ANARCHY AND POWER
What Causes War? Ch. 10. The International System
notes by Denis Bašić
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND ANARCHY

• Some scholars believe that the international system is characterized by **anarchy**; it is a political system that lacks a government.

• **Assumption**: At the systemic level of analysis, the central assumption is that **the structure of the international system plays the most important role in determining the behavior of nations**. The nature of the state or its leaders is relatively unimportant. The behavior of states is determined primarily by their positions in the international system (or regional subsystem.) **Different states within the same international system will behave similarly despite differing national attributes.**

• It is claimed that “**international society itself teaches conflict to its members: tells them when to conflict, with whom, and over what issues.**"
INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY & WAR

• Mankind (and therefore states) may be thought of as evil or power-seeking. In this case anarchy breeds aggressors and permits them leeway to act. Wars result from a failure of international government to deter or restrain the aggressive actions of states. This first path denotes the familiar deterrence model. (Deterrence Theory)

• Mankind (and therefore states) may be assumed to be peaceful and cooperative by nature. In this case the lack of world government to enforce cooperation among states leads to aggression out of unwarranted fear that one's rivals won't be restrained. This second path is an expanded security dilemma or conflict spiral model. (Stimulus-Response Theory)

• But whichever path one starts down, an anarchic international system still leads to war.

• The weakness of these hypotheses about the relationship between international anarchy and war lies in the following question. Why are then some historical periods more war prone than others if international anarchy is constant and if it is the root cause of war? Either the international system is not that anarchic, or the degree of anarchy varies, or some other variable(s), not international anarchy, actually cause(s) war.
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM & HEGEMONY

• if the world lives in anarchy, why aren’t we then constantly in war?

• the international system is not anarchic, but rather a well-organized system of hegemony though the hegemony may historically appear in different types.

• the variation in the distribution of capabilities is the defining characteristic of different types of international systems throughout history - unipolar, bipolar, multipolar.

• War may be seen as a way of maintaining the system's present structure or as the means through which the present structure is destroyed or transformed so drastically that an entirely new system is created.
STATUS DISCREPANCY (RANK DISEQUILIBRIUM) THEORY

• Status discrepancy theory (also known as rank disequilibrium theory) is based on the sociologist concept of stratification, which can be defined as the arrangement of units that make up a social system into "a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and/or psychic gratification."

• States might be ranked according to a wide variety of different criteria: military power, economic stability, literacy, technological sophistication, diplomatic reputation, productive capacity, possession of nuclear weapons, and so on.

• Maurice East prefers to collapse these criteria into three dimensions corresponding to sociologist Max Weber's classic categories:

class (economic might),
power (military force), and
status (prestige).
STATUS DISCREPANCY: WHO WAGES WAR AND WHY?

- Johann Galtung has suggested that states that are rank discrepant are more likely to participate in war than states that are in rank equilibrium.

- Maurice East has hypothesized that the more rank discrepancy that is present in the international system, the more war it should experience.

- Leaders of states, like ordinary individuals, may perceive aggression to be a necessary response to frustration.

- The theory only suggests that given high levels of rank discrepancy for the system or for individual states, aggression becomes more probable.

- * A central assumption of the theory is that national leaders will react to the situation of rank disequilibrium in similar ways, so that individual personalities may be regarded as unimportant.

- * The theory implies that world leaders should devote their attention to creating and maintaining greater social justice in the system. No Justice! No Peace!

- The weaknesses of the theory is that it focuses on the challengers of the system while wars can be started by the challenged party, too.
The notion that the balance of power within the system has an important effect on the behavior of states and the stability of the system is an idea that can be traced back at least as far as Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian Wars and is still advocated by the “Realist” or Conservative Theory.

What theorists, in general, mean by the term “stability” is whether the system can maintain itself over time without experiencing major wars.

The main idea of the “Realist” (Conservative) Theory is that the balance of power keeps peace. Equal power is sufficient to dissuade adventurism, while superiority tempts the possessor to gain power at the expense of others.

Weakness of the theory: If an equilibrium means either side may lose, it also means that either side may win, thus, tempting both sides to initiate war. Empirical research shows that military equality does not necessarily lead to peace.
POWER TRANSITION THEORY

- A. F. K. Organski has put forward a theory of war based primarily on changes in the distribution of power in the international system. Hence, this theory draws on the Theory of Status Discrepancy.

- The international system is seen not as anarchic, but as more or less hierarchically organized.

- In the world hierarchy, as potential rivals undergo industrialization and modernization, the old leader is challenged, creating a situation that frequently leads to war. The source of war is the differences in size and rates of growth of the members of the system.

- Conflicts are most likely when power transitions are underway.

- Sudden changes in national capabilities upset the previous distribution of power.

- Assumption: Powerful, satisfied states do not start wars; they are the primary beneficiaries of the present system.
WEAKNESSES OF THE POWER TRANSITION THEORY

• Richard J. Stoll and Michael Champion agree that all of Germany's wars with other great powers occurred as predicted by the power transition theory. The Austro-Prussian War, the Franco-Prussian War, and the two World Wars all broke out within five years of the intersection of capability scores between Germany and its major power rival at the time, thus, lending support to the "parity leads to war" hypothesis.

• * But, they note also several transitions that did not result in war. Thus, for instance, war did not eventuate as the power capabilities of the United States surpassed those of the European powers. (Do you agree? Is this a good example?)

• Counterargument: Indeed, the US did not start a war against either the UK, or France, or Germany, for it did not need to do so at all. The latter powers were already in war against each other in WWI & WWII. The US could have only profited from standing by, waiting, watching, and selling supplies to all or some of the sides in conflict (WWI). However, the final transition from the UK to the US world dominance (WWII) did result in the Cold War against yet another challenger, the USSR.
WEAKNESSES OF THE POWER TRANSITION THEORY

• The Power Transition Theory is not a general theory of war; it only purports to explain certain exceptional cases - major encounters between the most powerful states in the system.

• The Power Transition Theory also focuses on the bilateral, rather than multilateral relations.

• Some studies show that dyadic equality (or near equality) of power doesn't always lead to peace between rivals (questioning the strength of the “Realist” Theory and the Balance of Power hypothesis); while other studies clearly show that power transitions don't always eventuate in war (questioning the validity of the Power Transition Theory.)