

## 3.1 Research on War and Conflicts: Methodological Considerations

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The author has written extensively on nuclear weapons systems, on threats of nuclear war, on defence capabilities, on arms sales and on studies of wars, conflicts and coups. This experience has led him to realize the disparity in the data available on wars and conflicts as opposed to the arms race. In this essay, he raises the question of why there is so much on the latter and so little on the former and offers a typology of categories of events which should be the subject of research, stressing the need to take great care in finding functional categories. He then focuses on specific problems which concern three overall subject categories: wars and armed conflicts, foreign military intervention and military coups d'état. In conclusion, he proposes a pragmatic and rigorous approach to improve research on wars and conflicts.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

On 29 June 1914 the *New York Times* carried two headlines on its front page. The large one, of three columns, read:

Heir to Austria's Throne is Slain With His Wife by Bosnian Youth to Avenge  
Seizure of His Country

The adjacent column bore a smaller headline, reading:

Our Guns Fire on Santo Domingo

The first incident was of course one of the principal events leading to the First World War, and is remembered by everybody. The second, though it was by itself an act of much greater military severity than a single assassination, is universally forgotten. The conjunction of the two events serves to illustrate an important point which is pertinent today—or arguably, far more pertinent today than it was in 1914. In the twentieth century and particularly since the Second World War, states have not found it necessary officially to declare war on one another in order to fight. What is worse, a very large number of ‘unofficial’, ‘undeclared’ acts of military violence seem to go unnoticed, even by serious researchers. Why should what previously would have been considered an act of war be taken less seriously today by international public opinion? Why should armed invasions of varying degrees, intermittent or continuous, in other sovereign states be tolerated or ignored? If a list of all states involved in military activities in other states through direct or indirect assistance of one sort or another during an active conflict were to be drawn up, it would probably run to several pages.

The purpose of this article is to examine two unrelated questions:

- What kind(s) of research should be done in this subject area?
- What definitions and criteria should researchers use to select the events they want to study?

### THE SUBJECT MATTER OF RESEARCH ON WARS AND CONFLICTS—AND DEFINITIONS

It seems strange that far more comprehensive and descriptive research similar to that done on the subject of weapons is not done on the uses to which weapons are put. If one looks at a subject such as the arms trade, for example, the literature is enormous,<sup>2</sup> which makes it all the more difficult to understand why the kinds of events in which these weapons are actually used, and when they are used, are not studied to a similar extent.

The purpose of such comprehensive research would be to describe what is going on in the world in a particular category of events, just as carefully and systematically as is done in studies of weapons systems, the research effort made to develop them, monetary expenditure for procuring them or international transactions for transferring them. Research on weapons

systems focuses on the tools of war and on weapon development and weapons accumulation as destabilizing factors in international politics. Seen in this way, however, strategic or tactical nuclear weapons, chemical and biological warfare, space or anti-submarine warfare weapons systems and various conventional weapons are all only antecedents to war. It is difficult to imagine that anyone would wish to argue against studying the actual use of the weapons, and yet such studies are not done, at least not adequately. If, for the sake of hypothesis, there were to be a war involving the use of nuclear weapons, one can be certain that the description and analysis of such use would be dealt with in a number of publications.

This suggests that while unusual, new and supposedly uniquely dangerous forms of weapon use probably have been or could be expected to be examined when they have occurred, this only happens in the context of that specific weapon. More common forms of military activity may escape notice, precisely because they are common. In short, what is needed is more concentrated study of active ‘wars’—armed international conflict and civil war—in addition to the study of ‘passive’ weapons systems.

There is no doubt that such research will disturb various people and that it may be considered provocative or political. Indeed, the better the research and the more timely it is, the more likely that it will be so considered. It is, however, unacceptable that private researchers and national or international research institutions should not be expected to display sufficient independence and integrity to be able to describe the invasion of any country by any other country, as well as all other (both lesser and more complex) forms of military activity, involvement or intervention. If a research institute or a researcher has any degree of integrity, it can be applied to this subject matter just as well as to any other. Without that integrity and independence, any work done is likely to be fundamentally flawed.

The problem then remains of *what* to study, which kinds of events and phenomena, and which definitions or criteria to use in selecting the events. I have given considerable thought to this question for some ten years, and particularly a few years ago in the course of a study examining comparative post-Second World War research on armed conflicts and related international events.<sup>3</sup>

I have come to the conclusion that the magnitude and diversity of armed international violence vastly exceed the conceptions of them held by most researchers; their preconceived notions blind them to a major part of what is actually going on. I have therefore become convinced that to focus on the question of definitions and to establish rigid criteria *in advance* is not the right way to start research in this area. The way to cut the Gordian knot of research definitions is by and large to disregard them until one has selected a general population of events on which one feels attention should be focused and then to work backwards from there to



setting criteria. This approach is in fact necessitated by the multiplicity and complexity of the forms and degrees of present-day international and civil wars, and of foreign military involvement in them.

It is of course perfectly clear that in every research project one must at some point establish criteria for the set of events to be studied and analyzed. It is also obvious that one must have some explicit notion to start with concerning the set of events which one is attempting to survey. The point here, however, is that the rigid *final* criteria marking the bounds of the events being examined should not be set in advance, and that, in the beginning, maximum thought should be given to making them as far from arbitrary as possible. On the contrary, the boundaries should be set after the study is well under way and after a sizeable population of events has been assembled, and they should emerge, as far as possible, from the characteristics of the events themselves. This is in contrast to many studies, which begin by establishing *a priori* criteria as definitions, and then select a population of events that fits them. For example, a war is something that takes place between such and such a kind of states or groups, lasts a minimum duration of time, produces a minimum number of casualties, and so on. Events which fit the established criteria are then sought, and analytical research is carried out on that sample. Other examples are the Marxist definitions of imperialist wars/wars of national liberation, just/unjust wars, etc.<sup>4</sup>

My aim in what follows is not necessarily to establish one set of criteria for all researchers, but to recommend a general approach. The method suggested is to assemble a loosely defined interrelated set of events in the world and then to select more carefully delineated sub-groupings that can be studied. I would suggest three overall subject categories: 'wars' and armed conflicts; foreign military intervention; and military coups d'état. The following discussion indicates some of the ways in which these groupings are very often interrelated, or at least pairs of them, particularly the first two. These three categories are of course very general. Except for coup d'état, which is probably sufficiently precise, they are not adequate as *definitions* of the activities that one wants to investigate. A suggested—but not exhaustive—list of activities that might be studied follows:

1. Invasions of one country by another.
2. Military threats, particularly in a crisis period; troop movements, weapons deployments, mobilization, etc., and certainly any actions intended to precipitate a war.
3. Internal, or civil, wars.
4. Foreign military personnel actively involved in conflict, (that is, active battlefield operations), as advisory or as auxiliary forces for a second state, either in combat or in special roles such as overall field

- commanders; pilots; tank operators; communications, radar or air defence weapons operators; maintenance or logistics specialists, etc.
5. Foreign military personnel filling the same roles, but without active fighting taking place.
6. Any crossing of a state border or entry into a foreign state by military forces. The presence of an allied state on the territory is simply a subset, which is often unquestioned and therefore at times unnoticed.
7. Foreign military personnel serving as 'praetorian guards' for a head of state, on loan from foreign states.
8. The involvement of volunteers or mercenaries.
9. Supplying arms prior to or during a conflict.
10. Training of regular or irregular armed forces by foreign nations, either in the trainer's country or in that of the recipient.
11. Direct payment to the seller for the purchase of weapons by a second state, or supplying funds with which to buy weapons.

Any event which fits into any of the categories of activities chosen for study should initially be included. There should be no limiting criteria of duration (days, weeks, etc.), numbers (of soldiers, deaths, casualties), or amounts (funds, etc.). This is perhaps the second most important suggestion in resolving the problem of competing criteria and definitions, which vary widely in existing individual studies. Civil wars or conflicts which involve any of these components should be studied, as well as wars between two sovereign states. What one is looking for are certain *kinds* of events or involvements, no matter what their context. Subsequently, arbitrary limits do of course have to be drawn for the populations of events, and this may or may not be difficult. There is no question that this is sometimes a difficult task. These limits become the 'definitions', and there must always be an ultimate arbitrary cutoff point established for any category. However, such limits are more significant if they are established *after* one has a large population of events to study, or at least something that approximates a substantial proportion of the type of events one wants to examine.

This will hold for both international and civil armed conflicts or wars. For example, *any* crossing of a state border by military forces would be noted. Then one would look at the complexities: Have the foreign troops been invited or not? Under what circumstances, within an alliance system or not? Is an international military or 'peace keeping' force involved; that of the United Nations, the OAU, OAS, Arab League, etc? Is it an aircraft overflight or a border penetration? Activities such as routine deployments or manoeuvres, whether of the major powers, their alliance systems, or other individual nations, which would otherwise fit this description, could then presumably be excluded, as would naval visits unassociated with a crisis, military representation at air shows, etc. But what should not be



excluded would be cases in which such activities, either by a major power or by any other state, are in fact pertinent aspects of involvement in a peripheral conflict or in a crisis. The same kinds of problems have to be tackled for civil wars. What, for example, is the most appropriate classification for events such as civil strife which may cost 2,000 lives in one state and 20,000 in another? There is no reason to try to establish an optimum set of limits here. They will have to be set, and they will have to be arbitrary. There is no ultimate correctness as to what they will be. The point is to start by making the broadest categories, and to set up subgroups with distinguishing common features only after one has a substantial number of events and can in fact examine their characteristics.

It is clear that several of the kinds of activities listed above—numbers 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10—can occur in a peacetime environment and can continue indefinitely without armed conflict being involved. At the same time, however, many of these activities can also be seen to be forms of foreign military involvement or intervention (about which more discussion follows), at the same time as they can be considered forms of military assistance. Considering 'military assistance' a form of 'foreign military involvement' is possible if one de-emphasizes the nature of the formal agreement that brought the activity about. From the point of view of describing a category of international interaction or behaviour, that aspect is of secondary importance. One descriptive term is no more than another view of the second. Country A is doing x, y or z in country B. The second question is to ask why, under what conditions. It all depends on the questions one is asking, and the processes or patterns one is trying to understand. At times, it is critical to disaggregate similar events and phenomena according to secondary criteria; at other times it is just as critical to aggregate them in order to understand their significance.

Specifying the activity one is seeking to trace is a way of bypassing the problem of definition, in effect substituting a definition of a precise *activity*. One can go back to questions of definition after one has established a large population of events and these have been sorted into subsets. Within any group, it is usually best to begin by selecting the events with the fewest complexities, those for which problems of definition would cause the least controversy, and then to move to those that bring in additional factors. The focus should nevertheless remain on the general question: 'What kinds of events or activities are to be studied?' The following sections contain further discussion of the three suggested research categories: wars and conflicts, foreign military intervention, and military coups.

## WARS AND CONFLICTS

A nearly completed survey of comparative studies of post-Second World War wars, conflicts and military coups examined the lists or numbers of

post-Second World War 'wars' or analogous events in some 90 different research studies.<sup>5</sup> Virtually none of these studies utilized a common set of events, since individual authors were free to set their own definitions and criteria for the inclusion of events. The number of events in different studies varied by more than a full order of magnitude, from around 30 to over 350. Yet the authors of all of these studies described them as being of nominally complete populations, not of selected samples. Cumulative mortality in these conflicts since 1945 has been around 20 million. Individual variables examined by each of the 90 research studies were identified.

The survey was undertaken precisely to demonstrate the problems that one faces in attempting to draw conclusions from the existing research and data on wars since the Second World War. Hardly any two authors used the same definitions, criteria or data base. Categories and descriptive phrases were used in a haphazard fashion. The word *conflicts* was used in the title of the survey since very few 'wars' since the Second World War have been declared wars by the countries involved, and different authors often used different terms for the same event. For example, if a reader looked at the *New York Times* on the morning of 7 March 1979 (a source which cannot itself be considered a thorough compendium), he would have found active fighting—whether defined as 'war' or not—in Chad; between Uganda and Tanzania; between China and Vietnam; between Yemen and Democratic Yemen; by South Africa in Angola; by Zimbabwe in Zambia and Mozambique; and between Vietnam and Kampuchea.

Nevertheless, more than half of these events would have been missing from most of the studies surveyed, because they would not have satisfied various arbitrary criteria. Rather than aiding research, definitions and criteria more often than not seem to be used—or at least serve—to prevent large segments of the population of events ostensibly under study from being studied. It is this observation above all that led to the conclusion that it was a mistake to start off by establishing definitions. Rather, one should look at the kinds of events one wants to include and then see what subsets fall out as units, what categories can be used or adapted, where one wants to draw the limits of categories.

A specific suggestion for analytical as well as descriptive research would be to study the relationship between arms transfers and conflicts in the Third World, either as aggregates or as individual case studies. As previously noted, there is an abundant data base and experience with the arms transfer half of the equation, but virtually no research literature on this crucial relationship.<sup>6,7</sup>

A substantial number of the conflicts since the Second World War have been civil wars of one sort or another, and of course political judgments about the contending parties in these often vary. Careless, controversial



and politically loaded terminology has often served as a form of definition. Different authors use the terms *insurgents* and *insurgencies*, *guerrillas* and *revolutions*, *rebels* and *rebellions* interchangeably at times. At other times, the same author will use *insurgency*, *rebellion*, *revolution*—or yet other terms—within a single listing to indicate different events in different countries that are substantially identical to one another. Often these terms are used with differing connotations of legitimacy, according to the author's bias or whim. If a military coup fails, the perpetrators are called a *rebel group* or *insurgent group*. If it succeeds, they are not. Because of the political competition in the post-Second World War period, civil wars or conflicts rarely remain free from external influence and involvement. Even if they begin without such components, they are likely to develop quickly to include external involvement.

### ARBITRARY OR OBJECTIVE CRITERIA—AND RESEARCH RESULTS

One must stress the need to think about the range of the categories and definitions selected, which events they include and which they exclude, and what kinds of functional or operational categories they establish. Researchers seem capable of very great ingenuity in excluding major populations of events that their own descriptive captions would imply were the direct subject under investigation. I will use two contrasting examples to demonstrate this. In 1973 a study was published which listed the United Kingdom as a 'peaceful society' from 1485 to 1940, and the United States from 1866 on.<sup>8</sup> This should certainly puzzle the reader. For the United Kingdom this includes its imperial period; Elizabethan and later wars with Spain; the Napoleonic Wars; the French and Indian Wars and the war with the American colonies in North America; wars in India, Afghanistan, Egypt and the Sudan; the Boer War; and the First World War. For the United States it includes the Spanish American War, war in the Philippines, invasions of various Central American states and the First World War. The researcher arrived at this conclusion through the following definition of 'peaceful':

To begin with, I shall consider peace to be an absence of war, revolution or other physical conflicts among men. . . . Sometimes a country, like Britain in the eighteenth century, participates in a series of external wars, while maintaining peace at home. . . . So if a region or state is peaceful, I shall consider it peaceful regardless of what its government may be doing somewhere else.

The second example is a report produced in 1974 by the Rand Corporation, concerning 'international terrorism'.<sup>9</sup> In the sections on Latin

America, there was not a single entry or mention of the killings of thousands of individuals in some of the countries in this region by semi-official groups of police or military working during or outside their routine responsibilities and working hours. These were not defined as 'terrorists'. Only the left-wing groups were listed. One has only to compare the Rand report with any annual report of Amnesty International, and to match the entries country by country to realize that a most astounding contrivance was being perpetrated. 'Terrorism' carried out officially or unofficially by state agencies was omitted. The rationale was again simple—and transparent. In the Rand report

only incidents that had clear international repercussions were included—incidents in which terrorists went abroad to strike their targets, selected victims or targets that had connections with a foreign state (e.g., diplomats, foreign businessmen, offices of foreign corporations), or created international incidents by attacking airline passengers, personnel and equipment.

Thus, again, the problem is not that a definition was not presented, but that the categories were contrived to omit great segments of the kinds of events they ostensibly pretended to have under discussion. Melko's 'peaceful' counted only killings at home, while Rand's 'terrorism' counted only events away from home. Definitions were used to exclude the essential aspect of what the study was supposed to be examining. The definition obliterated its own category. Double standards are not only the death of morality; they are the death of meaningful research as well. They produce incorrect answers: with contrived definitions and contrived criteria, one can prove anything.

### MILITARY COUPS D'ÉTAT

The three broad research areas—'wars' and armed conflicts, foreign military intervention, and military coups d'état—have large areas of overlap. The last two categories receive the least attention. I would strongly urge the inclusion of military coups for study since I feel that they represent the functional equivalent of more extended wars in nearly all important aspects. There have been about 350 successful military coups since the end of the Second World War, and roughly the same number of attempted and unsuccessful ones. The main difference is that in this category—at least for the successful coups—the two variables of duration and casualties are reduced to zero or to very low numbers. However, these are the two least important aspects of military coups in terms of political significance. In their most essential aspect, or aspects, why should military coups not be considered in the same way as civil wars? Is the



critical factor that civil 'insurgents' have no previous state or government role, whereas the military does, or is it rather that the government is overturned? Is it more significant that fighting takes place for a certain number of days or months, or that a specified number of people are killed during that time (some of the criteria used by various researchers to define a war), or rather that a coup succeeds and, again, that the government is overturned, and overturned by the military? Is the military coup less significant if it is bloodless, and if it is over in an hour, than if fighting takes place for a longer time? And to what degree may the length of the conflict be dependent on whether the coup is against a civil government, or against another already installed military junta? In addition, if the coup is less successful, or unsuccessful, civil war of varying duration may result, and then what is in effect the result of the coup attempt more frequently becomes included among wars as a 'civil war'. In rare cases there is a more generic connection between a particular coup and a war; the coup which took place in Cyprus in 1974 under the aegis of the ruling Greek military junta directly precipitated the Turkish military invasion of Cyprus in an attempt to redress the political effects of the coup.

The category of military coups demonstrates the problems that surround the study of conflicts and the care and thought that is required in establishing categories. Some lists of wars or conflicts include them—or, at the least, selected coups that interest a particular author for one reason or other—while other compilations omit them entirely. By poorly conceived criteria that arbitrarily rule such events out of consideration, we simply bias any listing against the very group which has the least difficulty in overturning a government. In addition—though it remains to be demonstrated whether this is uniform for all geographic regions—the category of events thus omitted is likely to have a more or less distinct political character, injecting a hidden qualitative as well as quantitative bias.

Finally, military coups should be a phenomenon of particular interest, because of major research efforts on the subjects of arms transfer and the diffusion of sophisticated conventional weapons, and on nuclear weapons proliferation. We cannot say with certainty that military governments as a group disproportionately increase the importation of advanced conventional weapons or accelerate decisions aimed at developing a nuclear weapons infrastructure. Nevertheless, since both of these activities are accelerating and the number of military governments is increasing, the relationships deserve particular attention. Since military dictators or juntas very rarely give up power once installed, and since the rate of military coups appears to be more or less constant in the post-Second World War years, the result is a constantly increasing number of military governments—despite the fact that as the number of military governments increases, many military coups are directed against other military governments rather than civil ones. Roughly half the developing nations are

now governed by military groups, but military coups occur in more economically advanced states as well. The possible functional connections between military coups and both wars and intervention also need investigation. To what degree are decisions on war or other minor military engagements more or less common under military governments, and with what frequency are military coups themselves the result of foreign interference?

### FOREIGN MILITARY INTERVENTION AND WAR

At the end of the Second World War, foreign military intervention was mainly that of the United States, the USSR, the United Kingdom and France. One early and superficial expectation was that the dispersion of large quantities of modern weapons to Third World nations would eventually serve to reduce the amount of foreign military intervention by the major powers, since they would meet with the possibility of serious opposition and losses. This outcome may very well still develop in the future.

In the interim period, however, the primary development seems to have been not a reduction but rather a pronounced increase in foreign military activity on the part of a sharply increasing number of intervening states. Once again, terminology is something less than satisfactory. In some cases, the 'interventions' are nothing less than full-fledged wars, in other cases, not. Thus, foreign military involvement at present covers a wide variety of activities, both in active combat and in peacetime.

An early manifestation of this important development was the covert use of pilots by both the United States and the USSR in various wars in the 1960s. This expanded into the supply of highly trained specialists in addition to pilots: field commanders, air defence systems operators, tank operators, aircraft repair and maintenance crews, communications or logistics specialists, and instructors for all these capabilities. Military personnel have been involved in such assignments from many countries including Pakistan, India, Israel, the People's Democratic Republic of Korea, Egypt, Cuba, the German Democratic Republic, and from a substantial number of other countries, as well as the United States, the USSR, France and the United Kingdom. These foreign assignments often go hand-in-hand with the acquisition of sophisticated military equipment, which the armies of the recipient nations can neither operate nor maintain with their own personnel.

In recent years, together with the more traditional missions of external military forces, the development of this process has led to the deployment of a substantial number of expeditionary forces outside their own national borders by many countries in addition to the forces of the major powers. Some of these operations were brief air or commando strikes, followed



by withdrawal. Others were full-scale wars, extended deployments and invasions. In some cases, the military forces of the intervening state were invited in and their aid sought; in other cases, they came as invaders. Still other states have played auxiliary roles in these interventions, by, for instance

- supplying immediate airlift capacity or other supplies for a second state's use in these operations;
- supplying funds for support of operations or for arming other states;
- acting as a base for the forces that invaded a third country.

If researchers choose to argue that such activities are justified in any particular case, that is their prerogative, but that comes afterwards, and should not imply the omission of such events from a research analysis. The conclusion that seems inescapable is that increased worldwide availability of modern weapons has meant that foreign military intervention has become a truly international activity, open to a far larger number of actors than before, and has increased significantly.

There are no *a priori* problems of definition and no need for political debate before studying these things. One simply describes the behaviour in every instance; if it takes place, what is it? Then one can go on to describe sub-categories which may differentiate one kind of foreign military presence from another. This avoids prior argument about whether one instance or another fits a single definition. The overall category comes first; then all the different subsets can be indicated.

The rigorous application of uniform criteria to all cases under examination is of critical importance to research on foreign military intervention, as it is in all research on war and conflict. Special pleading from one government that its military intervention is a justified defensive act while another's is illegitimate aggression should be disregarded. No state ever says that it is in the wrong and its behaviour unjustified. The researcher faced with this issue time and again in contemporary events can usefully recall the touchstone of 9 April 1940. On that day, Adolph Hitler and the German Foreign Ministry announced that, because of the prior violations of Danish and Norwegian neutrality, Germany had taken over the responsibility for the neutrality of the two countries. In plainer language, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway. Perhaps this example will seem less ambiguous or debatable than others that the researcher will face, but it is a useful reminder nevertheless. In analytical research such events must be recorded every time they occur no matter who the actors are, and no matter where one's political sympathies reside.

Foreign military intervention is probably the least systematically studied area relating to war and conflicts. In fact, it is barely studied at all, systematically or otherwise. The 'overt', grosser forms of military inter-

vention are at least well-known, even if they are also poorly studied in all but a few well-known cases. Additional case studies, in particular for the less studied wars and conflicts, would provide an important base for new comparative research. 'Covert' assistance to military coups is often alluded to but next to no research has been done in this area. Other subtle forms of military intervention are manifested in more sophisticated forms of military assistance. Times change, and with them the methods of foreign military intervention. The term needs refining and the subject matter, however labelled, requires detailed study.

This paper is not designed to provide answers to all these questions. Its purpose is to suggest a general approach and to draw attention to several specific aspects of national and international wars and conflicts that deserve substantially more research attention. The approach suggested is intended to be both pragmatic and rigorous. Active wars and other acts of organized armed violence have been numerous, continuous, and undiminishing since the end of the Second World War. Little that researchers can do would contribute more to the goal of peace between nations than turning their efforts to the study of modern-day warfare, unencumbered by *a priori* theoretical constructs and definitional straitjackets.

## NOTES

1. The author would like to thank the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Research for financial support during the period in which this paper was written.
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