Is War Rational or Miscalculation and Misperception Matter?

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Abstract- War is costly and it consumes the taste of blood of fighters who are negaged in war and of innocent citizens. It temporarily satisfy the winners and suffers the lossers, but in long-run, both parties suffer. Rationality or miscalculation and misperception always play key roles in determining the potential outcome of wars by the experts and leaders. States' leaders, sometimes, do not calculate the overall impact of war in the internal affairs of the states except their winning in elections through mechanism. Findings show that relative power is often not a good predictor of outcomes of Wars. Our research found and conclude that war is mostly irrational (that means miscalculation and misperception matter) when it is considered from the initiator point of view, but it would be rational when States want to defend themselves against other threat(s), especially in destructive conflicts, but it should follow the international war rules and regulations.

Index Terms- War, Rational, Rationality, Miscalculation, Misperception

I. Introduction

War is costly and it consumes the taste of blood of the fighters who are engaged in war and of innocent citizens. Also, war temporarily satisfies the winners and suffers the losers. The rationality assumption divides theorists on the causes of war into two camps: the realists and the miscalculation camp. Many realists and expected utility theorists fall into the rationalist camp, while political psychologists and students of bureaucratic politics fall into the miscalculation and misperception camp. Despite this schism, few studies empirically test the overall extent of rationality in decisions for war. If we see the previous Correlates of War (COW), Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID), and National Material Capabilities (NMC) databases, we find that prior to 1900, war initiators won over 70% of the time.[1] Since 1945, only a third of initiators have won war. In spite of the decreasing win rates, states' leaders initiate wars at an increasing to steady rate over time since 1920.[2] States' leaders are not learning that war increasingly does not pay. Declining win rates and steady initiation rates provide the main basis for our core argument: miscalculation and misperception are increasing. This argument is bolstered by other findings showing that, for example, relative power is often not a good predictor of outcomes. We divide our discussion into three sections. The first section analyzes the rationality explanation of War. In the second section, we examine the war in the view that it is mostly caused by miscalculation and misperception of actors. The third section includes our arguments and some preventive solutions to war.

In this first section, rationalist arguments will be unraveled. Rationalists' assumption in the debate about the rationality of war is that even rational leaders may end up opting for war under certain circumstances. [3] First, a game-theory rationalist approach will be studied in the article 'Is War a Rationality Activity?' of Giacomo de Luca and Petros G. Sekeris and second a more theoricized version of rationalist arguments will be explained in the article 'War and Rationality' of James D. Fearon.

In their article 'Is War a Rationality Activity?' Giacomo De Luca and Petros G. Sekeris go for a game-theory approach, in which they use a model of 'guns and butter' to find out at which stage of a conflict it would be rational to prefer deterrence over conflicts. This model contains two agents which make a decision about their armament level in the first stage of the conflict and would have to make a choice during the second stage to attack or not. It is thus a 'static two-stage general equilibrium model.' [4] Furthermore, their model results in the mix of a deterrence and aggression strategy of parties. The finding of De Lucas and

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[1] Wang, Kevin and James Lee Ray, Beginners and Winners: The Fate of Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers Since 1495, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 1994), URL:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2600875.pdf?casa_token=f07niDXhfjgAAAAA:My03tZLdrB7qQWz11J7guuJ2ZH1LjQ9ug-pZV88dI0Tz_7xovyl7EDY37y3jzpE4kkjJ6fXY2AXj4ul-k2wOeJV-laFJf4-ByelgrDd1fU-y6ebS5lkK

[2] Wang, Kevin and James Lee Ray, Beginners and Winners: The Fate of Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers Since 1495, *International Studies*

Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 1994), URL:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2600875.pdf?casa_token=f07niDXhfjgAAAAA:My03tZLdrB7qQWz11J7guuJ2ZH1LjQ9ug-pZV88dI0Tz_7xovyl7EDY37y3jzpE4kkjJ6fXY2AXj4ul-k2wOeJV-laFJf4-ByelgrDd1fU-y6ebS5lkK

[3] D. Fearon, James. 'Rationalist Explanations of War', *International Organization: MIT Press*, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 379

[4] De Luca, Giacomo and G. Sekeris, Petros. Is War a Rational Activity?, 2008, p. 3

Sekeris is that any weapon built creates the possibility of war due to the fact that a positive weapons' production generates an imperfect deterrence. [5] More precisely, in this economic model, two economic agents have the choice to invest their resource endowment over two goods, which are guns and butter. In this model, war is understood as a zero-sum game. Two outcomes are tested: a destructive war and a non-destructive war. De Lucas and Sekeris generated two propositions for the non-destructive war which are that in a non-destructive conflict war strategy would prevail over deterrence strategy no matter what and that there exists a 'unique stable pure strategy equilibrium' in the case of non-destructive conflicts.[6] Also, the destructive conflict possibility made both authors extrapolate three other propositions: first, that there is always an equilibrium in case of conflict; second, that a 'pure strategy deterrence equilibrium never exists' [7] and that 'a stable pure strategy war equilibrium exists if and only if $\delta > \underline{\delta}$, where δ represents the destructiveness of war. [8] Those five propositions lead De Lucas and Sakeris to their theorem that 'if aggregate spending in guns is strictly positive, war always occurs with positive probability'. [9] Their model unravels the possibility of peace in war when both agents select their deterrence investment in guns in the first stage of the war, which would make both parties prefer the peace option because of the high quantity of guns of their opponents. This specific destructive war scenario would lead to a peaceful outcome, which was not mentioned in previous models neglecting the deterrence strategy. Thus, this article shed a new light on the rationality of war in which 'non-destructive conflicts' would lead to a war equilibrium whereas 'destructive conflicts' would lead to mixed strategy equilibria. In the latter case, agents would have complementary probability of opting for a deterrence strategy and a war strategy. [10]

According to Fearon in his article 'Rationalist Explanation of War', there are three mechanisms explaining that some rational political leaders may end up choosing war. The first one is that during war prevention negotiations many information about military capacities of states are unknown to others. In order to bargain a more favorable deal, one state might have incentives to misrepresent their real military capacities in order to gain a better deal afterwards. Hence, war would occur not only because of an unintended lack of communication, but from a strategic lack of divulgated military information and asymmetric information. The second valuable rationalist argument is that potentially conflictual states would be unable to concert on an agreement that would satisfy both parties because of commitment problems, which refer to 'situations in which mutually preferable bargains are unattainable because one or more states would have an incentive to renege on the terms.' [11] The last rationalist argument accepted by Fearon is that parties may not find an agreement that would meet both expectations because of 'issue indivisibilities', which means that some issues can not lead to concessions from both sides because of their inherent nature. Some examples of issue indivisibilities Fearon mentioned are 'abortion in domestic politics and the problem of which prince sits on the throne, of, say, Spain, [...].'[12] Nonetheless, Fearon rejects three commonly accepted rationalist arguments since they do not directly answer the main question of the debate which is: 'What prevents states in a dispute from reaching an ex ante agreement that avoids the costs they know will be paid ex post if they go to war?'.[13] Those three arguments are the anarchy argument, the preventive war argument as well as the positive expected utility argument. The anarchy argument states that in the absence of a hegemonic international superpower, there is no force able to prevent war from happening. According to the logic of this argument, no state would be able to settle peacefully by itself; there is a need for an external hegemonic figure to enforce law. However, this argument does not answer the question why would the state have any incentive to use force if it is always a costly choice? By not answering this question, the anarchy argument is unable to tackle the war's ex post inefficiency issue. The preventive war argument puts forward that it is rational for a declining power state to declare war to a rising power if it thinks that the latter have high probabilities of attacking. The problem with this argument is that it does not take into account the possibility of bargaining between two states to prevent war. Indeed, if war is again considered as always costly, bargain should be the preferred option of both parties no matter what. It is thus not rational for the declining power to fear a declaration of war from their rising opponents. The positive expected utility argument is also not valuable according to Fearon. This argument set forth that war is a possible outcome when two or more states judge that the expected benefits of fighting counterbalances the expected costs of war.[14] This argument has not yet answered the question when would it be rationally preferable for two states to go for war instead of peace agreements. Therefore, all of those three rationalist arguments are not valid according to Fearon.

There are very few scholars who, in any methodological tradition, have attempted to test the overall extent of miscalculation and misperception in decisions for war. The main reason for this gap is that scholars who emphasize miscalculation and misperception tend to do case studies, while large-*N* scholars tend not to assess miscalculation and misperception.[15] For example, in Geller and Singers review of the findings of 500+ large-N analyses on the causes of war, they claimed that miscalculation and misperception are important, but they then cast

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[5] De Luca, Giacomo and G. Sekeris, Petros. Is War a Rational Activity?, 2008, p. 3

[6] Ibid, p. 6

[7] Ibid, p. 6

[8] De Luca, Giacomo and G. Sekeris, Petros. 'Is War a Rational Activity?', 2008, p. 3 and 7

[9] De Luca, Giacomo and G. Sekeris, Petros. 'Is War a Rational Activity?', 2008, p. 7

[10] Ibid, p. 8

[11] Ibid, p. 389

[12] D. Fearon, James. 'Rationalist Explanations of War', *International Organization: MIT Press*, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 382

[13] Ibid, p. 395

[14] Ibid, p. 379

[15] Dan L and Ryan S. *Is war rational: the extent of miscalculation and misperception as causes of war*, 2005, URL: http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/6/4/5/2/pages64522/p64522-1.php

aside the issue by arguing that the subject can best be examined with case studies.[16]

The study of wars' outcomes is crucial for two reasons. First, success in war is the best way to judge the utility of war. The more initiators win, the higher the expected utility of war. The second reason to study war outcomes is to learn more about the predictability of these outcomes. The extent to which war is a calculable bet is directly related to participants' utilities of engaging in war. For example, relative power should be one of the most powerful predictors of war outcomes. As the National Material Capabilities (NMC) documentation makes clear, relative power is not easy to measure, but it is easier than strategy, morale, domestic politics, or other more elusive determinants of outcomes (2004).[17] If relative power is a good predictor of outcomes, this should reduce miscalculation and misperception and help deterrence. On the other hand, as the ability of relative power to predict war outcomes declines, war outcomes must then increasingly depend on more elusive variables. This in turn increases the odds of miscalculation and misperception. In sum, aggregate win and loss ratios provide a first attempt at judging the utility of war. Predictability of outcomes then tells us more about the utility of war as a policy tool.

There is a problem with the assessment of wars. For example, Wang and Ray [18] use a dataset of 105 great power wars going back to 1495 in order to explain the rationality of war.[19] They found that initiators were significantly more likely to win than their targets in the 19th and 20th centuries with win rates of 56%, 52%, 53%, 74% and 67% from 15th to 20th centuries.[20] In spite of these findings the authors took a neutral position by saying that the variation in win rates offers support for both rationalist and miscalculation/misperception camps. That creates a new puzzle. They only take into account great power wars instead of all wars. Assessing all wars, we find the winning rate decreasing over time. In addition, If we look at the databases of Correlates of War (COW), Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID), and National Material Capabilities (NMC), we find that initiators won 55% of the 79 large interstate wars between 1815 and 1991.[21] The utility of war has declined markedly over time. In the 47 wars since 1900, the success rate declined to 43%. Since 1945, initiators won

33% of 23 wars. Despite declining win rates, states initiate wars at an increasing to steady rate over time since 1920.[22] Thus, states are not learning that war does not pay.

Declining win rates and steady initiation rates provide the main basis for our core argument: miscalculation and misperception are increasing. This argument is bolstered by other findings showing that, for example, relative power is often not a good predictor of outcomes. However, we do claim that war increasingly results from miscalculation and misperception. We build on this useful study in several ways. We gain leverage by looking at all major interstate wars, not just great power wars. By looking at 79 wars over the last 200 years, instead of 108 wars over 500 years, we reduce the N somewhat, but increase temporal commensurability between the wars. We examine the influence of relative power in more depth, and we focus on the rationality of war. Finally, we find that the rationality explanation does not outweigh other factors of wars, including miscalculation and misperception.

To examine the "Is War Rational or Miscalculation and Misperception?" question, we assume that countries start wars so as to win. When we see initiators win, we assume that states' leaders made a rational choice. A loss indicates a miscalculation and/or misperception.

II.   ARGUMENTATION

First, we begin with the definition of some key concepts: war, miscalculation, misperception, and rationality. War is understood as a 'strategic interaction rooted in hostile intent, and chosen for political/policy goals which can be met by compelling the enemy by force.'[23] Misperception occurs when incorrect data are received by the decision-maker and when the decision-maker distorts those information. Imperfect information always generates misperception. Misperception can cause miscalculation. Miscalculation occurs when a decision-maker obtains non-intended results. Perfect rationality means making decisions to maximize utility based on perfect information about all the available choices and their consequences. If all states and actors

[16] Geller, Daniel S. and J. David Singer, *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, URL: https://homepage.univie.ac.at/heinz.gaertner/wp-content/folien-13junipw.pdf

[17] Dan L and Ryan S. *Is war rational: the extent of miscalculation and misperception as causes of war.*, 2005, URL: http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/6/4/5/2/pages64522/p64522-1.php

[18] Wang, Kevin and James Lee Ray, Beginners and Winners: The Fate of Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers Since 1495, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 1994), URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2600875.pdf?casa_token=f07niDXhfjgAAAAA:My03tZLdrB7qQWz11J7guuJ2ZH1LjQ9ug-pZV88dI0Tz_7xovyl7EDY37y3jzpE4kkjJ6fXY2AXj4ul-k2wOeJV-laFJf4-ByelgrDd1fU-y6ebS5lkK

[19] Wang, Kevin and James Lee Ray, Beginners and Winners: The Fate of Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers Since 1495, *International Studies*

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[20] Ibid, p. 145

[21] Ibid, p. 144

[22] Ibid, p. 146

[23] Von Clausewitz, Carl. On War, Princeton University Press, 1976, New Jersey, URL: https://cf75bcf4-a-62cb3a1a-s-sites.googlegroups.com/site/gwupsc003/readings/clau.pdf?attachauth=ANoY7coI_8u63kF2F_HdFMAji4UIibcvOI1R9dKf94pxkMbRR70GXuEJ3a_Iz45o6KPdy9LAcjAmm1KBt6lexEn94eFCdh5ks-sAL5tCPUiYrZfHiWnIOimrB0T3yFkowq3O9fRac4do92T1swjuDyyK4f5uYID9BWUBshpiczPYlnFL72pgN6PG7TH5EZaumGtDaojn8J0R7kmQ8XnbMcWf1Llq-UHyKA%3D%3D&attredirects=0
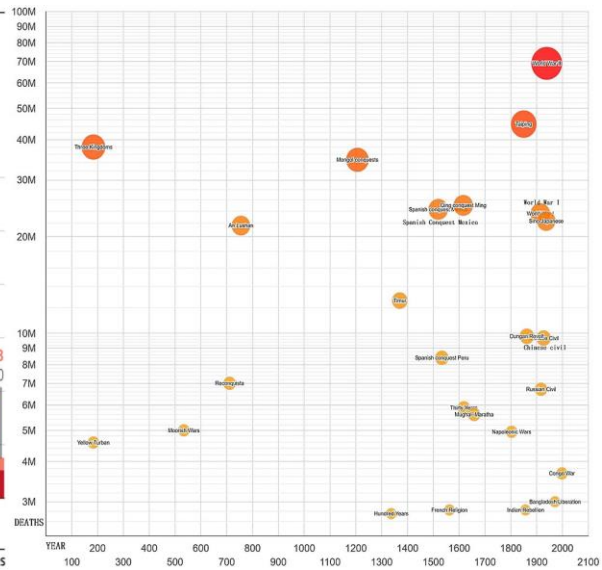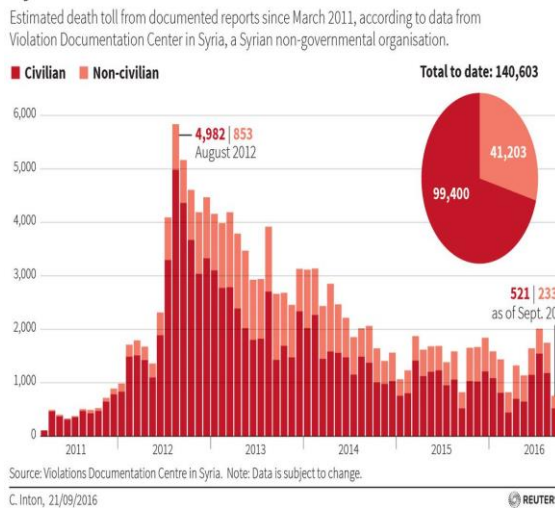
were perfectly rational, war would be rare because states could predict outcomes in advance and losers in particular would, presumably, have strong incentives to prevent war. [24]

Furthermore, we look back to war history and its impact on states' socioeconomic spheres. We know that wars are costly endeavors. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database, the approximate estimated costs of wars in 1992 and 2016 were 1.136 and 1.686 billion constant US dollars for the 2011 record or 1.699 billion constant USD respectively, which represents 2,2% of the world's GDP. In addition, at least 108 million people were killed in wars in the twentieth century.[25] The SIPRI death reports of some

major wars unravel the corresponding number of deaths for the following conflicts in chronological order:

- ❖ World War I (1914- 1918) - over 15 million
- ❖ Korean War (1950- 1953) - over 1.2 million deaths
- ❖ Second Congo war (1998- 2002/3) - up to 5.4 million deaths
- ❖ Iraq war (2003 - Mid-2011)- around 0.5 million deaths (BBC report, 2013)
- ❖ Syrian civil war (up to 2016)- over 0.5 million deaths (UN and Arab League, 2016)

Source: Stockholm Institute for Peace Research Institute.

If we care about the lives of those people and economic losses, an alternative solution to war should be found. In this sense, war seems irrational.

Also, war is not rational in the sense that it entails the risk of massive destruction for both sides of the conflict. As De Lucas and Sekeris put forward in their game theory of war, any weapon built increases the possibility of war. Therefore, it would be rational not to initiate war in the first place. However, the possibility of war can cause deterrence from the opponent in the case of a destructive war. Even though the second scenario can generate status quo for some time, it can degenerate in the long run according to our understanding because of the agents incentive to develop more refined weapons in order to answer possible attacks from potential opponents. Therefore, we argue that the irrational position aggregated advantages are greater than their disadvantages.

However, war may be rational under some circumstances. As Fearon mentioned in his article 'Rationalist Explanation of War', war can be rational when two parties are unable to find common agreement because at least one party has no incentives to

accept this agreement. In other words, the implications of an agreement may be cruel or unjust towards the second party's citizens and thus seem unacceptable. Also, a leader can prefer war over peace settlement to get a better deal in the future by misrepresenting their true military capacities. The intent there would simply be to hide their true military power in order to wait for better deals. Political leaders have access to privileged military information such as 'military capabilities, strategy, and tactics; the population's willingness to prosecute a long war; or third state intentions.' [26] The asymmetric information of one state over another can lead this state to rationally think that its benefits from war would be greater than its losses and hence, lead to a certain victory. As Fearon, we believe that political leaders may rationally opt for strategic asymmetric information rather than misperceive another opponent capacity because 'two rational agents having the same information about an uncertain event should have the same beliefs about its likely outcome.' [27] It would be in the state's interest to misinform the other about its military capacity. In those

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[24] D. Fearon, James. 'Rationalist Explanations of War', *International Organization: MIT Press*, Vol. 49, No. 3

[25] Chris Hedges. 'What Every Person Should Know About War'(2003). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/06/books/chapters/what-every-person-should-know-about-war.html

[26] D. Fearon, James. 'Rationalist Explanations of War', *International Organization: MIT Press*, Vol. 49, No. 3 p. 392

[27] Ibid, p. 392

two senses, war can be a rational path of political leaders without taking into account general losses.

Finally, we conclude that war is more irrational than rational ceteris paribus. Rationality of war arguments are mostly directed towards defense of one agent's population whereas irrationality of war arguments are directed towards losses of all parties included in the conflict. Thus, one should forget its national pride for peace and understand himself as a world citizen first and foremost. From this standpoint, this agent has no opponent and there is nothing to win in war other than death and sufferings of other humans.

III.   RATIONAL SOLUTION AND CONCLUSION

In light of what has been said, war is mostly irrational when it is considered from the initiator point of view, but it would be rational when States want to defend themselves against other threat(s), especially in destructive conflicts, but it should follow the international war rules and regulations. Game theory arguments as well as misconception (and misperception) arguments both give new perspectives to the rationality of war conflict. However, we would mostly consider war as irrational because of the important costs it encompasses in general. In order to limit the incentives of States to opt for war as much as possible, we identified two major solutions to conflicts. Some rational solutions to war can come from a third party intervention, namely the United Nations. Indeed, the United Nations institutions have proven their relevant role as conflict solver after the Second World War as well as during numerous conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Plus, the United Nations has a higher probability of being an objective conflict manager than any other third party because it is not a State actor and hence does not serve its own interests. However, one may question its legitimacy in interfering into domestic politics of other countries. One other solution to war would be international trade. William Polachek Solomon in his article 'Conflicts and Trade' considers international trade as a natural peace making procedure by mutual economic dependencies created. Those mutual dependencies between States would increase the costs of conflict and would give incentives for both parties to cooperate. Since countries sharing important international trade relations should experience less conflicts and since the most strategic trade relations would create the most deterrent incentive of trade on conflict, one can come to the conclusion that trade is a natural peacemaking process between countries, which is often more long-lasting than when peace is imposed. Hence, even though war can be rational under some circumstances, such solutions would always be more preferable than the option of war. [28] Finally, it would be relevant to investigate the rationality of conflict intervention in order to understand if those interventions are always rational in order to prevent conflicts., such as UN interventions for further research.

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