



1993

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Tetlock, P.E. et al. (1993). Introduction. In Tetlock, P.E., Husbands, J.L., Jervis, R., Stern, P.C., & Tilly, C. (Eds.), *Behavior, Society, and International Conflict: Volume Three*, 3-7. Oxford University Press.

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# Introduction

## **Abstract**

"May you live in interesting times," runs the legendary Chinese curse. These are interesting times: almost anything can happen except a return to the delicate but enduring balance between two blocs that marked international relations for nearly half a century after World War II. The possibilities include nuclear war, not in the form of the long-feared mutual destruction of the Soviet Union and the United States, but as a last resort in the course of escalating regional conflicts in the Middle East or South Asia. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, United Nations inspectors found evidence of strong steps toward the production of nuclear weapons in Iraq, a country whose leaders did not hesitate to rain missiles on noncombatant Israel during their struggle to hold Kuwait; the same science is available to many other small, rich despots throughout the world. While the chances that two of the world's largest countries would annihilate each other simultaneously have surely receded, the risk of nuclear war has by no means vanished.

## **Disciplines**

Defense and Security Studies | Emergency and Disaster Management | Energy Policy | International Relations | Management Sciences and Quantitative Methods | Military and Veterans Studies | Peace and Conflict Studies | Policy History, Theory, and Methods | Science and Technology Policy | Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies | Terrorism Studies

## Introduction

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“May you live in interesting times,” runs the legendary Chinese curse. These are interesting times: almost anything can happen except a return to the delicate but enduring balance between two blocs that marked international relations for nearly half a century after World War II. The possibilities include nuclear war, not in the form of the long-feared mutual destruction of the Soviet Union and the United States, but as a last resort in the course of escalating regional conflicts in the Middle East or South Asia. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, United Nations inspectors found evidence of strong steps toward the production of nuclear arms in Iraq, a country whose leaders did not hesitate to rain missiles on noncombatant Israel during their struggle to hold Kuwait; the same science is available to many other small, rich despots throughout the world. While the chances that two of the world’s largest countries would annihilate each other simultaneously have surely receded, the risk of nuclear war has by no means vanished.

We began the adventure of *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War* at a time of mixed dread and hope: dread of the mutual threat between the United States and the Soviet Union, with its many risks of missteps and calculated accelerations, hope that changes in the international system could finally occur. Although we took the Cold War as a durable reality, we thought that heavy concentration on strategic analyses of hypothetical Soviet-American conflicts was a mistake, for several reasons: first, because wars have frequently resulted from errors in strategic calculations or their execution rather than from

the simple rational calculation of interests; second, because those errors often flowed from the very organization of military and diplomatic decision making; third, because a nuclear war could begin elsewhere than in the threat and counterthreat of Washington and Moscow, either because peripheral segments of the superpowers' military forces deployed the arms or because third parties did so. Thinking primarily of policy discussions within the United States, we decided to survey and publicize the possible contributions of current behavioral and social sciences to the analysis of these problems. Our central idea was to locate subjects that were in principle applicable to questions of war and peace, where a well-developed scientific literature already existed whose relevance to the analysis of international relations had not been widely recognized or pursued. Our secondary object was to draw specialists in those subjects more explicitly into applying their theories and findings to war and peace.

With those objectives in mind, we solicited synthetic papers from leading theorists and researchers on crisis decision making, negotiations, the causes of war, third-party intervention in conflict, arms races, and similar topics. They varied in how much they focused on nuclear conflict and the nuclear age: some intensely, some hardly at all. Almost all of them, however, turned out to be relevant to meeting the challenges of the post-Cold War world. The ways in which human beings process information (Fischhoff, 1991) remain central, and we will still need to take account of the effects of stress on the quality of decision making (Holsti, 1989). Arms races (Downs, 1991) are likely to recur even if they do not involve the United States and what was the Soviet Union. The role for third-party intervention (Wallensteen, 1991) and negotiation (Druckman and Hopmann, 1989) may increase, as is likely to be the case for the use of reassurances (J. Stein, 1991).

The outlines of the post-Cold War international system are still indistinct. In such a time of flux, we have become even more concerned to draw on scholars who can put particular conflicts into historical, comparative, and global perspective or who can analyze the potential to restructure the conditions of war and peace by forging new relationships and institutional arrangements between states. The present volume should forward that effort.

In this volume, perspectives on conflict are offered in chapters on the strategy of conflict (Shubik, Chapter 4), learning in international relations (Jarosz and Nye, Chapter 3), and influence techniques among nations (Leng, Chapter 2). Analyses of the opportunities for and barriers to structural change in the international system are provided by Robert Hinde (Chapter 1), who examines the relevance for war of human tendencies toward aggression, William Jarosz and Joseph Nye (Chapter 3), who assess the potential for states

to learn; and Arthur Stein (Chapter 5), who analyzes the peace-generating potential of international economic interdependencies.

As with earlier volumes of *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, a central purpose remains to help disentangle the factual and moral issues that underlie disagreements about how best to prevent nuclear war. The behavioral and social sciences contribute toward this goal in two categories: methodological and theoretical. On the methodological side, the behavioral and social sciences can identify the dangers of making vague causal claims that are difficult to falsify and that rest on superficial and subjective readings of the historical record. For instance, the discussion of international politics and conflicts that accompanies policy debates is often analytically weak. One rarely hears policy advocates specify the types of evidence that would induce them to change their minds, clearly articulate the causal assumptions that undergird their policy recommendations, or dispassionately assess the strengths and weaknesses of alternative research methods for testing their causal assumptions. Although the contributors to this series are asked to explore the policy implications of the research literatures they review, they are also asked not to slip into roles of policy advocacy. We encourage contributors to be methodologically self-conscious—to make careful note of both the strengths and weaknesses of the data and methods that underlie their theoretical and policy conclusions.

On the theoretical side, the behavioral and social sciences can identify the dangers of making undifferentiated, sweeping claims concerning the causes of war and peace. Simple theoretical generalizations tend to have poor empirical track records in the arena of public policy. The causes of international conflict are extremely complex; variables operating at a number of levels of analysis appear to play key causal roles (Tetlock, 1989). Moreover, the effects of these variables appear to be both interactive (the effects of variable A on war depend on levels of variables B, C, D, . . .) and probabilistic (variables influence the likelihood of various types of war and peace but rarely make a particular outcome inevitable).

The behavioral and social sciences have established lines of research and theory that promise to clarify the factors affecting the likelihood of war in general and of nuclear war in particular. Although there is no well-accepted theory of the conditions that promote nuclear war, there is knowledge about important parts of the problem, including the behavior of decision makers under uncertainty, the effects of different kinds of organizations on their members, the circumstances under which threats do or do not deter dangerous behavior, and the processes of negotiation when stakes are high. There is also knowledge about parts of the problems of the causes of war in general (in this

series, Levy, 1989) and of change in specific policies or broader social systems that may decrease the likelihood of war (e.g., Evangelista, 1991; J. Stein, 1991; Jarosz and Nye, Chapter 3; A. Stein, Chapter 5).

Our strategy in developing this series has been to identify existing work that bears on these issues and then to persuade a well-informed researcher to summarize the current state of the literature and reflect on its implications for reducing the risk of nuclear war and enhancing international security. Given the difficulties of conducting research on these issues—the limited number of observations, the large number of confounding variables, and the fallibility of the research methods at our disposal—it is impressive, as Tetlock argues (1989), that we have achieved as much as we have. Given the magnitude of the problem, it is discouraging, as Tetlock also argues, that so much remains to be accomplished.

As recent international events reemphasize, the behavioral and social sciences do not offer short-term predictions or decisive solutions for the international predicaments confronting the world today; they do, however, identify considerations that prudent policymakers should take into account in choosing among policies aimed at reducing the risk of nuclear war. They can help illuminate and specify for the policy community the dangers of cognitive conceit (of thinking we know more than we do); the limitations of deterrence theory, the most widely accepted theory of international influence, and the strengths and limitations of the alternatives; the impact of crisis-induced stress on human thought and the difficult trade-offs in crisis management; the pitfalls of international communications; and the egregious errors that can arise from relying on selective and superficial readings of the historical record.

In brief, we draw on the behavioral and social sciences to make a case for new intellectual approaches to the subject of international security. The approaches need to be conceptually rigorous, with key ideas well defined and their links to reality explicitly noted; theoretically eclectic in drawing upon a broad range of interacting levels of analysis, from the psychological to the international; and methodologically self-conscious, with careful scrutiny of the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of the different research methods that underlie claims to knowledge about the sources of war and peace. Taking a new approach, to be sure, is not easy; it requires increased tolerance of ambiguity and complexity. There are no neatly packaged answers to the pressing policy dilemmas posed by the multifaceted and rapidly changing international environment. To contribute to policy deliberations, researchers must try to understand and take account of the complex interactions of human and societal processes. Appreciating the difficulties, we attempt here to mobilize new resources for the task.

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