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## The War Puzzle

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# BOOK REVIEWS

*A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.*

*Admiral H.G. Rickover*

## “Can Simple Induction Discover the Causes for War?”

Vasquez, John A. *The War Puzzle*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations, Vol. 27. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1993. 378pp. \$59.95

**T**HE STUDY OF WAR IN RECENT DECADES has proceeded along three paths: game theoretic and other structural studies of war, historical studies of particular wars, and survey-based studies of multiple wars. The first path uses deductive logic, the second deploys the logic of narrative, and the third embraces the canons of induction.

Vasquez's *The War Puzzle* is a dry but splendid example of the third sort of study. For Vasquez, Quincy Wright shows the way, Singer and Small and the Correlates of War project provide the data, and the task of the scientist is to find patterns. Vasquez claims to have found patterns and struck gold: “The analyses offered in this book satisfy the formal criteria for scientific explanation. . . . They distinguish the correlates from the causes of war.”

By limiting his field to fifty interstate wars between roughly equal rivals, Vasquez discerns that such wars are caused by territorial disputes, exacerbated by multipolar alliances, and compounded by the political belief that the gains of war will outweigh the losses. Since territorial disputes can, and often are, settled by nonmilitary means, “the conditions necessary for world war can be prevented. World wars are the great accidents of European history.” Realist arguments that war is inevitable and peace is best obtained through strength and deterrence are vigorously combatted by appeals to the database.

The impact of all this on readers will depend partly on their faith in such inductive studies of war. Vasquez includes nineteenth-century wars in his data,

but for children of Hegel (right and left) who think that history proceeds in dialectical surges and that the rules of the game get rewritten at each new stage, the use of nineteenth-century data detracts from insight. Since the Vasquez parameters (e.g., presence or absence of territorial disputes) are non-numerical, his generalizations emerge from simple induction and not from concomitant quantitative variation. Can simple induction discover the causes for war? If we find that territorial disputes are involved in 90 percent of major wars and religious disputes in only 10 percent, do we now know that the root cause of the Iran-Iraq war was territorial and not religious? Granting the prevalence of territorial disputes, should we conclude with Vasquez that the absence of a territorial dispute between the United States and the Soviet Union (not, say, fear of nuclear destruction) explains the absence of war between the superpowers from 1946 to 1991? Many will be skeptical, and not just David Hume. Perhaps human affairs are chaotic, and of two epistemically indistinguishable situations one may lead to war and the other may not. If so, one can no more predict future wars by studying a database than by examining the entrails of birds.

Vasquez's emphasis on territorial disputes is striking, hinting that it "is part of humanity's collective genetic inheritance." Wisely, he spares us the details, but his analyses could use a little conceptual clarification: When is a dispute "territorial," and when is it not? Is the question of whether South Vietnam shall have a communist or noncommunist government a territorial problem? (As a child in school, I was shown world maps with red and blue areas, and in a Mercator projection, the red loomed.) If we construe the Vietnam War as territorial, there *was* a superpower territorial confrontation leading to war. But if this dispute is territorial, perhaps all disputes can be so construed, and the causal law collapses into tautology.

Vasquez writes as a social scientist, never announcing his ethics. He seems to believe that all war is bad and all its causes (e.g., alliance systems) should be avoided. Now, Russia's connection with Serbia dragged Moscow (and therefore France and Germany) into the Great War, and that was bad. But England's alliance with Poland dragged Britain into war with Germany in 1939—and on the moral scales, that was a plus. Surely Vasquez is right that all wars are avertible by wise choices, and he provides nice hints (buffer zones in particular) about how to facilitate wise behavior. What he does not tell us, however, is how we ought to behave with an opponent who is persistently unwise.

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