

# INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

## Lloyd Jensen

*Department of Political Science, Temple University and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, USA*

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## Summary

Despite advances in the destructiveness of weapons and the purposeful targeting of civilians in modern warfare, the world appears no more violent than it has in previous centuries. In many respects, the record is better. The number of wars and casualties from war seems not to have kept pace with the increased number of states or the rise in population. In fact, interstate war has shown some decline and the wars of the future appear likely to be civil wars—wars within the state between ethnic and religious groups.

Theories of war from the systemic, societal, and individual perspectives abound. At the system level, conflict can be seen as the result of states competing in an anarchical world. From this viewpoint, war is the result of changing power balances as one state or the other sees the stability of the system and its position within it threatened. Such threat perceptions are only enhanced by the tendency to engage in arms races, which end either in war or disarmament.

From the national or societal perspective, the most researched explanation of war is found in the democratic peace theory which holds that democracies are less likely to fight, particularly against each other, than are more centralized regimes. International conflict has also been exacerbated by domestic instability and nationalistic fervor as decision makers have found it useful to engage in foreign adventures as a way to pull their nation together by seeking a scapegoat for domestic problems. In appealing to a real or imaginary enemy, leaders have exploited the sense of national feeling among the population, resulting in the development of a highly expressive nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Since it is ultimately individuals who make the decisions to clash, much effort has been made to try to understand whether such conflict is innately driven or whether it tends to be a learned or a rational response. Given so much variability in human aggression, most writers conclude that violence is not an innate characteristic. Contributing also to conflict behavior are the many misunderstandings which tend to arise among human beings and miscalculations made by political leaders.

To think of all war as caused by any single factor is erroneous, as any historical study of the complexities of the origin of a particular war will reveal. Of one thing we can be certain: conflict between human beings is endemic. But there is another revelation in human history which suggests that warfare is not the only way to deal with conflict. There is reason to hope that global violence can be controlled, and perhaps even to think that some of the root causes of conflict can be removed.

## **1. Introduction**

As has been the case throughout history, the threat of violence committed by one person or group against another continues to challenge global security. That threat has taken on added seriousness given the modern weapons technologies which make it ever more efficient to kill thousands, if not millions, of human beings in a single attack. This has led to a certain urgency on the part of researchers to try to understand what causes conflict and war in the modern age. After looking at some of the trends in international conflict in recent centuries, the various systemic, national, and individual explanations of why violence continues to play such a prominent role in international relations will be examined.

## **2. Historical Trends in International Violence**

It is not entirely clear whether the incidence of violence in the international system is on the increase or decrease. The answer varies depending upon what periods and which states one is comparing. In general, the statistical evidence, much of which has been collected by the Correlates of War (COW) project at the University of Michigan, suggests that individual nations are much less likely to engage in war at present than they were in earlier centuries. One study, for example, found that the odds that a country would become involved in an international war in any given year declined steadily from one in 43 in the mid-1800s to one in 62 around the turn of the century, and to only one in 166 since World War II.

Yet these figures may be misleading. Because there have been many more sovereign states in the world in recent times than there were a hundred or more years ago, warfare may still be prevalent even when most states in the world are not involved. The rise in the number of sovereign states and the shrinking of the time required to send weapons to distant lands have also meant that the number of states participating in the average war has increased considerably over the centuries from two or three in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to six or ten in the eighteenth century, to 30 in the First World War and over 40 in the Second, according to Evan Luard in *The Blunted Sword*.

What is clear is that the amount of death and destruction from international conflict has increased dramatically as war has become more globalized and as the killing capabilities of weapons have increased astronomically. COW data collected for 118 interstate wars during the 179-year period 1815–1994 revealed combat fatalities totaling some 31 million (see Table 1). Almost half, or 15 million, occurred during the six years of World War II. World War I accounted for 9 million casualties, Korea for two million, and Vietnam 1.2 million. Together, these twentieth century wars accounted for more than eight times as many casualties as occurred in the century from 1815 to 1914.

The number of civilians killed in war also appears to be on the increase. During World War I, 8.4 million soldiers and 1.4 million civilians were killed. But in World War II the proportions were the reverse, with 16.9 million troops and 34.3 million civilian fatalities. Even the almost surgically “clean” war fought over Iraq’s cities in the Gulf War of 1991—clean in the sense that the US coalition’s “smart” bombs produced very few direct civilian casualties—nonetheless had a devastating longer term impact on the lives of innocent citizens of Iraq. It is estimated that about 70 000 Iraqi civilians died in the months after the war’s conclusion because of the fact that US bombs had destroyed the nation’s power grid; that action crippled public health by knocking out water purification and distribution stations, sewage treatment facilities, health care systems, and refrigeration. Similarly a study for the International Rescue Committee in New York revealed that 1.7 million people died in the two-year period following the eruption of war in the eastern Congo in 1998. But only two hundred thousand of the deaths were the result of battle deaths, whereas the remaining were attributed to the war-related collapse of health services and food supplies.

Despite such depressing statistics, the world is not necessarily becoming a more violent place. Compared with earlier centuries, most modern wars end before massive destruction occurs. The Seven Years War (1756–1763) engaged in by Frederick the Great, for example, resulted in the loss of one-ninth of the Prussian population. Most estimates conclude that the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), which provided the impetus for the Westphalian system, ended with the loss of one-third of Germany’s population. A much higher figure has been cited by the French historian, Jean Perre, who suggested that Germany’s population declined as a result of that war from 13 million to 4 million, or by a total of 69 percent.

Although global wars like the two which occurred in the first half of the twentieth century appear much less likely today, small-scale interstate wars continue to threaten the world. That was made dramatically clear in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990 and in the less publicized border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea beginning in 1998. Wars between Arab states and Israel, between India and Pakistan,

and perhaps among neighboring states elsewhere, remain a real possibility.

Increasingly interstate conflict has been replaced by conflict within states as two-thirds of the wars between 1945 and 1995 were internal ones. Between 1975 and 1994 the latter have accounted for over four times as many battle deaths. These wars, which have often been based upon religious and ethnic differences, have had a tendency to spill over into neighboring regions as arms, refugees, and troops in search of sanctuaries flow between states.

<i>Traditional Approach</i>	<i>Alternative Dispute Resolution Methodologies</i>
Crises force policy choices	Early discussion of policy options
Little contact or personal exchange amongst stakeholders	Face-to-face discussion among parties to encourage candor and trust
Polarization occurs before options can be explored	Interests explored rather than positions immediately taken
Facts selectively used to support partisan positions	Experts used to help establish and clarify factual issues
Outcome can include frustration and residual distrust	Explicitly collaborative, but does not try to hide disagreements
No neutral convenor assists parties explore issues and negotiate	Neutral convenor may assist parties identify issues, clarify fact, and explore options

Table 1. Battle Deaths in War, 1815–1994

Source: Courtesy of Professors J. David Singer and Meredith Sarkees, Correlates of War Project, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor Michigan, April 1996 data base.

### 3. Issues over which States Conflict

Given the importance of the topic, considerable research has been conducted on the causes of war. Khalevi Holsti in his book, *Peace and War*, came to the following conclusions concerning the issues over which states have fought in 177 wars over the past three and a half centuries:

- Quarrels over territory figured in about one-half of all wars between 1648 and the outbreak of the First World War, but since Napoleon’s defeat there has been a gradual decline in the prominence of this issue.
- The search for statehood has commanded the international agenda since the late eighteenth century, and in two of the periods (1815–1914 and since 1945) it has been more often associated with war and armed intervention than any other issue.

- The importance of ideological issues has been particularly notable in the post-1945 period where they have been involved in 42 percent of the wars.
- Between 1648 and 1812 economic issues figured significantly in the etiology of war, followed by a rapid diminution during the 19th century, a revival with Japanese and Italian imperialism in the 1930s and a decline in the postwar period. While sympathy for ethnic and religious kin in other countries played an important role in conflict in the 19th century there has been a decline of sympathy issues since the First World War. Nevertheless, such issues have been a source of conflict in more than one-fifth of the post-1945 wars.

#### 4. System Level Explanations

Beyond looking at the specific issues over which states conflict, research on the causes of war has focused upon the correlates or specific conditions which seem to give rise to international conflict behavior. Among the more prominent theories of such causes are those based upon the structure of the international system of which two have received the most attention. The first is that of how power is organized within the international system, particularly in terms of whether it is bipolarized or multipolarized. A second explanation is that of arms racing, which many see as leading directly or indirectly to war.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Lloyd Jensen** is a professor emeritus of political science at Temple University and a professorial lecturer at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. He holds three degrees—B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.—from the University of Michigan, and has taught at the University of Illinois, the University of Kentucky, and Northwestern University. Among his publications are several books, including *Return from the Nuclear Brink*, *Bargaining for National Security*, *Explaining Foreign Policy*, and *Global Challenge*, the last of which was co-authored with Lynn H. Miller. He has published numerous articles dealing with questions of war and peace, in journals such as *International Negotiation*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Peace Research Reviews*.