



Multipolarity, Perceptions, and the Tragedy of 1914

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In “Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War,” Dominic Tierney critiques our work on alliance politics in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Tierney incorrectly ascribes to us a theory about the outbreak of conflict based on a “chain-ganging theory” in which war occurs because states become so tightly tied to their allies that they lose volition and find themselves in conflicts not of their own choosing. In fact, we do not try to explain the origins of war, but instead explain why wars in Europe escalated to a continent-wide scale. Here we briefly restate our argument and demonstrate how Tierney misconstrues it. We also show how some of the factors that we discuss in our original work are useful for assessing Tierney’s claim that the causes of conflict and alliance dynamics hinge on whether states are hawks or doves.

We are very grateful for the opportunity to respond to Dominic Tierney’s article, “Does Chain-Ganging Cause the Outbreak of War,” in which he critiques our work on alliance politics in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Tierney ascribes to us a theory about the outbreak of conflict based on a “chain-ganging theory” in which war occurs because states become so tightly tied to their allies that they lose volition and find themselves in conflicts not of their own choosing. In fact, we subscribe to no such theory. In our approach, we largely take conflicts and political disputes as exogenously given and ask when and how they are likely to escalate into system-wide conflagrations. Chain-ganging is not, as Tierney’s title suggests, our independent variable, but, rather, a dependent variable in our argument.

Below, we will briefly restate our argument and demonstrate how Tierney misconstrues it. Although Tierney’s project is very different from ours, we also show how some of the factors that we discuss in our original work are useful for assessing Tierney’s claim that the causes of conflict and alliance dynamics hinge on whether states are hawks or doves.

Put most simply, our article is not about the sources of German or Austro-Hungarian belligerence. We treated “Germany’s aggressive aims” as “constant factors” across the two World Wars, an analytic parameter in our argument akin to “the multipolar checkerboard configuration of power” (Christensen and Snyder 1990:148). In principle, we have no objection to distinguishing between more or

less hawkish states. Each of us has published work separately that emphasizes the domestic sources of German and Austrian aggressiveness in the period leading up to World War I (Snyder 1991; Christensen 1993). In the article, however, we were trying to do something very different. We sought to explain why multipolarity led to disastrous system-wide war in almost entirely opposite ways before the two world wars. In 1914, a local crisis in the Balkans led to very fast-paced escalation involving all of the great powers through a process we labeled chain-ganging. Before World War II, a strategically much more significant event—the coerced incorporation into the Nazi empire of not only Austria but also an industrially and militarily powerful Czechoslovakia—failed to elicit a prompt and violent response. The early lethargy and “buck-passing” of the future allies arguably made the eventual war much longer and harder to terminate than it otherwise would have been.

One can fairly blame German and Austrian truculence for the outbreak of war in 1914. We and many others have. But this does not help us explain the variation in the two systemic outcomes. After all, no matter what one thinks of the security strategies of the two central European powers before August 1914, they cannot be considered more aggressive or “hawkish” than Hitler’s strategy. Something other than variations in German hawkishness must have been at work to explain the variation in alliance dynamics.

To explain chain-ganging, we combined two separate variables, one structural and the other perceptual (Tierney only allows us the latter). The structural variable—multipolarity (as opposed to bipolarity)—means that great powers seek allies and fear isolation because any group of two or more other great powers can threaten the security of an isolated state. Perceptions enter the picture because the degree to which one state views its own security as directly tied to the near-term security of a real or potential ally depends on strategic threat perceptions about the efficacy of offensive aggression by the opposing alliance. In worlds in which attackers are believed to have the advantage (offense dominance) and initial victories are predicted to snowball into greater strategic advantages for the attacker, states tend to ally more tightly so that, when conflict occurs (for whatever reasons), allies on both sides quickly enter the fray out of the fear that their indispensable allies might be eliminated quickly, leaving them far more vulnerable.

Multipolarity and perceived offense dominance combine, we argue, to explain why European states were so quick to escalate in the fateful summer of 1914. We contrast this to Europe in the late 1930s, a period in which an objectively much more pressing and serious threat was allowed to spread because of the relatively lethargic initial response of the members of the future anti-fascist coalition. There we argue that belief in defensive advantage and predictions of a long and attritional war in which attackers would be worn down by defenders led various states to try to pass the buck of opposing Hitler early to other potential or actual allies. Just as we have no “chain-ganging theory” for the outbreak of war in 1914, we have no “buck-passing theory” for the outbreak of war in 1938–1940. Our theory instead is designed to explain when buck-passing and chain-ganging are most likely to occur in conflict-ridden environments.

In terms of the history of the period leading up to World War I covered by Tierney, we see no problem, in principle, in distinguishing between types of actors as more or less aggressive. But even for Tierney’s purpose of explaining the initial outbreak of conflict, which differs from our own in our article, it is important to recognize how multipolarity and beliefs about offensive efficacy affected the behavior of both Tierney’s “hawkish” and “dovish” regimes. Despite aggressive German diplomacy and military policy, Germany’s overall strategic optimism was not as unalloyed as Tierney portrays it. Rather than simply egging Austria-Hungary on, and there was plenty of that, Berlin also balked briefly on the brink of war with its “halt in Belgrade” proposal, an eleventh-hour

initiative to keep the peace once it was clear that not only France, but also Great Britain, could line up on Russia's side in a European War. This proposal was, however, rejected by Austria-Hungary and eventually by Germany itself in part because once mobilization of the future combatants, including Russia, had begun, losing the military initiative was considered too risky in the world we describe.

What gave the weaker Austro-Hungarian ally leverage in Germany in such a crisis was not mainly Germany's concern about the former's "defection" from the alliance, as Tierney's argument emphasizes, but two scenarios for Austria-Hungary's destruction as an ally: the potential collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire internally if Russian support for Balkan nationalism continued unchecked or its decisive military defeat if Germany did not support it against a superior Russia. So while Tierney dismisses Moltke's quotation expressing fears regarding Austro-Hungarian "annihilation" as window dressing, we take it quite seriously. Combined with the aforementioned perceived dangers of stopping mobilization once underway, the specter of an ally's collapse leading to strategic isolation would have made it much more difficult for Germany to restrain or abandon Austria-Hungary than Tierney's approach allows. Tierney's discussion of "casus foederis" and the international legal options generally available to more dovish leaders to abandon more belligerent allies seems interesting as an abstract exercise, but totally divorced from the frenzied and fraught strategic situation in central Europe at the time.

Making matters worse, as William Wohlforth argues so convincingly and to which Tierney briefly alludes, Germany's willingness to accept war in the near term, rather than waiting for a potential future conflict, was based in large part on a (false) perception of a shift in the balance of power in favor of Russia (Wohlforth 1987). In a world in which defense was perceived to be dominant, such a perceived shift might not have seemed so onerous in Berlin, but in a world in which material advantages were believed (again, falsely) to provide real and growing advantages for attackers, such a strategic trend was seen as very dangerous indeed. So Wohlforth's approach provides a nice complement to our own approach, rather than a refutation.

Of course, pre-World-War-I Germany suffered from a complex mix of hyper-nationalist myths and aggressive ambitions alongside these strategic misperceptions and the exaggerated fears that flowed from them. But even if we see Germany as fully aggressive and dedicated to a conflict with Russia over the latter's differences with Austria-Hungary, we still need to explain why Germany chose to attack France first, thereby instantly widening the war to include not only France, but also the United Kingdom. In a related fashion, Tierney fails to recognize how Germany's military strategy of attacking in the West undercut any hope of sustaining its claim that Russian mobilization made Germany the victim, not the aggressor in 1914.

In terms of the more defensive or dovish actors in 1914, Tierney's approach cannot explain why French officials were often more resolute than Russian ones when faced with the prospect of a showdown over the Balkans, encouraging Russia to stand firm. Even France, a state without many of the domestic sources of aggression and ambition found in Germany at the time, was rather aggressive in the strategic setting of the time. We believe that the checkerboard geography of multipolar Europe and the widespread belief in offensive advantage helps explain this surprising phenomenon, which we label chain-ganging. Tierney's own concept of "coordinated action" provides a label for Russian and French alliance cooperation but does nothing to explain it.

Unfortunately, wars break out all too frequently. Fortunately, global conflagrations like World Wars I and II are much more rare. Our article is not about the outbreak of conflict. It is about how small conflicts in multipolarity can escalate

into global ones and how aggressors in multipolar settings can be left unchecked until only a global struggle can stop them. World War I is the flagship example of the former. If we exclude strategic misperceptions in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and France as motivators for action in any explanation of the war and its alliance dynamics, we are left with a history of events that begs the crucial questions. Tierney states matter-of-factly that by 1914 the “interests of both Germany and Austria-Hungary in war had come into alignment,” but never explains why. He also states that Germany restrained Austria in 1912–1913 because the “situation was not optimal for war.” When did it become optimal? 1914? Exactly how, at that time, did launching a war that would lead to the destruction of Austria-Hungary and the amputation of German territories serve the interests of either state? If the issue was purely countering Russia in the Balkans, why start the war by attacking France? Looking at the other camp, was France wise to egg Russia on to adopt a tough policy toward Austria-Hungary when it paid such a dear price in the ensuing war? That is not to mention the Russian state itself, which would fall to a revolution by war’s end. Simply labeling the European states hawks or doves fails to explain this enormous human tragedy. Our original article was one attempt to provide such an explanation.

References

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