power by synthesizing the strengths of current realist approaches. The resulting theory offers two new contributions. First, the theory provides a deductively consistent argument for how changes in rel-

ative power should have differing effects in bipolar versus multipolar systems. Classical realism and neorealism emphasize the importance of polarity and occasionally consider dynamic trends, but they do not analyze the effect of power trends across the system-types. Hegemonic stability theory and preventive war arguments are fundamentally dynamic, but they do not include polarity as a critical boundary condition.

Second, the book divides power, for theory-making purposes, into three categories—military, economic, and potential. By considering the differentials and trends in each realm, we can determine when declining military power will lead directly to war and when it will lead to measures short of war.⁴¹ Even theories emphasizing the problem of relative decline, such as preventive war arguments, have trouble explaining why some situations of decline are more destabilizing than others. Polarity, of course, plays a significant role here, as I have emphasized. Decline is more likely to lead to major war in bipolarity, since the declining state does not have to possess marked military superiority and may even be somewhat inferior. Yet equally important is the declining state's military power in comparison to its economic and especially potential power. A dominant military state that is inferior in economic and potential power is much more likely to expect decline to be both deep and inevitable, inclining it to risky actions. Negative trends in the latter two forms of power will only make things worse.

The theory thus helps answer two long-standing questions: Is major war more likely when great powers are equal or unequal? And can major war occur between states seeking only security, or must there be actors with inherently aggressive motives?

The answer to the first question is clear: it depends on the polarity of the system. Major wars in multipolarity require a preponderant military power, but they can occur in bipolarity whether the two great powers are equal or unequal.⁴² This helps explain why in the three bipolar cases before 1945 (Sparta-Athens, Carthage-Rome, and France-Hapsburgs), it was the declining and formerly dominant great power that initiated major war against the rising adversary, despite relative military equality between the states. In the early cold war, there was great instability whenever one of the superpowers feared serious decline, even though the United States remained militarily superior throughout. The multipolar systems before 1914 and 1939, on the other hand, were destabilized only after one state (Germany) came to possess significant military superiority over other states taken individually. In three of the four major wars before 1900—the Thirty Years War, the wars of Louis XIV, and the Napoleonic Wars—the conflict was initiated by the power with marked military superiority. Only in the Seven Years War was the declining state essentially equal, an anomaly I discuss in chapter 8.

The answer to the second question is equally clear: innately aggressive

actors, even though they may exacerbate the likelihood of major war, are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for such wars. Aggressive unit-level motives are not a sufficient condition, since even the most hostile leaders will be deterred from initiating major war unless power conditions make the bid for hegemony feasible. For the period of the last five hundred years, we might identify a number of European leaders who would have wanted hegemony purely for glory or greed-driven reasons. Yet there were only seven clear cases of major war during this time.⁴³ That so few major wars occurred is explained by a simple fact: few states ever achieved the military superiority needed to take on the system.⁴⁴ (And as I show in the empirical chapters, these wars were driven primarily by fears of decline, even when unit-level factors were also present.)

Aggressive motives are also not a necessary condition for major war. A purely security-seeking state may initiate war in either bipolarity or multipolarity solely because of its fear of inevitable and profound decline. Needless to say, a rising state showing signs of hostile intentions will make this declining state even more likely to attack.⁴⁵ But the *initiator's* attack is still a function of security motives, not unit-level aggressive designs. Perhaps the clearest case is Sparta's initiation of major war against Athens. The Spartans feared revolt at home if the soldiers were away fighting a large-scale war. Yet fear of the rise of Athens forced the Spartans into war, even as these domestic factors inclined them to peace.⁴⁶ As we shall see, Germany in 1914 faced a very similar situation: the key German leaders believed that war would only exacerbate domestic instability at home; yet it had to be chosen to prevent the rise of the Russian menace.

Even more to the point, the declining security-seeking state may initiate major war even if all other states in the system, including the rising state, are also only security-seekers. The declining state, given the anarchic environment, will be inclined to doubt the present intentions of other states, despite their best efforts to show their peaceful desires.⁴⁷ Indeed, rising states have every incentive to misrepresent their intentions as peaceful to reduce the possibility of preventive attack. The declining state will therefore have a hard time sorting out those states that are genuinely peaceful from those that are not.⁴⁸ Even today, for example, it is unclear whether or not Czar Nicholas II privately desired hegemony but was only postponing a bid until Russia grew stronger. Hence, German leaders, despite Nicholas's efforts to communicate his benign intentions, still felt compelled to initiate major war. Russia faced the same problem in 1939–41, when, despite his best efforts, Stalin could not convince Hitler of his good intentions.

Finally, the declining state may even know with certainty that the other has peaceful intentions, but still initiate war for security reasons. The problem is a profound one: the other's intentions might change in the future after it reaches a position of dominance, perhaps because of a change in gov-