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Introduction: The Puzzle of War Duration

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Why do wars last as long as they do? Why do some rage for years, while others last only a few months or days? The question matters because longer wars have serious consequences. They produce more fatalities¹ and are a greater threat to regimes' stability than are shorter wars.² To cite but one prominent example, had World War I ended in 1916, rather than dragging on into 1918, the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires would probably have survived, and the rise of both communism and fascism would have been less likely. Thus, war duration can have important implications that go beyond the immediate war in question.

Older research reasonably argued that less intense war fighting strategies and rough terrain extend conflicts.³ Yet variation in war duration can be found even

1. H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Zachary C. Shirkey, "When and How Many: The Effects of Third Party Joining on Casualties and Duration in Interstate Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2012): 321–34; Alex Weisiger, *Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013).

2. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson, and Gary Woller, "War and the Fate of Regimes: A Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992): 638–46.

3. D. Scott Bennett and Allan C. Stam, "The Duration of Interstate Wars, 1816–1985," *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 239–57. The relationship between the balance of forces and war duration is less clear. This is because imbalance, which would seemingly shorten wars, can cause the weaker side to pursue guerrilla strategies, thereby extending conflicts. Also, while the relative balance of forces should affect the terms of any settlement, rationalists suggest it is disagreement about that balance rather than the balance itself that influences war duration. See James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49 (1995): 379–414; Donald Wittman, "How a War Ends: A Rational Model Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 23 (1979): 743–63. Thus, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the relationship between the military balance and the likely duration of a war. Last, there is no consensus about whether military technology that favors offense should lead to longer or shorter wars, or even if it is possible to de-

among wars of similar intensity and terrain.⁴ More recent research has turned to looking at how states bargain with each other. What allows and prevents states from reaching mutually acceptable bargains to halt the fighting? Do obstacles to peace stem from parochial interests of leaders, psychological hurdles that prevent leaders from recognizing or accepting defeat, entrapment dynamics of leaders beholden to hawkish supporters, or the nature of the conflict itself? Such research has produced answers stemming from the rationalist bargaining framework, domestic politics, and psychology.

Rationalist approaches have looked to the causes of war to explain their duration. With some exceptions, rationalists have argued that longer wars are likely to have been caused by commitment problems, which arise when expected future shifts in relative power make it impossible for states to credibly commit to agreements today, since they would have strong incentives to renege and either violate or renegotiate the agreement in the future.⁵ Rationalists believe that commitment problems are the better explanation of long wars because private information about states' current capabilities and resolve is revealed reasonably quickly by battles and exchanges of offers for settlement, often allowing states to reach a mutually acceptable settlement.⁶ Commitment problems, on the other hand, may take years to resolve because of the need to significantly degrade an opponent's power in order to prevent or offset potential future power shifts or even bring about regime change in an opponent.

Domestic politics approaches have suggested that leaders may prolong wars due to high personal stakes in or private benefits from the war⁷ or due to an inability to

termine whether technology favors offense. See Karen R. Adams, "Attack and Conquer? International Anarchy and the Offense-Defense-Deterrence Balance," *International Security* 28 (2003–04): 45–83; Stephen Biddle, "Rebuilding the Foundations of Offense-Defense Theory," *Journal of Politics* 63 (2001): 741–74; Marco Nilsson, "Offense-Defense Balance, War Duration, and the Security Dilemma," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (2012): 467–89; Branislav Slantchev, "How Initiators End their Wars: The Duration of Warfare and the Terms of Peace," *American Journal of Political Science* 48 (2004): 813–29.

4. Weisiger, *Logics of War*, 1–2 (see note 1 above).

5. Commitment problems arise when anticipated future power shifts create an incentive for a party to an agreement to renege on that agreement when it has become more powerful. Commitment problems can also arise if a given regime is seen as being dispositionally unable to honor an agreement. These dynamics undermine states' ability to reach agreements today as there is little reason to expect the agreement to hold in the future. See Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60 (2006): 169–203.

6. Robert Powell, "Persistent Fighting and Shifting Power," *American Journal of Political Science* 56 (2012): 620–37; Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Weisiger, *Logics of War* (see note 1 above).

7. Sarah Croco, "The Decider's Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment," *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011): 457–77; Goemans, *War and Pun-*

construct a domestic governing coalition that could both accept a peace settlement and remain in power.⁸ These studies vary in the relative importance they assign to individual leaders versus the political regime as a whole, suggesting avenues for further research.

Psychological approaches argue that it is ultimately difficult to view extremely protracted and costly wars as the consequence of a rational decision-making process. Scholars focusing on psychology have argued that cognitive biases, a focus on sunk costs, or concerns about national honor may prevent settlement.⁹ They have also found that emotions affect beliefs and decision making, which in turn can influence how states update their expectations for war and their willingness to accept a proposed settlement.¹⁰

While each of these approaches has been productive, the disagreements across and also within them are worth more attention. The aim of this symposium is to create a dialogue between scholars from these varying approaches. The hope is that such a conversation will not only help to clarify disagreements and to determine which factors are most important, but also to find areas of agreement and perhaps of synergy.

Indeed, recent years have seen some attempts to find a productive synthesis between rationalist and psychological approaches. For example, Streich and Levy examine how motivated and unmotivated biases influence the role of information asymmetries in causing war.¹¹ In particular, they demonstrate that Russian racial biases and a focus on the most optimistic intelligence reports, combined with significant uncertainty about the relative capabilities of Russia and Japan, led Moscow to already favor war in 1904—even though waiting would have been rational, since Russian military strength in the Far East would continue to grow as construction

ishment (see note 1 above); Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Brandon C. Prins, “Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (2004): 937–61; Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

8. Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see previous note).

9. Thomas M. Dolan, “Demanding the Impossible: Honor, Bargaining, and War,” *Security Studies* 24 (2015): 528–62; Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War,” *Security Studies* 24 (2015): 662–95; Stanley, *Paths to Peace* (see note 7 above).

10. Thomas M. Dolan, “Go Big or Go Home? Positive Emotions and Responses to Wartime Success,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60 (2016): 230–42.

11. Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, “Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (2016): 489–511.

of the Trans-Siberian Railway continued over the next decade. Likewise, Lake shows that while the rationalist framework is helpful for understanding interactions between the United States and Iraq leading up to their 2003 war, the role that information asymmetries and commitment problems played in causing the war cannot be fully understood without factoring in American and Iraqi biases, misperceptions, and domestic politics.¹² Finally, a recent special issue of *International Organization* focuses on the implications of the behavioral revolution for understanding international relations and whether new psychological insights about how actors assess risks, make inter-temporal tradeoffs, and update beliefs could be productively combined with rationalist approaches. In particular, it appears that these new insights, including the possibility of social preferences and the connections between intuitions, emotions, and reasoning, might help us to understand actors' beliefs, preferences, resolve, and preferred strategies.¹³ While the jury is still out on whether such a fusion between rationalist and psychological approaches can be successfully forged, it is clear that the disagreements and possible syntheses between rational and psychological approaches comprise an important and fertile area of research worthy of further exploration.

With this goal in mind, the contributors to this symposium represent a variety of approaches to explaining, and arguments about, war duration. First, Dan Reiter argues that it is vital to think of war onset and war duration as one process, since the overlap between the two phenomena is evident in extant research. Specifically, theories of war duration often build directly upon theories of war initiation. He argues that this overlap can be leveraged to allow for better testing of theories and improved theory construction.¹⁴

Second, Elizabeth Stanley builds on recent research in neuroscience, psychology, and stress physiology to develop the micro-foundations of decision making under stress. She then connects these insights to bargaining, domestic politics, and

12. David A. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory: Assessing Rationalist Explanations of the Iraq War," *International Security* 35 (Winter 2010–11): 7–52.

13. See especially: Emilie M. Hafner-Burton et al., "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations," *International Organization* 71 (2017): S1–S31; Brian C. Rathbun, Joshua D. Kertzer, and Mark Paradis, "Homo Diplomaticus: Mixed-Method Evidence of Variation in Strategic Rationality," *International Organization* 71 (2017): S33–S60; Joshua D. Kertzer, "Resolve, Time, and Risk," *International Organization* 71 (2017): S109–S136; Janice Gross Stein, "The Micro-Foundations of International Relations Theory: Psychology and Behavioral Economics," *International Organization* 71 (2017): S249–S263; Robert Powell, "Research Bets and Behavioral IR," *International Organization* 71 (2017): S265–S277.

14. Dan Reiter, "Unifying the Study of the Causes and Duration of Wars," *Polity* 50 (2018): 168–77.

psychological theories of war duration so as to better ground these frameworks in human behavior and analyze their contributions to the literature. In particular, she argues that the decline of leaders' cognitive capacity, tolerance of ambiguity, and ability to incorporate new information due to prolonged stress can help explain why when wars last longer, it becomes more difficult to end them.¹⁵

Third, Thomas Dolan notes that by focusing on perceptual biases and the cognitive obstacles to learning and decision making, psychological theories of war have been limited to explaining long wars, though they can also help to explain short wars. Dolan contends that psychological theories that address emotions, individual traits, and decision making can and should be able to explain when leaders' risk acceptance, belief structures, and responsiveness to events make short wars more likely. He concludes that creating psychological explanations of short wars will make psychological approaches more complete and better position them to compete with rationalist explanations of war.¹⁶

Fourth, Alex Weisiger argues that rationalist explanations of long wars are more compelling than psychological explanations, since the latter often are empirically intractable, cannot explain short wars, or largely mirror the predictions of rationalist explanations. He argues that as long as rationalist arguments can be seen as reasonable approximations of reality, their simplicity will make them more appealing as explanations of war duration than psychological interpretations are.¹⁷

In the next article of the symposium, I argue that testing competing theories of long wars is extremely difficult. To some extent, this is a result of definitional and scope issues that are inherent in the study of war duration. More problematic, however, is that many theories of war duration predict similar behaviors and that both leadership groups and individual leaders often have multiple reasons for favoring continued fighting. This combination of overlapping predictions and multicausality makes testing theories of war duration very difficult.¹⁸

Weisiger concludes the symposium by highlighting points of agreement and disagreement between the various contributors and identifying open questions. He focuses especially on the connections between war initiation and decisions to continue

15. Elizabeth A. Stanley, "War Duration and the Micro-Dynamics of Decision Making under Stress," *Polity* 50 (2018): 178–200.

16. Thomas M. Dolan, "Moving Beyond Pathology: Why Psychologists Should Care About Short Wars," *Polity* 50 (2018): 210–14.

17. Alex Weisiger, "Rationality and the Limits of Psychology in Explaining Interstate War Duration," *Polity* 50 (2018): 215–24.

18. Zachary C. Shirkey, "Rationality and the Limits of Psychology in Explaining Interstate War Duration," *Polity* 50 (2018): 225–37.

fighting, the causes of short wars, and the need to adjudicate between competing explanations of war duration.¹⁹

Given the continued occurrence of wars, both long and short, understanding what causes them to vary in duration remains relevant. I hope that this symposium will not only help to clarify points of agreement and disagreement between various explanations of war duration, but will also spur further and improved research that may help those grappling with removing obstacles to war termination and settlement.

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19. Alex Weisiger, "Conclusion," *Polity* 50 (2018): 238–42.