

Violent Conflict and Collective Security

Violent Conflict is a constant problem in international relations, but it varies widely in its impact

We traditionally think of violent conflict in terms of war – knock down, drag out fights between nation states

This is changing as this type of war becomes less common and other types of conflict become a focus of concern

War

Traditionally we think of war as a tool of statecraft – as part of how states achieve their goals in the world

The traditional notion of war is that of Clausewitz – armies representing their respective nation states fighting it out, in uniform, on a field of battle, controlled in their actions by their generals

The laws of war that exist today presuppose this type of war in key ways:

- An assumption of a separation of civilian and soldier – one that is identifiable through clear uniforms
- A clear responsibility for those involved in war to follow the laws – they are acting as tools of the state in the state interest and must respect the rules committed to by the state

This notion of war brings with it some key potential problems

- War is a tool of statecraft, which implies that war is perfectly reasonable under many different circumstances – it may be the last resort, but it is still on the table
- This implies that all states must be prepared to fight wars at all times – you can't predict when they will be necessary

This is reinforced by the idea that the international system is anarchic

- You can't appeal to a higher authority and you can't rely on others
- You must ultimately depend on your own ability to fight to survive and promote your interests

The need to constantly be prepared for war in the context of anarchy can often lead to what is termed the “security dilemma”:

- To ensure that your enemy cannot defeat you, you must build a sufficiently large military
- This military will be seen as a threat by potential adversaries (which, at least in principle, could include all other nation states in the system)
- The threat of your military preparations will lead other states to build up their military forces to protect themselves against you
- The build-up of forces by all parties will progressively make all the other parties feel insecure and lead to further expansion of military forces
- In the end, this leads to arms races
- The only way to break the cycle is to fight a war

This has implications for war as a policy tool:

- If you are the strongest state and your rival is building forces to try and match you, you have an incentive to fight the war before your potential enemy can match you

- War is going to happen periodically
- If you know this is likely, then you know that you will have to fight eventually, why not do it on the most favorable conditions for you to win

This is a popular explanation for WWI:

- The British saw the Germans rising as a major power and created alliances to balance against Germany
- The Germans saw the British as being the dominant power and wanted to match them
- There was a massive build-up of military (particularly naval) forces in the period from 1895 – 1914
- The idea here is that the British wanted to fight Germany before it caught up to British power, the Germans thought that their land forces could trump the British naval power in a land war in Europe
- Both sides thought that the time was right to fight and wanted to fight at that time

So if this is such a powerful problem, how do we break the cycle?

Collective security is one answer and it has been a bulwark of security policy since the end of WWI

What is collective security?

The basic idea is simple:

- States agree that they will join together to punish any state that acts aggressively against any one of them

This was the key goal of the League of Nations

Aggressive states would face sanctions and ultimately the combined military force of the world community

The League of Nations failed

The United Nations was built for the same purpose, but included some key institutional changes to try and make the system work

The Security Council and its five permanent members

The Security Council would act to collectively punish aggression

The permanent five would act as the “world's policemen” in order to maintain the system

It is a good idea, but it founders on the rocks of Cold War competition

NATO and the Warsaw Pact

- The two sides in the Cold War each saw the other as a dire threat and both built up their military forces to counter the threat
- Both sides also engaged in collective security as a means of deterring the other
- The US perceived the USSR as expansionist and felt that it directly threatened Western Europe
- NATO was formed to explicitly bind the US to Europe – an attack on Western Europe would be an attack on the US and met with the same type of response
- The USSR created the Warsaw Pact in response – binding its satellite states into a system of

collective security

The upshot of this is that collective security has become a bulwark of security policy in the West. Even with the end of the Cold War, there has been a strong push to keep NATO alive – in spite of having no enemy to deter.

Collective security begins to break down as the nature of conflict has changed.

- State vs. State war has become rarer than it has historically been.
- Non-state actors have begun to use unconventional tactics to wage war against states and other non-state actors.
- Security problems now arise as much from the disintegration or collapse of states than from the actions of the states themselves.

Collective security has adapted to these changes, but with varying degrees of success.