

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 8
Part I: Quantitative and Formal Theories

Note: This week's questions go into far greater detail on the underlying literature than is actually covered in Cashman. I'm including these as examples of the sorts of questions you should be asking (and/or what might appear on prelims) if you want to look at this literature in greater detail.

1. Assess the strengths and limitations of the Correlates of War studies on the following dimensions
 - a. Operational definition of war (i.e. sample of cases)
 - b. Choice of variables to study
 - c. Operationalization of those variables
 - d. Period of time studied
 - e. The choice of correlation as the primary analytical technique
 - f. The primary hypotheses tested

Which of these choices are most likely to have affected the results; which are least likely? If you could do the entire exercise all over again, what would you do differently? Do you think that your modifications would change the results?

2. From the beginning, the CoW project has been criticized for looking only at wars; i.e. it did not include a control group of states or dyads that are not involved in war. (This element of the design has been modified subsequently by some individual researchers) Discuss the extent to which this affected the questions that the project could ask—you might want to review some of the basic philosophy of science and experimental design material from POLS 706 in dealing with this question.
3. Same questions on the fact that while the CoW project deals with cases that occur over time, many of the analyses are essentially cross-sectional and do not include information about the dynamics of a conflict process. To what extent is this constraint imposed artificially by the project, and to what extent is it consistent with the theories that CoW was attempting to test? (We will deal with this in more detail next week when we discuss the time-series studies)
4. Summarize the major results of the CoW project that have been consistently confirmed in multiple studies. Also summarize the hypotheses that were suggested by the theoretical literature but have not been validated by the CoW studies (Cashman's discussion is helpful here, though Cashman is not particularly sympathetic to empirical tests that contradict the theories). To what extent have these results actually affected the theoretical development of the field of international relations, and to what extent have they simply confirmed the obvious (e.g. contiguous states are more likely to fight than non-contiguous states)?
5. Agree or disagree: the Correlates of War project is essentially a good-faith effort to test the theory of realism as realism was understood by Morgenthau. Are there other theories of

international conflict that could be tested using the CoW variables but have received only limited attention (you can assume that Midlarsky's book is a good survey of the major CoW work)? Are there other theories that could be tested by collecting somewhat different variables?

6. To what extent are the CoW variables sufficient to measure the elusive concept of "power". To the extent that these indicators fail to validly or reliably measure power, is this because the concept of "power" itself is intrinsically difficult or impossible to objectively measure, or did the CoW project make poor choices in that measurement? Same set of questions on "polarity."

7. By choosing a long historical period—1815 to the present—the CoW project gets a large sample size and avoids focusing on the idiosyncratic characteristics of a single historical period. However, the period in question encompasses at least two major changes in the nature of international conflict—the industrialization of war, and the expansion and decline of European colonial systems. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Are there key concepts—for example "alliance"—that have changed so significantly over this period that they render the pooled analysis meaningless.

8. Same questions on the issue of inter-state war and the definition of "state." For example, there was a recent exchange on an IR methodology list questioning the fact that CoW did not consider China to be a "state" during the 19th century, despite China's roughly 5,000 of documented autonomous existence as a political actor. The exchange was concluded with someone commenting (sarcastically) "Well, I suppose China was just a tribal cheifdom." How well might we expect CoW results to generalize to contemporary international violence, which typically involves one or more non-state actors? Leaving aside issues of political correctness, does the Euro-centric definition of a "state" limit the extent to which these results can be generalized across time and geographical regions?

9. The "internal-external" hypothesis appears to be the hypothesis-that-will-not-die: There is little evidence for the validity of the hypothesis despite numerous attempts to test it, yet researchers still won't give up. (This hypothesis also is probably second only to "balance of power" as a concept one is likely to encounter in popular—e.g. CNN—discussions of international politics.) Are the existing tests missing something—i.e. the hypothesis is correct, but the tests are incorrectly specified—or does the theory just happen to attract morons for some reason? Note that Blainey, using an historical rather than a quantitative approach, also rejects the theory, but suggests that nations experiencing internal instability may *attract* conflict. If this is true, have the existing empirical tests adjusted for it?

- a. economic or "business" cycles
- b. human generational cycles, presumably around 20 to 25 years
- c. imperial "rise and fall" theories
- d. others?

For each of these cases, what is the social/political mechanism(s) that link the behavior that has the cycle to conflict? What are the mechanisms driving the cycle itself, and how credible are these? Have these mechanisms changed significantly over time?

10. Are arms race theories still relevant to the 21st century, or were these simply a temporary characteristic of warfare that was highly dependent on industrial mass production? (Note that the

answer to this might be different depending on whether one is dealing with the phenomenon of arms race, or the linkage between arms races and war—one could be true without the other.) How has this been affected by (or affected) some of the “obsolescence of war” arguments—the fact that many very wealthy states have chosen to spend relatively little of that wealth on armaments, and several states that have invested heavily in military preparedness (e.g. North Korea, Vietnam, Iraq) have miserable economies? [A related question—for which a literature exists, albeit not in this syllabus—is the issue of the contrast between “guns versus butter” and “guns as butter”: does the development of a modern military retard or enhance economic modernization.]

11. Is there such a thing as a “qualitative arms race”—in other words, can you really have competition in the qualitative characteristics of weapons but not in the number of weapons. Illuminate your argument with specific historical examples.

12. In the studies discussed in Cashman, to what extent is the term “cycle” being used in a formal sense—that is, comparable to the way that a “cycle” is defined in the natural sciences—and to what extent are the “cycles” simply situations where a behavior increases and then decreases? How does one distinguish this behavior from the inevitable “cycles” that occur in randomly-generated data due to Galtonian regression? What factors could speed up or slow down a cycle?

13. In my more cynical moods, it seems to me that the links between cycles and wars as described in Cashman are so general that any war could have a “cyclical” explanation (i.e. wars occur when states are expanding because they have more resources available; wars occur when states are contracting because they appear weak, etc.). Agree or disagree; is it possible to modify the theories so that this is not the case?

14. Is the “rise and decline” hypothesis primarily an artifact of the European imperial period (i.e. 1450-1950, at varying levels of intensity), or is it more general? Are there extended historical periods (either globally or in some regions) that do not show this pattern? To what extent are the indicators unambiguous, particularly at the time? (for example, what explains the popularity, about a decade ago, of books arguing that US power had peaked, when in fact that US has entered a period of unquestionable conventional military hegemony and the greatest economic expansion in history). Can one have an economic or cultural “rise and decline” pattern without also seeing a pattern in war involvement?