

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 12
The Westphalian Transition

Starting point for our discussion will be simply to look at the various changes and processes that McNeill identifies, assess the strength of his evidence and argument, and try to identify whether these (or their contemporary analogues) might be changing in the current system.

1. What sort of militarized structures were in place prior to the "Westphalian transition" that led to the [nominal] primacy of the sovereign state? How were these maintained; what sort of generalizations (if any) can we make about these that would still be relevant today, particularly in situations where economic development is limited and the state is weak (Somalia, Afghanistan, Congo)
2. Was the emergence of the sovereign state somehow "inevitable" — that is, given the military, political and economic conditions, it was the only possible outcome, or was it just one of a number of paths. This is, of course, a counter-factual but I think one that can be discussed intelligently. You might also pay attention to alternative historical structures, notably empire. Exactly what were those key conditions?
3. In undergraduate classes, we pretend that 1648 marks a sharp division from the past -- how accurate is this? At what point (if any) did the sovereign state become the primary legitimate actor? The dominant actor? Note that McNeill does not see this as a critical turning point.
4. To what extent are we currently seeing a reversal of this transition, particularly with respect to
 - a. Globalization and decentralization of significant military power (automatic weapons, high explosives) to the level where a relatively small group can once again challenge, at least locally, even a major power
 - b. Globalization and decentralization of economic power to the extent that has very significantly diminished both the ability of any sovereign to control its own economy, and removed many of the advantages of sovereignty. That is, a city-state such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Dubai or Qatar can play a major role in the world economy, and a continental power such as Russia does not necessarily have major advantages. Territorial size no longer is important.

Will these changes lead to a political decentralization similar to the European high Middle Ages or have other changes -- for example in communications and non-military technology -- locked the system into a different path?

5. [from Week 2] Comparing war in the pre-gunpowder era (which for convenience I will call "classical") and the contemporary (21st century) era, what characteristics can one find in common, and what characteristics are fundamentally different? Stated only slightly differently, does someone trying to understand contemporary conflict have anything to learn from conflict prior to 1650? [some of the other questions below pursue this in greater detail]

6. Outline the key processes that allowed economic and military (and hence political) power to city-states. Given the wealth of the city-states, why didn't the process stop there: why did it further concentrate into nation-states? And then why did the process of concentration *stop* at that point, instead of going on to further concentrate into empires (which, keep in mind, were the norm in both Europe prior to around 400 CE and in Asia generally).?

7. Agree or disagree: until relatively recently, the “Westphalian” period—1648-present—is not really characterized (as we teach undergraduates, and as has been reified by realist theory) by nation-states as the dominant actors but a situation Stephen Colbert might call “nation-statiness:” while nation-states are important, the major actors involve either colonial empires (Spain, Netherlands, Britain, France) or internal empires (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian, Chinese), and emerging powers (USA, Japan, Germany and Italy), upon achieving nation-state status, immediately embark on policies designed to create empires. Being a simple nation-state is for chumps.

8. [from Week 2] What are the possible linkages between war and large-scale organized political activity found in civilized societies. More generally, to what extent does organized violence (both the preparations for and implementations of) determine the political and social structures of a society in general? To what extent do the economic structures and technology determine the organization of violence?

9. What cultural, political or economic elements are most effective in limiting the levels of organized violence in a society (by "society" I mean a cultural area in general—a group of people who are interacting over a long period of time—not just a single state). To what extent have these constraints changed over time?

A closely related issue (courtesy William McNeil; Martin van Crevald generalizes this to the issue of “Hollandization”—the rampaging Lutherans of the 17th century decided to settle down and merely become fabulously wealthy)—what are the tradeoffs between "raiding and trading"? To what extent can commercial exchange accomplish the same objectives as organized violence, and to what extent are the two distinct? To what extent does one type of activity consistently evolve into the other (particularly if one includes in the "trading" category taxation systems that work with minimal coercion). Has this changed significantly over time?