TOKENS OF POWER

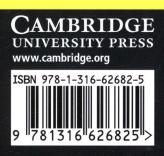
RETHINKING WAR

ANN HIRONAKA

"Much of the study of war suffers from complex theories that rest on fragile factual bases. Ann Hironaka's new book combines a simple theory – world society theory – with deeply researched histories of great power wars over the last century and a half. Unlike instrumentalists, realists, and bargaining theorists, she characterizes military competition as a deeply social process in which states often go to war over their place in a status hierarchy, with little understanding of the lessons of history, poor measures of power and impoverished readings of their national interests. This has led to catastrophic strategic errors and to immense human tragedies. This is a book that both international relations scholars and sociologists will want to read."

Sidney Tarrow, author of War, States, and Contention:
 A Comparative Historical Study

ANN HIRONAKA is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. She studies war, politics, and the environment from a global perspective. Her book, *Neverending Wars* (2005) examined the intractable civil wars of the contemporary era and the role of the international community in perpetuating these conflicts. Her recent book, *Greening the Globe* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), examined the historical emergence of the global environmental regime and its impact on national policy and environmental practices around the world.



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ANN HIRONAKA

University of California, Irvine



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Tokens of Power

War presents a curious paradox. Interstate war is arguably the most carefully planned endeavor by states, yet military history is filled with disasters and blunders of monumental proportions. These anomalies happen because most military history presumes that states are pursuing optimal strategies in a competitive environment. This book offers an alternative narrative in which the pillars of military planning – evaluations of power, strategy, and interests – are theorized as social constructions rather than simple material realities. States may be fighting wars primarily to gain or maintain power, yet in any given historical era such pursuits serve only to propel competition; they do not ensure military success in subsequent generations. Allowing states to embark on hapless military ventures is fraught with risks, while the rewards are few.

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For my father, Minoru Hironaka



Preface and Acknowledgments

On the first day of my freshman political science course, the professor announced three assumptions that would undergird our study of international relations for the quarter. The first assumption was that states were rational actors. At the time I thought it odd to assume the rationality of states a priori, and the dubiousness of that proposition has only grown in my mind over the years. This book represents my attempt to look at the planning of interstate warfare without the assumption that states are acting rationally. This does not necessarily mean that states are acting irrationally – it simply does not insist on forcing historical events into a rational framework. I focus instead on the origin of broad assumptions about the nature of warfare and the international system that provide the taken-for-granted parameters within which decision-making takes place. This book seeks to develop an explanation for the basis for military planning, evaluation of state power, and the identification of national interests that underlies calculations for war.

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The Ambiguity of Military Planning

War presents a curious paradox. Interstate war is arguably the most carefully planned endeavor pursued by states, yet the pages of military history are filled with military blunders of monumental proportions. For centuries, the Great Powers states devoted substantial resources to the planning and preparation of war. Militaries employed cadres of bright analysts to refine strategy and tactics and to analyze every facet of warfare in minute detail. Despite this painstaking preparation, the history of warfare is littered with failures on an almost inconceivable scale.

It is difficult to find a major war in which things did not go massively awry. The Franco-Prussian War proved a humiliating miscalculation for France and led to embarrassing defeat and loss of territory. The First World War was a huge debacle, fought for reasons that remain opaque to this day and employing strategies that served principally to wipe out a generation of young European men. The Second World War was another disaster for the aggressor as well as for millions more worldwide. In Vietnam, America's brilliant "whiz kids" led the world's most powerful military into a dismal muddle that has come to epitomize the term "quagmire."

This book, which examines military planning and war, offers a simple resolution to this puzzle. Militaries make egregious errors because

¹ Michael Howard, The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870–1871. New York: Macmillan, 1962; Geoffrey Wawro, The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

² Michael Howard, The First World War. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

warfare is exceedingly complex, while information about war is ambiguous and usually outdated. As any social scientist knows, it is difficult or even impossible to understand complex systems with limited data.³ The number of potential military threats is vast, and upgrades in military strategy and technology occur with sufficient speed that lessons from the past provide poor guides for the future. Perhaps most importantly, the unpredictability of battle events – the fog of war – ensures that the course of campaigns never follows the plans drawn up in the war room. The sheer complexity of military affairs overwhelms the efforts of even the most skilled military planners.

In particular, this ambiguity undercuts conventional understandings of power. States cannot easily evaluate the power of enemy forces, or even reliably evaluate their own relative power.⁴ It seems inconceivable that the American military could struggle against a militarily feeble insurgency in Vietnam only two decades after the impressive Allied victories in the Second World War. Yet such reversals are not uncommon throughout history, as the resources, strategies, and weapons that appeared decisive in one geographic, historical, and political situation prove less effective in a different situation. Military power is much less transferable across context than is often imagined.

Nevertheless, this answer simply begs further questions. Why do states march to war so confidently if war is complex and fraught with risk? Why don't states see the fragility of their plans? Why do states fight wars at all? Historically, the stakes of war have often been puzzlingly small in comparison to the enormous outlay of life and treasure. As James D. Fearon puts it, "the central puzzle" is that "war is costly and risky, so rational states should have incentives to locate negotiated settlements that all would prefer to the gamble of war." One solution to this puzzle put forth by scholars is to argue that wars represent an error made by one or more participants. Stephen Van Evera notes, "Many modern wars have been wars of illusions, waged by states drawn to war by misperceptions of international power realities." Scholars are increasingly recognizing the

³ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War." World Politics 61 (2009): 28-57.

⁵ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49 (1995): 380.

⁶ Stephen Van Evera, Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 255.

prevalence of misperception and error in military and political decision-making.⁷ Yet if every war must be explained as a mistake by one or both sides, the puzzle remains: Why don't states learn that military calculations are highly prone to error?⁸

This book develops a different explanation for this puzzle and other perplexing features of military competition by exploring the social dimensions of the international system. Over the course of centuries, the European state system developed a set of rule-like expectations that defined the hierarchy of Great Powers and channeled competition among states. Amid ambiguity, military planners turned to these widely accepted social facts of the international system; in particular, they focused on the recognized hierarchy of the Great Power states. However, these foundational aspects of military planning and competition - ideas about power, interests, and strategy, as well as the identity of Great Powers themselves – can ultimately be seen as socially constructions. The social agreement regarding power, interests, and strategy reduced perceived ambiguity and focused military competition, paving the way for war. However, social agreement does not erase the underlying empirical complexity and ambiguity. As a result, the Great Powers became embroiled in a hubris-filled quest to be masters of a hopelessly complex universe.

In this account, the Great Power hierarchy stands as the preeminent social fact of the state system, serving as a beacon in an ocean of

⁷ Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War"; Darren Filson and Suzanne Werner, "A Bargaining Model of War and Peace." American Journal of Political Science 46 (2002): 819-838; Andrew Kydd, "Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility and Mediation." American Journal of Political Science 47 (2003): 597-611; Robert Powell, "Uncertainty, Shifting Power, and Appeasement." The American Political Science Review 90 (1996): 749-764; Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem." International Organization 60 (2006): 169-203; Robert Powell, "The Inefficient Use of Power: Costly Conflict with Complete Information." American Political Science Review 98 (2004): 231-241; Robert Powell, In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999; Alastair Smith and Allan C. Stam, "Bargaining and the Nature of War." The Journal of Conflict Resolution 48 (2004): 783-813; R. Harrison Wagner, "Bargaining and War." American Journal of Political Science 44 (2000): 469-484; Alex Weisiger, Logics of War: Explanations for Limited and Unlimited Conflicts. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013; Suzanne Werner, "Deterring Intervention: The Stakes of War and Third Party Involvement." American Journal of Political Science 44 (2000): 720-732; Scott Wolford, Dan Reiter, and Clifford J. Carrubba, "Information, Commitment, and War." The Journal of Conflict Resolution 55 (2011): 556-579. Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; Jack S. Levy "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems." World Politics 36 (1983): 76-99; Barbara W. Tuchman, The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam. London: Abacus, 1984.

ambiguity. The route to objective power and security may be elusive, but the pecking order of states in the Great Power hierarchy is well defined. One consequence is that efforts to pursue security frequently devolve into one-upmanship among the Great Powers. The hierarchy of the Great Power system also serves to define "best practices" in military planning, which subsequently diffuse across the state system. Just as ambitious university presidents look to Harvard as an exemplar, military analysts look to the preeminent Great Powers to inform their strategies and theories of war. This social consensus disguises the overwhelming ambiguity of warfare, allowing states to confidently embark on hapless military ventures.

The empirical chapters of this book examine the way states prepare for war and engage in military competition. How do states evaluate the power of their competitors or determine the most valuable resources? How do states identify the best strategies? How do they decide which technologies hold promise for the future? How do they identify their enemies? The chapters uncover greater complexity and ambiguity than is commonly acknowledged. Each one of these calculations proves devilishly challenging. Under pressure to plan, states resolve ambiguity by turning to others. States seek to emulate their peers and copy the popular military doctrines of the era in hopes of replicating the successes of the major Great Powers. Ultimately, preparation for war is a transnational process that is both social and collective in nature rather than the result of military planners operating in isolation from each other in the bowels of top-secret military facilities.

The threads of this book, intertwined over many chapters, weave a tapestry that suggests a new understanding of war. The pillars of military planning – power, strategy, and interests – can be seen as evanescent social constructions rather than hard material realities. States may be fighting wars to obtain power, but understandings of power and the means to achieve it are mirages that do little to ensure military success in subsequent generations. Later chapters explain how socially constructed beliefs about power, strategy, and interests – and thus patterns of military competition – change over time. The patterns of war shift when the social hierarchy of the Great Powers is disrupted, prompting states to construct new lessons and reorient around a different set of supposed best practices. One might say that the Great Powers are embarking on a string of fools' errands, chasing after new strategies and competing over new resources that will prove fruitless in subsequent wars. Yet the potent expectations of the Great Power system encourage