

Escaping the Deadly Embrace: Encirclement at the Origins of World War I

Abstract:

What lies at the origins of major wars?

I argue that major wars are caused by the attempts of great powers to escape their two-front war problem: encirclement. To explain the causal mechanism that links encirclement to major war, I identify an intervening variable: the increase in the invasion ability of the immediate rival. This outcome unfolds in a three-step process: double security dilemma, war initiation, and war contagion.

Encirclement is a geographic variable that occurs in presence of one or two great powers (*surrounding great powers*) on two different borders of the *encircled great power*. The two front-war problem triggers a double security dilemma (step 1) for the encircled great power, which has to disperse its army to secure its borders. The surrounding great powers do not always have the operational capability to initiate a two-front war (*latent encirclement*) but, when they increase their invasion ability (*actualized encirclement*), the encircled great power attacks (war initiation, step 2). The other great powers intervene due to the rival-based network of alliances for preventing their respective immediate rival from increasing its invasion ability (war contagion, step 3).

I assess my theory in the outbreak of WWI. This article provides ample support to the claim that major wars are caused by a great power that has the limited goal of eliminating its two-front war problem. These findings have important implications for the prospects of major wars, since I anticipate that in the long term China will face the encirclement of India and Russia.

“Surrender, you're surrounded!”

In any movie with a hostage standoff, these words are the nightmare for every criminal. Surrounded by a cordon of police and with no way out, the “bad guys” have two drastic and opposite choices: either fighting for their freedom with the serious risk of death or surrendering and ending up in jail. This desperate situation rarely has a happy ending.

This dreadful scenario is not confined to movies. The presence of powerful states on at least two different borders – *encirclement* – has been considered the greatest threat to state survival from ancient times to contemporary international politics. As historian Hanson notes, “why did Athens [...] risk a campaign that might involve facing the Boeotians? Again, it was the old-age *desire to be free of a two-front war*, the specter that later haunted Rome when it faced the Carthaginians and Philip V of Macedon, the traditional German dilemma of being wedged between Russia and France, and the predicament America found itself in during World War II, with both Pacific and European theaters.”¹ Encirclement lies at the origins of major wars, but the impact of the two-front war problem on great-power war has been overlooked.

The absence of great-power war since World War II has reduced the concerns about the outbreak of major military conflicts. Some authors have concluded that major war has become obsolescent.² Even without completely excluding this possibility, authors have underlined how the presence of a unipole,³ the post-World War II international order,⁴ and the qualitative change

1 Victor D. Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2005), 125 (emphasis added).

2 John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Michael Mandelbaum, “Is Major War Obsolete?,” *Survival*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (1998), 20-38; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

3 William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), 5-41.

4 John G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Patrick M. Morgan, “Multilateral Institutions as Restraints on

in the level of economic interdependence among states⁵ have greatly decreased the chances of great-power conflicts. Finally, other scholars argue that the destructiveness of nuclear weapons has eliminated war as a tool of statecraft,⁶ making it even a taboo.⁷

Other scholars challenge the post-Cold War optimism about the anachronism of great-power war. The main concern is that China's rise will compel the United States to launch a preventive war.⁸ However, the advent of nuclear weapons, while it has not made great-power anachronistic, has considerably limited the reasons for conflict unless state survival is imminently threatened. It is not plausible that China will launch wars of conquest for becoming a regional hegemon, as they will not only be extremely costly but they might risk to undermine its own survival. It is also doubtful that the United States would risk a nuclear war to stop China's rise for concerns over its long-term security, given that geography provides a powerful deterrent against any potential territorial invasion by an extra-regional great power.⁹

The main problem with the current debate is that “World War I and II have severely skewed

Major War,” in *The Waning of Major War: Theories and Debates*, ed. Raimo Vayrynen (London, Routledge, 2006), 160-184.

- 5 Michael Mousseau, “The End of War: How a Robust Marketplace and Liberal Hegemony Are Leading to Perpetual Peace,” *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Summer 2019), 160-196; Richard N. Rosecrance, *Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Stephen G. Brooks, *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 6 Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospects of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Kenneth N. Waltz, “Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (1990), pp. 731-746.
- 7 Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer, 1999), 433-468.
- 8 Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2005), 7-45; Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, “Racing Toward Tragedy?: China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia-Pacific and the Security Dilemma,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2014), 52-91; Allison Graham, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3 (2010), 381-396; Thomas J. Christensen, “Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No.1 (Summer 2006), 81-126.
- 9 By no means, this does not imply that the United States will remain passive but other strategies short of direct military attack will be employed, unless China could pose an imminent threat to U.S survival by being capable of launching an invasion by land.

our sense of what war is”,¹⁰ leading to the incorrect expectation that it will be a hegemonic struggle for the mastery over the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, “few wars are fought purely to gain power and/or hegemony [...], and only about half of time do power transitions or other shifts in capability end in war.”¹¹ Conversely, most of major wars in modern history has been thought for limited aims. This puzzle begs the fundamental question of this article: what are the origins of major wars?

The simple answer is encirclement, a situation that creates a two-front war problem for the *encircled great power* as it shares two different borders with a single opponent or two great powers (the *surrounding great powers*). Being a geographical variable, encirclement is constant and cannot explain the variation of war and peace. I identify an intervening variable – the increase in the invasion ability of the immediate rival – as the causal mechanism that links encirclement to the outbreak of major wars. This variable is not a function of behavior or gradual power shifts in the future but of imminent, *operational* changes that alter the ability of the immediate rival to launch a successful invasion. Major wars unfold through a three-step process: double security dilemma, war initiation, and war contagion.

First, encirclement creates a two-front war problem for the *encircled great power*, because it shares at least two different borders with one single opponent or two great powers (*surrounding great powers*). This uniquely dangerous situation generates a *double security dilemma* for the encircled great power, because it has to disperse its forces against the surrounding great powers. The measures short of war that the encircled great power undertakes to eliminate its encirclement (forging alliances and creating buffer zones) decrease the security of the surrounding great

10 Tanisha M. Fazal and Paul Poast, “War Is Not Over: What the Optimists Get Wrong About Conflict,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 6 (2019), 80.

11 John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 136.

powers, which carry out similar counter-measures to contain the encircled great power.

Second, *war initiation* is caused by a change in the “threat environment” of the encircled great power. The surrounding great powers do not always have the operational ability to launch a simultaneous attack (*latent encirclement*). When the strategies that the surrounding great powers adopt to tighten their grip on the encircled great power lead to increases of their operational capability to launch a joint invasion (*actualized encirclement*), the encircled great power attacks one of the surrounding great powers as a measure of last resort.

Third, the other great powers are dragged into the dyadic war between the encircled great power and one of the surrounding states because of the rival-based network of alliances that was formed during the phase of the double security dilemma (*war contagion*). The encircled great power seeks alliances with states that consider one of the surrounding great powers its respective immediate rival, that is, the state that poses the greatest threat to its survival based on its ability to launch a successful invasion. The surrounding great powers respond by forging an alliance between them and with those states that regard the encircled great power or one of its allies as their respective immediate rival. The result is the formation of two opposite alliance blocs that connect separate dyads of rivalry in one unified zero-sum game. The attack of the encircled great power triggers a cascade of military interventions, as the other great powers try to prevent an increase in the invasion ability of their respective immediate rival.

I explore my argument in the outbreak of WWI. I argue that this major war was caused by the encirclement of Germany and its attempts to prevent France and Russia to increase their ability to launch a simultaneous two-front war. Since its unification in 1871 German officials tried to prevent this outcome by creating a network of alliances that would prevent and then split the Franco-Russian alliance. The Russian decision to ramp up the construction of strategic

railroads in Poland after the end of the Balkan Wars pushed German rulers to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy, which ended in war because of the failed coercive game during the July Crisis. Since the Russian order of general mobilization precluded any possibility to avoid a military confrontation, Germany was compelled to declare war against Russia before it would launch a simultaneous attack with France. This decision activated the rival-based network of alliances, as each great power was dragged into the war for preventing its respective immediate rival from increasing its invasion ability.

This study makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it claims that major wars are initiated by a great power that faces a two-front war problem. The encircled great power has the limited goal of preventing a simultaneous invasion by the surrounding great powers and it attacks even if it lacks power preponderance. In turn, my structural theory challenges hegemonic theories of major wars, which predict this outcome to be the result of the most powerful state's attempts to either achieve or preserve hegemony. Second, my theory highlights the importance of quick operational changes in the ability to invade of the surrounding great powers, rather than gradual power shifts, as the factor that links the geographical variable of encirclement to the outbreak of major wars. Third, this article provides a new explanation on the origins of WWI by identifying the construction of the Russian strategic railroads in Poland as the catalyst that led to the escalation of the July Crisis.

The findings of this study have important implications for foreseeing the outbreak of future major wars. I shift the current focus away from the rivalry between the United States and China and, instead, I anticipate that the next major war will be the result of the encirclement of China. In the long term China (encircled great power) will face a two-front war problem by Russia and India (surrounding great powers) and its attempts to prevent them from acquiring the operational

capabilities to launch a simultaneous attack will create the conditions for the outbreak of a major war in the Asia-Pacific region.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, after showing that IR scholars have failed to theorize the impact of encirclement on the origins of major wars, I explore the faulty logic of hegemonic theories of major wars. Second, I define the key components of my theory. Third, I outline its logic in the three steps that lead to the outbreak of major wars. Fourth, I analyze the three steps that led to the outbreak of WWI. I conclude by laying out the contributions of this study and anticipating the prospects for future major wars.

Literature Review

The two-front war problem is considered a uniquely dangerous situation that has a profound impact on international politics. Few IR scholars mention encirclement *in passing* but they do not elucidate how it leads to major war, how encirclement really works.¹² For instance, Copeland emphasizes how encirclement was a critical factor in the Nazi decision to invade Poland in 1939: “Hitler's conference with senior commanders on 23 May shows how *impending encirclement* and others' accelerating rearmament had convinced him to speed up plans to invade Poland”.¹³ Mearsheimer suggests that the German fear of encirclement contributed to the outbreak of World War I: “The German decision to push for war in 1914 was not a case of wacky strategic ideas pushing a state to start a war it was sure to lose. It was [...] a calculated risk motivated in large part by Germany's desire to *break its encirclement* by the Triple Entente, prevent the growth of

¹² For other mentions of encirclement, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 235; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 267-268.

¹³ Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 134 (emphasis added).

Russian power, and become Europe's hegemon."¹⁴

Encirclement is a concept that has been overlooked by International Relations (IR) scholars with one notable exception.¹⁵ Snyder identifies "self-encirclement" as the result of strategic over-commitments that are driven by the imperialist myths of domestic elites. This characterization of encirclement has important differences from my theory. Snyder uses the concept of "self-encirclement" to give an example of how imperialist great powers adopt counterproductive behavior that leads to containment by other states, but he does not identify how encirclement is at the foundations of major wars. Moreover, he does not consider "self-encirclement" the main variable that provokes the irrational behavior of imperialist great powers, but rather a product of over-expansion.

Hegemonic Theories of Major Wars

The literature on the causes of war and peace is voluminous, but few scholars try to explain the origins of major wars.¹⁶ Since the main debate on the prospects of the next great-power conflict is dominated by hegemonic theories of major wars, I explore its two main alternatives: Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Copeland's dynamic differential theory.¹⁷

Mearsheimer argues that, in an anarchic self-help international system, rational states that

14 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 209 (emphasis added).

15 Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6-9.

16 The literature on the causes of war and peace is too vast to be covered in this article. For an overview of the main theories, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

17 I treat Copeland's theory as the most compelling among power transition theory. For other works in this field of research, see A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Modelski, "The Long Cycles of Global Politics and the Nation-State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 20 (April 1978); Joshua Shiffrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018); Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), 591-614.

have offensive capabilities and cannot know each other's present and future intentions try to maximize their relative power until they achieve regional hegemony as the best way to guarantee their primary goal of survival.¹⁸ The structure of the international system creates the conditions for this zero-sum competition but its constant features cannot account for variation of war and peace. Therefore, Mearsheimer introduces the number of great powers and the distribution of power among them as the critical variable for explaining the likelihood of major wars. These systemic conflicts are more likely to occur in unbalanced multipolarity, when the bid for hegemony by the most powerful state (potential hegemon) triggers the formation of a counter-balancing coalition by the other great powers in the region.

Copeland elaborates a theory on the probability of major wars as the result of changes in relative power that will cause a future power transition between the the most powerful state in the system (declining hegemon) and a rising challenger. The existing hegemon adopts a variety of strategies short of war to prevent adverse power shifts but, when its decline becomes “deep and inevitable”, it launches a preventive attack against the rising challenger. In addition to the dynamic differentials, Copeland argues that the probability of major wars is affected by the polarity of the system. Bipolarity is more unstable than multipolarity because the declining hegemon needs less power advantage to launch a successful attack against the rising challenger. The more the number of great powers in the system, the bigger the size of a counter-balancing coalition will form against the declining hegemon.¹⁹

These two explanations share one important trait that diverges from my theory: they argue that major wars are caused by the most powerful state's attempts to “take on the system”. The

18 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 29-42.

19 Copeland, *Origins*, 11-34.

main difference is on the timing of the attack: according to Mearsheimer, the bid for hegemony occurs when the most powerful state is in ascendancy and the conditions are the most favorable to succeed; Copeland claims that a preventive war is launched as a measure of last resort when the most powerful state in the system is already in deep, inevitable decline. Both authors expect the other great powers to coalesce in a counter-hegemonic balancing coalition against the most powerful state in the system.

I argue that offensive realism and dynamic differential theory are characterized by theoretical flaws and empirical puzzles. First, Mearsheimer and Copeland cannot account for major wars that occurred in absence of a (potential or declining) hegemon. Based on the conventional wisdom on periods of power preponderance, half of the ten major wars that occurred since 1494 occurred in absence of a (potential or declining) hegemon:²⁰ the Thirty Years' War (1635-1648), the Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678), War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), and the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802). Moreover, offensive realism and dynamic differential theory fail to explain why periods that were characterized by imbalances of power in the system or by large and rapid power shifts did not lead to the outbreak of major wars. The British decisions not to bid for hegemony in the first half of the nineteenth century and not to launch a preventive war against Imperial Germany at the turn of the twentieth century are two major empirical puzzles for Mearsheimer's and Copeland's theory, respectively.

Second, I argue that both theories have a missing step in their comprehensive explanation for the outbreak of major wars. Offensive realism does not provide clear, observable predictions

²⁰ Ibid., 27-28; Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 50-76.

on the timing of war initiation. As Mearsheimer points out, the common fundamental flaw of structural theories is of being “not capable of explaining precisely how often war will occur [...]. Nor are they capable of predicting exactly when wars will occur.”²¹

Copeland identifies a clear mechanism for the timing of war initiation; yet, preventive motivation is a necessary but insufficient condition for the outbreak of major wars.²² Why should a declining hegemon risk of being attacked in the future if the rising challenger surpasses it? Why cannot transition be peaceful? If a preventive attack by the declining hegemon in deep decline is inevitable, why would a rational challenger rise? Why is it dissatisfied? Additionally, Copeland identifies internal development of states as the reason for deep and inevitable decline; however, these power shifts are rarely large and rapid enough to explain the sense of urgency of the attacker.²³ If war is launched as a measure of last resort, as we both agree upon, the reason for war initiation is not the perception of adverse power shifts in the future but the imminent threat that an operational increase in the invasion ability of the surrounding great powers poses to the survival of the encircled great power.

Finally, both Mearsheimer and Copeland predict the formation of counter-hegemonic alliances to thwart the attempt of the most powerful state in the system to pursue or preserve hegemony, respectively. However, alliances are not always characterized by the modality “one v. the rest”. The recurrent formation of two opposite blocs shows that the motivation of states for forming an alliance is not merely to stop the rise of the most powerful state in the system, but to counter their respective immediate rival.

In sum, Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Copeland's dynamic differential theory provide

21 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, p. 335.

22 Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War and Domestic Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2008), 3.

23 Alexander Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (2014), 4-5.

an important contribution in explaining the origins of major wars, but they are at best incomplete. I outline a new structural theory on the origins of major wars that aims at solving the flaws of hegemonic theories of major wars by providing an explanation for both endemic and dynamic features of international politics.

Definitions

Before explaining how encirclement leads to the outbreak of major wars through a three-step process, I define the key variables of my theory: encirclement, increase in the invasion ability of the immediate rival, and major war.

Encirclement

Encirclement is a geographic variable that occurs in presence of one or two great powers (surrounding great powers) on two different borders of the encircled great power. It can take two possible forms: two surrounding great powers, both of which share a different border with the encircled great power;²⁴ one great power that shares two separate and distinct borders with the encircled great power.²⁵

It is essential to clarify when the two-front war problem is absent. First, a great power is not encircled if it shares borders with states that have not achieved great-power status. For instance, the United States is not encircled by Mexico and Canada. Second, the encirclement of smaller states is out of the scope of my theory, because I consider this situation not to be conducive to major wars. Third, I suggest that only continental great powers could be encircled. Technically,

24 The most illustrative case is the situation of Germany since its unification in 1871, when it was encircled by Russia on the east and France on the west.

25 The United Habsburg under Charles V (1519-1556) controlled territories in the south, east, and north of France.

an insular state could be encircled if another great power could sustainedly control all the sea lanes around it, but the difficulties of this enterprise and of launching amphibious assaults lead me to rule out latent encirclement for maritime great powers. Based on my definition, I identify the following periods of encirclement in European modern history (table 1).

Table 1: Encirclement in Modern History

<i>Time period</i>	<i>Encircled great power</i>	<i>Surrounding great powers</i>
1482-1519	France	Austria and Spain
1519-1556	France	United Habsburg
1556-1713	France	Spain
1738-1806	Prussia	Austria and Great Britain ²⁶
1763-1802	France	Austria and Prussia
1871-1919	Germany	France and Russia
1939-1940	Germany	France and USSR
1939-1945	USSR	Germany and Japan

Invasion Ability of the Immediate Rival

Encirclement is a geographical variable and, as such, it is constant; yet however, my argument is not deterministic. I consider the invasion ability of the immediate rival to be the catalyst for war initiation.

The *immediate rival* is the state that poses the most serious threat to survival²⁷ due to a combination of geographical proximity and relative power. Each great power has a respective

²⁶ The Prince-Elector of Hanover became King of Great Britain in 1714, at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession. Prussia shared with Hanover its northwestern border. Prussia was briefly encircled by France and Russia in 1806, after France extended its possessions to the Confederation of the Rhineland (July 1806). Prussia lost great-power status with the Battle of Jena (October 1806).

²⁷ I adopt Mearsheimer's definition of survival, considered in terms of territorial integrity and foreign-policy autonomy. See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 31.

immediate rival, but they do not share the same one. Only in presence of a state with clear power preponderance, the other great powers in the region coalesce in a counter-hegemonic coalition.

The encircled great power and the surrounding great powers are mutual immediate rivals. Based on the type of “threat environment” of the encircled great power, which is a function of the operational ability of the surrounding great powers to launch a two-front war, I distinguish two possible layers of encirclement: latent encirclement and actualized encirclement. *Latent encirclement* occurs when the encircled great power has one or two great powers at two distinct borders, but there is no serious possibility of a two-front war.²⁸ While there is the potential of a simultaneous invasion by the surrounding great powers in the future, they lack the current operational ability to launch a joint invasion. *Actualized encirclement* occurs when the surrounding great powers develop the operational capability of launching a joint attack against the encircled great power. While a simultaneous attack by the surrounding great powers is not inevitable, actualized encirclement makes the nightmare of a two-front war a concrete probability in the present rather than a mere possibility in the future. An increase in the invasion ability of the surrounding great powers produces a fundamental change in the “threat environment” of the encircled great power, because it gives the former the operational capability of launching a successful attack against the latter.

It is important to emphasize that the invasion ability of the surrounding great powers differs from gradual power shifts. Power transition theorists stress the role of uneven economic growth, but these power shifts are rarely rapid enough to explain war initiation and they are usually the consequence of war.²⁹ In particular, Copeland identifies rapid and large *power shifts* in the *future*

28 This situation could happen for a variety of reasons, but it is usually the result of the presence of internal or external security threats that prevent the surrounding great powers from concentrating their forces in a potential invasion of the encircled great power.

29 Richard N. Lebow and Benjamin Valentino, “Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition

as the reason for why the declining hegemon, while being *more powerful* than the rising challenger, launches a *preventive war*. Instead, I emphasize that the encircled great power, which does *not* need to be relatively *more powerful* than each surrounding great power, initiate war for preventing *imminent* increases of the *operational capability* of the surrounding great powers to launch a two-front war.

Major War

I define major wars as overt and direct military confrontations among *all* the great powers of a specific region.³⁰ There are three important caveats to my definition. First, I exclude from the classification of major wars secret involvement and proxy wars. For instance, the Korean War is not considered a major war, because the Soviet Union was not officially belligerent and played only a covert role. Second, I exclude military conflicts that involve regional powers, none of which has great-power status at the global level. Third, major wars entail the involvement of all great powers in their own region. This implies that the intervention of extra-regional great powers is not necessary to classify the conflict as a major war. In table 2 I identify the ten major wars that occurred since 1494.

Theory,” *International Relations*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (2009), 389-410.

30 My definition of major wars generates two differences from Levy's and Copeland's lists. Copeland, *Origins*, 27; Levy, *War*, 50-76. Differently from Levy but like Copeland, I include the Italian Wars (1521-1559). Moreover, Copeland excludes the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) from his classification, while Levy and I consider the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) as a single major war. Finally, I argue that the Thirty Years' War did not begin in 1618, as Levy and Copeland suggest, but when France attacked Spain in May 1635.

Table 2: Major Wars in Modern History

<i>Major War</i>
Italian Wars (1521-1559)
Thirty Years' War (1635 ³¹ -1648)
Franco-Dutch War (1672-1678)
Nine Years' War (1688-1697)
War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713)
War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748)
Seven Years' War (1756-1763)
French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815)
WWI (1914-1918)
World War II (1939-1945)

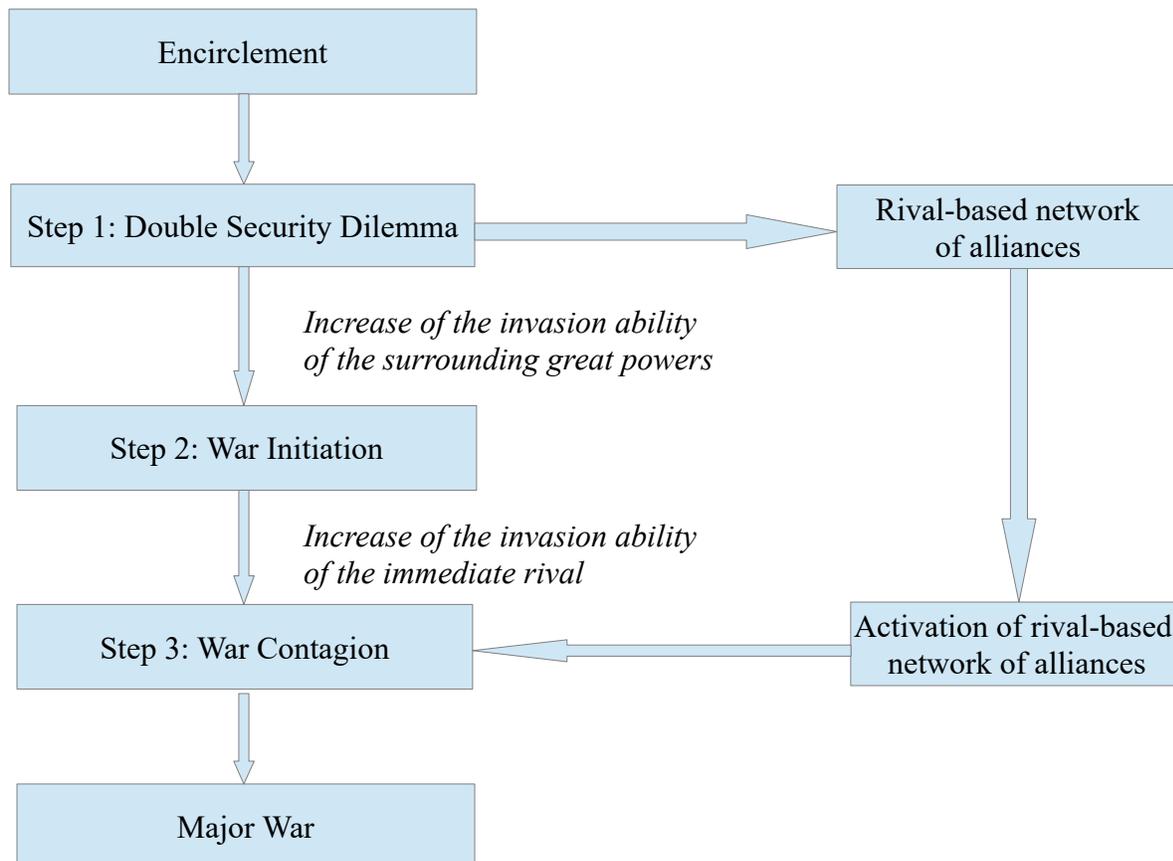
Encirclement at the Origins of Major Wars

Major wars are caused by the attempts of the encircled great power to eliminate its two-front war problem. The necessity to “escape its deadly embrace” leads to the outbreak of major war through three different steps:³² the double security dilemma, war initiation, and war contagion (Figure 1).

31 According to my definition, the Thirty Years' War begins with the French declaration of war against Spain (May 1635). Between 1618 and 1635 it was characterized by a civil war within the Holy Roman Empire and a combination of separate dyadic wars, but it did not involve all the great powers in the region.

32 My theory shows several differences with the steps-to-war argument. The most important is my rejection of unit-level variables as part of the explanation for major wars. Indeed, what accounts for change in the steps-to-war explanation seems not to be geography but domestic politics. Specifically, the emergence of hardliners that adopt *realpolitik* foreign policy worsens existing territorial disputes and increases the likelihood of crisis escalation. Vasquez, *War Puzzle*, 167-215; Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, “Assessing the Steps to War,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Oct. 2005), pp. 607-633.

Figure 1: Encirclement at the Origins of Major Wars



Step 1: Double Security Dilemma

Latent encirclement creates an acute sense of fear and vulnerability, because the encircled great power faces the possibility of a joint invasion from separate fronts. Its geographical situation constantly jeopardizes its survival, because it cannot concentrate its military capabilities and defend itself even if it is more powerful than each of its opponents. This uniquely dangerous situation creates a *double security dilemma* for the encircled great power, which is compelled to

carry out an active and aggressive foreign policy until the possibility of a simultaneous invasion from two fronts is eliminated. Inaction equals to surrender.

Ideally, the encircled great power would eliminate its encirclement by achieving a decisive military victory against one of the surrounding great powers, so that it is relegated to a less than great-power status. However, this solution would almost inevitably cause the outcome that the encircled great power is trying to prevent: a two-front war. The other surrounding great power could not stay on the sidelines while its immediate rival significantly increases its invasion ability. Even if the encircled great power was by far the most powerful state in the system, eliminating its encirclement through preventive war would be a daunting task.

The encircled great power resorts to less costly measures than a direct attack against one of the surrounding great powers for preventing actualized encirclement. It adopts two main strategies for hindering the ability of the surrounding great powers to launch a simultaneous invasion. First, the encircled great power seeks and provides support to states that considers the surrounding great powers their respective immediate rival. For instance, in the decade that preceded the French attack to Spain in the Thirty Years' War (May 1635), Cardinal Richelieu financed “wars by diversion” by Sweden, the Dutch rebels, and German Protestant States to prevent Spain and Austria to concentrate their forces against France.³³

Second, the encircled great power attempts to establish buffer zones by extending its control over strategic territory along its borders. The creation of a line of territory between the encircled great power and the surrounding great powers acts as first line of defense and it stops or, at least, hinders an invasion by the surrounding great powers. For example, Louis XIV tried to reduce the

33 Richard Bonney, “France's 'war by diversion',” in *The Thirty Years' War*, eds. Geoffrey Parker (London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 129-137.

possibility of a joint invasion by Spain and Austria by facilitating the formation of the League of the Rhine (1658), a confederation of all German states that prevented Leopold I of Austria from uniting the Imperial troops with the Spanish army on the eastern border of France.³⁴

The attempts of the encircled great power to eliminate its encirclement concern the surrounding great powers, because seeking external support by other great powers and creating buffer zones can increase not only the ability of the encircled great power to improve its security but also to launch an attack from its more defensible borders. The surrounding great powers adopt similar counter-measures for containing the encircled great power and preventing it from increasing its invasion ability. The more aggressive the attempts of the encircled great power to eliminate its two-front war problem, the greater the incentive for the surrounding great powers to tighten their grip by forming alliances and to resort to limited use of force. But the attempts by the surrounding great powers to contain the encircled great power have the inevitable consequence of increasing its conviction that they are trying to “put its head in a noose”. Containment and encirclement are two sides of the same coin and the “*target of this containment strategy [...] is sure to view any balancing coalition forming against it as encirclement by its rivals*”.³⁵

Step 2: War Initiation

Latent encirclement is destiny. This geographical variable can explain the endemic intense security competition that characterizes the relationship between the encircled great power and the

34 Jean Bérenger, “An Attempted Rapprochement between France and the Emperor: the Secret Treaty for the Partition of the Spanish Succession of 19 January 1668,” in *Louis XIV and Europe*, ed. Ragnhild M. Hatton (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976), 121-123.

35 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 345.

surrounding great powers but, given that the two-front war problem is constant, it cannot account for the outbreak of a dyadic conflict between them. What explains war initiation?

Increases in the invasion ability of the immediate rival drive the decision of the encircled great power to initiate war to prevent actualized encirclement. There are two possible scenarios that encircled great power considers a point of no return, beyond which less risky measures become insufficient for preventing the surrounding great powers from increasing their ability to launch a joint invasion.

In the case of *concentration of forces*, the surrounding great powers eliminate all the (internal and external) security threats that prevented them from concentrating their forces against the encircled great power. This outcome undermines its survival, because it cannot defend its territorial integrity against two great power that can fully mobilize their armies against it. For instance, the Nine Years' War (1688-1697) was launched by Louis XIV because the Austrian Emperor Leopold I's was about to defeat the Ottoman Empire, which for decades had been preventing the Habsburg from uniting troops with Spain and concentrating its full force against France.³⁶

In the case of *closure of the circle*, the surrounding great powers increase their ability to invade the encircled great power by annexing territory along its borders. This outcome would add another layer to latent encirclement by opening a new gate for invasion. For example, the bone of contention that led to the outbreak of the Italian Wars was the control of the Duchy of Milan: if the United Habsburg had annexed it, they would have completed the encirclement of France on all its borders with Habsburg possessions from the North Sea to the Mediterranean

36 Geoffrey Symcox, "Louis XIV and the Outbreak of the Nine Years War," in *Louis XIV and Europe*, ed. Ragnhild Hatton (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), 179-212; John Childs, *The Nine Years' War and the British Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 15.

Sea.³⁷

When one of these two situations arise, the encircled great power launches an attack against one of the surrounding great powers. The encircled great power is aware that its attack will likely cause a two-front, but inaction would be equivalent to surrender. Given that all the strategies short of open warfare that the encircled great power adopted to prevent actualized encirclement failed, launching an attack against one of the surrounding great powers becomes the only rational option for guaranteeing its survival.

One might wonder why the encircled great power and the surrounding great powers do not reach a pre-war settlement. The logic of war initiation might elicit two main criticisms. Some scholars could argue that the costs of a potential two-front war exceed by far the potential benefits of victory. However, this argument fails to take into account the greater costs of inaction. The increase in the invasion ability of the surrounding great powers leads to actualized encirclement, which would put the encircled great power at the mercy of its enemies. This situation of extreme emergency makes standing firm and fighting less costly than backing down and accepting an intolerable peace.

The second critique would highlight that rational surrounding great powers ought to undertake reassuring measures to avoid war. However, the only way in which a pre-war bargain could be reached was if the surrounding great powers adopted unilateral concessions that would prevent them from increasing their invasion ability. Other conciliatory policies would be insufficient because the encircled great power cannot afford to make a mistake that would be fatal. Yet, making these concessions would be irrational for the surrounding great powers, because it would prevent them from containing the encircled great power and it would

37 Christine Shaw, *The Italian Wars 1494-1559* (London: Routledge, 2019), 12-14.

undermine their ability to prevent increases in the invasion ability of their mutual immediate rival. Thus, the surrounding great powers are not willing to strike a bargain, because maintaining the encircled great power weak and incapable of concentrating its forces against a single one of them decreases its ability to launch an attack.

Step 3: War Contagion

The emergence of actualized encirclement leads to the decision of the encircled great power to attack one of the surrounding great powers, but it still remains to be explained how the outbreak of this dyadic conflict propagates to the other great powers in the region. Great-power war usually remains geographically contained and limited to the two warring parties. Instead, the attack that is initiated by the encircled great power does not allow the other great powers to stay on the sidelines. What is the underlying mechanism of war contagion in presence of an encircled great power?

In order to analyze the logic of intervention by the other great powers, it is essential to understand the connection between war contagion and the double security dilemma. Since the encircled great has to disperse its forces along its borders, it seeks the support of other states. The surrounding great powers react by forming an alliance between them and with other states. Each great power enters into one of the two blocs for countering their respective immediate rival. The result is the formation of a checkerboard rival-based network of alliances that extends the logic of bilateral relative gains between immediate rivals to the whole region, as each separate dyad of rivalry becomes interwoven through the attempts of the encircled great power to eliminate its two-front war problem. Therefore, this mechanism creates a zero-sum game between the two

opposite alliance blocs based on which, if one great power increases its invasion ability, it threatens not only its immediate rival but also its allies.

Each great power in the region intervenes in the dyadic war between the encircled great power against one of the surrounding great powers to prevent an increase of the invasion ability of its respective immediate rival, which could occur in two main ways: loss of great-power ally by military defeat or defection or annexation of territory. First, a great power risks of losing an ally by military defeat if it stays on the sidelines when one of its great-power ally is attacked. Even if its ally was not likely to be easily defeated, lacking to intervene on its side would increase the chances that it will defect from the alliance. If the great power stays on the sidelines when its ally is involved in a major conflict, it will be unlikely to intervene in future conflicts. Second, a great power intervenes to prevent its respective immediate rival from annexing increasing its territorial possessions close to its borders, which would increase its ability to invade or even create a two-front war problem.

As dropping a stone into a lake creates a *ripple effect* that propagates from its center to the banks, the attempt of the encircled great power to “escape its deadly embrace” is the common thread that ties the double security dilemma, war initiation, and war contagion. *Coming full circle*, encirclement lies at the origins of major wars.

Research Agenda

To assess my argument, I employ process tracing to make within-case inferences about the causal mechanism of my theory in the outbreak of WWI.³⁸ I consider this case study to be a hard

³⁸ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 85–87.

case, because hegemonic theories of major wars consider it as a clear-cut example of the attempts of the (potential or declining) hegemon to achieve or preserve hegemony. Moreover, WWI is a fundamental case for the study of the causes of war and peace. This major war lies at the foundation of the discipline of International Relations and it still “remains the case to which nearly every IR conflict theorists is drawn.”³⁹ Lastly, hegemonic theories of major wars often draw (inappropriate) parallels between WWI and the prospects of war in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁰

After outlining the current understanding of this major war, I assess the validity of my theory in the three different steps. I conclude this section by addressing the main flaws of hegemonic theories of major wars on the outbreak of WWI.

Overview

More than one hundred years after the end of this major war, IR scholars and historians still have not agreed on its fundamental causes. In spite of the variety of accounts on the origins of WWI, four main explanations can be identified.⁴¹

39 Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, “Introduction: Historians, political scientists, and the causes of the First World War,” in *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*, eds. Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

40 Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds. *The Next Great War?: The Roots of WWI and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).

41 Andreas Gestrich and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, eds. *Bid for World Power?: New Research on the Outbreak of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Annika Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of WWI,” *Central European History*, Vol. 48 No. 4 (2015), pp. 541-564; James Joll, “The 1914 Debate Continues: Fritz Fischer and his Critics,” in *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, ed. H. W. Koch (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1972), pp. 30-45; John A. Vasquez, “The First World War and International Relations Theory: A Review of Books on the 100th Anniversary,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 16, No.4 (2014), pp. 623-644; John C. G. Röhl, “Goodbye to all that (again)? The Fischer thesis, the new revisionism and the meaning of the First World War,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (2015) 153–166; Samuel R. Williamson, “July 1914 Revisited and Revised: The Erosion of the German Paradigm,” in *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*, eds. Jack Levy and John Vasquez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Thomas G. Otte, “‘Outcast From History’: The Fischer Controversy and British Historiography,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 376-39.

First, the “primacy of domestic politics” school claims that the internal dynamics within the German state were the driving force behind the war.⁴² Fischer, the main proponent of this thesis, contends that German leaders caused foreign crises and exploited the fear of external threats to unify the German public and to arrest the rise of the Social Democrats. In order to safeguard their position in the threatened domestic status quo, German ruling elites orchestrated a premeditated plan for territorial aggrandizement and manipulated the July Crisis for launching a preventive war against France and Russia.

Second, several authors concur with the “Fischer thesis” in identifying Germany as the main responsible of the outbreak of WWI, but they stress how it was caused by the structural features of the international system rather than domestic variables. Although these scholars agree in considering German behavior to be driven by security-driven considerations, they disagree on the underlying motive for its decision to launch a preventive war. Mearsheimer stresses that Germany was willing to fight a continental war (a war against France and Russia) and even to risk a world war (a conflict that would also include Great Britain) for achieving hegemony in Europe.⁴³ Copeland claims that German foreign policy was driven by the fear over Russia's rise and that preventive war was a measure of last resort to arrest its deep, inevitable decline.⁴⁴

Third, some historians challenge the “primacy of domestic politics” school and stress the impact of the structure of the international system but, differently from the previous explanation,

42 Several arguments within this school of thought have been advanced, from the role of economic interests to the impact of German militarism. Eckart Kehr, “Anglophobia and Weltpolitik,” in *Economic Interest, Militarism and Foreign Policy: Essays on German History*, ed. Gordon A. Craig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 22-49; Fischer, *Germany's Aims*; Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975); Fritz Fischer, *World Power or Decline* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974); Immanuel Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1966), pp. 75-91; Jack Snyder, “Civil-Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984,” *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1984), pp. 108-46; John C. G. Röhl, ed., *From Bismarck to Hitler: the problem of continuity in German history* (London: Longman, 1970).

43 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 181-190.

44 Copeland, *Origins*, 56-117.

they do not consider Germany to have planned a continental war.⁴⁵ The war was the result of the failed attempt to break the Triple Entente by exploiting the crisis between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. German decision-makers resorted to a strategy of calculated risk that would present the other great powers with a *fait accompli* by localizing the conflict in the Balkans. The miscalculation over the Russian resolve and the risk of losing its only ally (Austria-Hungary) compelled Germany to stand firm and fight a major war that it tried to avoid. In addition to downplaying the responsibility of Germany, certain scholars emphasize the role played by Russia and Great Britain during the crisis escalation in July 1914.⁴⁶

Finally, the “inadvertent war” thesis contends that WWI was an “accident” that nobody wanted.⁴⁷ States acted for pre-emptive reasons due to the advantage to go on the offensive and to the mobilization mechanisms that interlocked the European great powers. Civilians' lack of understanding of this mechanism provoked the adoption of diplomatic moves that set in motion a wheel that could not be stopped and gave the military control over the ultimate decision to go to war.

These explanations fail to elaborate a comprehensive explanation that explains endemic features (such as the heightened security dilemma between Germany, France, and Russia) and dynamic outcomes such as the outbreak of the July Crisis instead of one of the previous crises,

45 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014); Konrad Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg Calculated Risk, July 1914,” *Central European History*, Vol. 2 (March 1969), 48-76; Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of War of 1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952-57), 577-580; Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War, After Sarajevo, Vol. II, Vol. 2* (New York: The Free Press, The Macmillan Co., 1966).

46 John F. V. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983); Paul W. Schroeder, “WWI as Galloping Gertie: A Reply to Joachim Remak,” in *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, ed. H. W. Koch (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1972), 101-127; McMeekin, *Russian Origins*.

47 Albertini, *Origins*, 479-483; David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); L. C. F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1970); Thomas G. Otte, *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

like the Russo-Japanese War or the Balkan Wars. Existing theories are flawed because the “factor of geography is one that not only Fischer but also his critics miss.”⁴⁸ The German two-front war problem is often mentioned as an important factor but scholars fail to understand how and why it caused this major war, how encirclement really works.⁴⁹

I argue that WWI was caused by the attempts of Germany (encircled great power) to “escape the deadly embrace” of France and Russia (surrounding great powers). Germany's main strategy to eliminate its two-front war problem was to prevent the creation of the Franco-Russian alliance and, after it was formed, to provoke its split through the use of coercive diplomacy. The key factor in altering the German willingness to risk a two-front war was the Russian decision of ramping up the construction of strategic railroads in Poland after the end of the Balkan Wars (August 1913), which reduced its time for mobilization from weeks to few days (actualized encirclement). The shift in the Russian ability to move its troops to the German eastern border explains the decision to initiate and escalate the July Crisis. The German declaration of war against Russia led to a cascade of military interventions by the other European great powers on the basis of the rival-based network of alliances.

Step 1: Double Security Dilemma

Since its unification in 1871, Germany had to face the possibility of a two-front war (Figure

48 H. W. Koch, “Introduction,” in *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, ed. H. W. Koch (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1972), 11.

49 The German two-front war problem is mentioned in almost all relevant accounts of the origins of World War I. The following is just a small selection of the most relevant works that discuss the role of this variable. Copeland, *Origins*, 34; Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967), 47; Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Shuster Paperbacks, 1994), 205-210; John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I* (Philadelphia: Critical Periods of History, 1965), 111-140; Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), 13; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 209; Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin Press, 1998), 68; Snyder, *Myths*, p. 68.

2). In one scholar's phrase, “modern Germany was born encircled”.⁵⁰

Figure 2: Latent Encirclement of Germany



SOURCE: R. H. Labberton, *New Historical Atlas and General History* (New York, NY: Townsend MacCoun, 1886), Plate LIII.

From 1871 to 1914 all German rulers were obsessed by the Franco-Russian encirclement and their foreign policy was centered around the goal of preventing them from acquiring the operational ability to launch a simultaneous invasion. As Moltke the Elder affirmed straight after

⁵⁰ David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order, 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 206.

the end of the Franco-Prussian War: “the most dangerous challenge to the continued existence of the new German Reich would be a simultaneous war against Russia and France.”⁵¹

Since Germany could not extend their territories to create a buffer zone without triggering a two-front war,⁵² the main option to prevent actualized encirclement was to create a network of alliances that would hinder France and Russia from concentrating their forces against Germany by keeping them occupied on one front. The mastermind of this strategy was Chancellor Bismarck (1871-1890): “the idea of coalitions gave me nightmares. We had waged victorious wars against two of the European Great Powers; everything depended on inducing at least one of the two mighty foes whom we had beaten in the field to renounce the anticipated design of uniting with the other in a war of revenge”.⁵³

The cornerstone of Bismarck's foreign policy relied on the ability to diplomatically isolate France and unite Russia and Austria-Hungary in an alliance with Germany in the League of the Three Emperors.⁵⁴ However, this policy was short-lived because the weakening of the Ottoman Empire exacerbated the conflict of interests of European powers over the “Eastern Question”⁵⁵ and put under serious strain the relations with Russia. The failure of maintaining Austria-Hungary and Russia within the same league compelled Bismarck to create a new system of

51 Gerhard P. Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 51.

52 German statesmen were aware of the exceptional geographical situation of being “surrounded by three great Empires with armies as large as our own, any two of whom might coalesce against us”. Confidential letter of Chancellor Bismarck to the British State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Clarendon, in February 1870. Lord Newton, *Lord Lyons, A Record of British Diplomacy Vol. I* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1913), 254.

53 Otto von Bismarck, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman, Volume 2* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 255.

54 The alliance, which lasted between 1873 and 1878, consisted in mutual aid to a league member if attacked on a member and benign neutrality if one of the three states was involved in a conflict with a non-member state. Although the alliance was renewed in 1881 and lasted until 1887, Bismarck found increasing difficulty in balancing the interests of Russia and Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. W. N. Medlicott, “Bismarck and the Three Emperors' Alliance, 1881–87,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 27 (1945), 61-83.

55 The “Eastern Question” was a political and military competition among European great powers regarding the future of the Ottoman Empire and the control of the Straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Alexander Lyon Macfie, *The Eastern Question 1774-1923* (London: Routledge, 1996).

separate bilateral alliances with Austria-Hungary and Russia with secret protocols that would reassure them against each other.⁵⁶

Bismarck's diplomatic ability could only postpone rather than eliminating the endemic conflict of interests of Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Great Britain. The German refusal to prolong the Reinsurance Treaty and the signs that Great Britain intended to join an alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary pushed Russia towards France.⁵⁷ The Franco-Russian military convention prescribed coordination of their mobilizations in order to launch a two-front war against Germany, so that France would support Russia in case of an attack by Germany or Austria-Hungary and that the Russians. In Alexander III's words, “[we] must immediately hurl ourselves upon the Germans”⁵⁸ in case of an attack by Germany or Italy.

The stipulation of the Franco-Russian alliance marked the end of Bismarck's attempts to prevent the formation of the “nightmare of coalitions”. Germany increasingly resorted to coercive diplomacy to split this alliance and to prevent France and Russia from acquiring the operational capability to launch a simultaneous attack.⁵⁹ Among the several crises that Kaiser Wilhelm tried to exploit to isolate France,⁶⁰ it is worth emphasizing his attempts to foster a rapprochement with Russia during the Russo-Japanese War (February 1904 – September 1905).⁶¹ Exploiting the French unwillingness to intervene on the side of Russia for the possibility of

56 The collapse of the League of the Three Emperors led to the stipulation of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (1887) and of the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary (1879).

57 The Treaty of the Franco-Russian alliance was signed secretly in 1892 and publicly revealed in 1894. Keiger, *France*, pp. 11-13; Xu Qiyu, *Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy, and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871-1914* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 103-105; William L. Langer, *The Franco-Russian Alliance, 1890-1894* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929).

58 William L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 27.

59 Qiyu, *Fragile Rise*, 182-189.

60 *Ibid.*, 175.

61 David Walter, *The short victorious war: The Russo-Japanese Conflict, 1904-5* (New York City: Harper & Row, 1974).

undermining the relations with Great Britain,⁶² Kaiser Wilhelm tried to split the Franco-Russian alliance by convincing Tsar Nicholas to sign the secret treaty of Björkö (24 July, 1905). The agreement, which gave mutual defensive support in case Russia or Germany were attacked by another European great power,⁶³ was received with jubilation by the Kaiser:

“My eyes were brimming with tears of happiness [...]. So the morning of 24 July 1905 at Björkö has become a turning-point in the history of Europe, thanks to the grace of God; and a great relief for my dear fatherland, which at last be freed from the *dreadful clutch of the Gallo-Russian pincers*.”⁶⁴

Although Wilhelm's dream would not last long because the agreement was not ratified by the Russian government as it would have undermined the alliance with France, this episode shows the underlying motivation behind German foreign policy in the years that preceded the July Crisis: splitting the Franco-Russian alliance. On the other hand, the German attempts to break its encirclement had the opposite effect of drawing France, Russian, and Great Britain together. With the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907,⁶⁵ Germany was surrounded by hostile great powers. Europe was divided in two opposite rival-based systems of alliance and Germany could only resort to increasingly aggressive measures to eliminate its two-front war problem:

62 Great Britain stipulated an alliance with Japan (January 1902).

63 Roderick R. Mclean, “Dreams of a German Europe: Wilhelm II and the Treaty of Björkö of 1905,” in *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany*, eds. Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 119-142; Röhl, *Abyss*, pp. 354-380; Sidney B. Fay, “The Kaiser's Secret Negotiations with the Tsar, 1904-1905,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (October 1918), 48-72.

64 Röhl, *Abyss*, p. 270 (emphasis added).

65 *Ibid.*, 437-463.

“A policy aiming at the *encirclement* of Germany and seeking to form a ring of Powers in order *to isolate and paralyze it* would be disastrous for the peace of Europe. The forming of such a ring would not be possible without exerting some pressure. Pressure provokes counter-pressure. And out of pressure and counter-pressure finally explosions may arise.”⁶⁶

Step 2: War Initiation

If Germany was encircled since 1871, why did it declare war against Russia at the end of the July 1914? I argue that Germany decided to initiate a conflict when France and Russia became capable of concentrating their forces in a two-front war (actualized encirclement). This scenario started to emerge with the Russian decision to ramp up the construction of strategic railroads in Poland at the end of the Balkan Wars (August 1913) and for the progressive decline of Austria-Hungary, which would have prevented it from diverting Russian forces from a potential invasion of the eastern German border.

France had urged Russia to construct strategic railroads since the stipulation of their alliance and it often tried to link its financial support to the reduction of the time for Russian general mobilization.⁶⁷ However, Russia had been incapable or unwilling to meet the French demands: on the one hand, the debacle in the Russo-Japanese War showed the military backwardness of its military apparatus and it prevented it to pose a significant threat to either Germany or Austria-

66 Chancellor von Bülow, speech in the Reichstag (November 4, 1906). In Immanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy 1871-1914, Volume IX* (London: Routledge, 1976), 121 (emphasis added).

67 D. N. Collins, “The Franco-Russian Alliance and Russian Railways, 1891-1914,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1973), 777-788; David A. Rich, *The Tsar’s Colonels: Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 78-103.

Hungary until 1912; on the other hand, Russia was reluctant to construct strategic railroads in Poland for fear that Germany could take control of them and attack Moscow.

The diplomatic defeats in the Balkan Wars (October 1912 – July 1913) led to a re-evaluation of the necessity to posing a credible threat of invasion of eastern Germany. The closing window of opportunity to seize the Turkish Straits shaped the Russian foreign policy in the months that preceded the July Crisis.⁶⁸ In a secret meeting of civil and military leaders (February 21, 1914), Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov considered that “a favourable moment was approaching for settling with Austria-Hungary” and for taking control the Straits at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. The French diplomat Paléologue even reported that, in case of death of the Austrian Emperor, influential figures of the Russian Council of Ministers confirmed that “we would be obliged to annex Galicia. Our minister of war General Sukhomlinov, explained to me just the other day that the possession of Galicia is indispensable to the security of our frontier.”⁶⁹

The shift in the Russian ability to move its troops to the German eastern border explains the decision to initiate and escalate the July Crisis: not the fear of a future shift in relative power but the immediate concern of a quick Russian general mobilization (days instead of weeks⁷⁰) and the ensuing ability to launch a simultaneous two-front war with France. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg recognized the importance of this operational power shift:

68 David M. Keithly, “Did Russia also Have War Aims in 1914?,” *East European Quarterly*, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (June 1987), 137-145.

69 Extending the control over Austro-Hungarian Galicia would have increased the Russian ability to protect the weak Polish flank against a German attack. Paléologue to Doumergue, 3 May 1914. In McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 22.

70 The conventional wisdom wrongly refers to six weeks as the time for Russian mobilization against Germany. However, this was based on Schlieffen's calculations in 1905. The Russian General Staff estimated that Russian armies was lagging 13 days behind Germany in April 1914. Indeed, Russian armies launched a rapid attack on the eastern German border on August 14. Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets: Bayonets Before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 252.

“Anglo-Russian negotiations for a naval agreement and a landing in Pomerania as the last link in a chain. [...] Russia's quickly growing military might. *After the completion of their strategic railroads in Poland our position [will be] untenable.* [...] [Austria] increasingly undermined from north and south-east, at any rate incapable of going to war for German interests as our ally. [...] The Entente knows that we are, therefore, completely, paralyzed.”⁷¹

It is in this dreadful situation that German officials adopted an increasingly aggressive policy in the Balkans to split the Franco-Russian alliance and “escape their deadly embrace”. Kaiser Wilhelm and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg referred to the necessity of dealing with the Serbian threat to Austria-Hungary, which would have compelled to mass its troops on its Southern border and give Russia “free hand” to concentrate its forces against Germany. This strategy of coercive diplomacy entailed that Germany would have supported Austria-Hungary against Serbia without risking a continental war, as it previously did in previous crises in the Balkans. Therefore, the localization of the Austro-Serbian conflict aimed at arresting the expansion of Russian influence in Balkan Peninsula as well splitting the Triple Entente. Thus, the famous “blank check” to Austria-Hungary (July 5, 1914) was issued with the goal of presenting the other European great powers with a *fait accompli*, since it was considered unlikely that Russia would intervene on the side of Serbia without receiving the support of France.

This strategy continued to be implemented throughout all the July Crisis, even when German officials started to receive news that Russia adopted pre-mobilization measures (July 24-

⁷¹ Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, July 7, 1914. In Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War,” 57 (emphasis added).

26).⁷² For instance, Bethmann-Hollweg advocated restraint to the Emperor few days before the outbreak of WWI (July 26): “as long as Russia commits no hostile act, I believe that our attitude, which aims at localization, must also remain a calm one.”⁷³ Moreover, the German Chancellor was convinced that a clear support of Austria-Hungary against Serbia would have broken the alliance between the surrounding great powers: “if we succeed not only in keeping France itself quiet, but also in having it plead for peace in Petersburg, this turn of events will weaken the Franco-Russian alliance.”⁷⁴

The Russian order of partial mobilization represented a fundamental step in the escalation of the July Crisis, because it crushed the German hopes of keeping the conflict localized.⁷⁵ Undermining the claim that Germany wanted a continental war, the news of the Russian partial mobilization led to a softening of German foreign policy. In a last-minute attempt to prevent the escalation of the crisis Bethmann-Hollweg, who had previously rejected a peaceful settlement, desperately tried to stop the Austrian ally by warning that Germany would not let itself “to be dragged by Vienna, wantonly and without regard to our advice, into a world conflagration.”⁷⁶

The German efforts to prevent a continental war were thwarted by the Russian decision to order general mobilization (July 30). Mediation for localizing the Austro-Serbian conflict was no longer possible, as the implementation of the Schlieffen Plan required Germany to mobilize quickly before Russia and France could concentrate their forces in a simultaneous attack. As

72 The realization that the window of opportunity to localize the Austro-Serbian conflict was closing accelerated the plan to present the Triple Entente with a *fait accompli*, but it did not lead to an incentive to escalate the crisis into a continental war. “Here every delay in the beginning of the military operations is seen as signifying danger that other powers might interfere. We are urgently advised to proceed without delay and to place the world before a *fait accompli*.” In Mombauer, *Origins*, 351.

73 Bethmann-Hollweg to Wilhelm II, July 26, 1914. In International Coalition, *Documents of the American Association for International Conciliation, 1920* (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 230.

74 Bethmann-Hollweg, July 15, 1914. In Jarausch, “The Illusion of Limited War,” 62.

75 Marc Trachtenberg, “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter 1990-1991), 130-137.

76 Bethmann-Hollweg, July 30, 1914. *Ibid.*, 134.

Bethmann-Hollweg affirmed a week before the Russian order of general mobilization, “we could hardly sit and talk any longer, because we have to strike immediately in order to have any chance of winning at all.”⁷⁷

In order not to leave Austria-Hungary unsupported in a war against Russia and to prevent its surrounding great powers from concentrating their forces in a simultaneous two-front war, Germany issued a 12-hour ultimatum to Russia for reversing its general mobilization (July 31) and, when that expired, it declared war against Russia (August 1). Kaiser Wilhelm clearly identified the closing of the ring of encirclement by the Triple Entente as the reason for initiating war against Russia:

“For that is clear to me beyond all doubt: England, Russia and France have agreed among themselves [...] to take the Austro-Serbian conflict for an excuse for waging a war of extermination against us. [...] either we are shamefully to betray our allies, sacrifice them to Russia – thereby breaking up the Triple Alliance, or we are to be attacked in common by of the Triple Entente for our fidelity to our allies and punished, whereby they will satisfy their jealousy by joining in totally ruining us. That is the real naked situation in nuce [...]. So the famous 'encirclement' of Germany has finally become a complete fact, despite every effort of our politicians and diplomat to prevent it”.⁷⁸

Step 3: War Contagion

⁷⁷ Jaraus, “The Illusion of Limited War,” 63.

⁷⁸ Mombauer, *Origins*, 457.

The crystallization of the European system into two opposite blocs – the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Great Britain) – ensured that a conflict that involved one of these great powers would inevitably propagate to the whole region: if “two Great Powers were to go to war, no one of the others could be sure of not being drawn into it”.⁷⁹ The rival-based network of alliances that formed during the double security dilemma connected the separate antagonisms among great powers in one unified zero-sum game: France supported Russia to contain their mutual immediate rival (Germany); Great Britain intervened on the side of France and Russia for opposing Germany (immediate rival); Austria-Hungary joined Germany for countering Russia (immediate rival);

The escalation of the Serbian-Austrian crisis put France in the dilemma of supporting Russia and being dragged into a European conflagration or of losing its ally and freeing Germany of the threat to its rear. The Franco-Russian alliance had been put under strain in several crises and it showed alarming signs of irrevocable damage: on the one hand, France had failed to support Russia during its war against Japan (1904-1905), the Balkan Crisis (1908-1909), and the First Balkan War (1912-1913); on the other hand, Russia showed signs of potential rapprochement with Germany (the secret treaty of Björkö, 1905) and it did not back up France during the Second Moroccan Crisis (1911). This spiral of defections risked to break the alliance and to leave the two great powers isolated against their common immediate rival, Germany.

In order to prevent the *loss of a great-power ally by defection*, in the months that preceded the war President Poincaré tightened the ties with Russia by increasing the coordination of their mobilizations and by consulting each other during crises. It is in light of this new strengthened

⁷⁹ Prince Lichnowsky, November 21, 1912. E. T. S. Dugdale, *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914 Volume IV* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1928), 145.

relationship that France gave a “blank check” to Russia during the July Crisis and stood by its ally after the German declaration of war.⁸⁰ As President Poincaré affirmed on the days that preceded the French intervention in the war: “not to break up an alliance on which French policy has been based for a quarter of a century and the break-up of which would leave us in isolation at the mercy of our rivals”.⁸¹

The official decision for the British intervention in WWI was the German invasion of Belgium, the neutrality of which was guaranteed by the Treaty of London (1839). Although this violation was the immediate cause, Great Britain entered into the conflict for preserving its French ally: the main concern was the *loss of a great-power ally by military defeat*. Had Germany controlled the territories on the other side of the English Channel and forced France into a settlement after marching into Paris, Great Britain would have been alone in resisting a German amphibious assault.

The British government clearly stated that it would not stand aside in a war between Germany and France, a commitment that was reiterated by prominent officials since the First Balkan War. As Secretary of State Grey stressed in December 1912: if “the position of France as a power” was threatened, Great Britain would not stay on the sidelines.⁸² Moreover, in stark difference with their uncertainty over the commitment to Russia,⁸³ the inevitability of British

80 Unfortunately, we do not possess documents on the French visit in San Petersburg (20-23 July). Nonetheless, the increase of military preparations and the order of partial mobilization in the days that followed the visit would have probably not have occurred if President Poincaré had not guaranteed French support over the crisis in the Balkans. Marc Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis, 1914: A Review Article,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, No. 3, December 1, 2010; Troy R. E. Paddock, *Contesting the Origins of the First World War: An Historiographical Argument* (London: Routledge, 2019).

81 J. F. V. Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

82 Gustav Schmidt, “Contradictory postures and conflicting objectives; the July Crisis,” in, *Escape into War?: The foreign policy of imperial Germany*, ed. Gregor Schollgen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 139.

83 The vagueness of the British military intervention in the east is well exemplified by the erroneous telegram of August 1, which temporarily gave Kaiser Wilhelm the impression that Great Britain would not intervene if Germany did not declare war against France. Dugdale, *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914 Volume IV*, 126.

intervention in a war that involved France was clearly understood by German officials: “England would therefore under no circumstances allow France to be defeated [...]. Should thus Germany be embroiled in the conflict by Austria, and thus end up at war with France, then current would be created in England which no government could resist”.⁸⁴

The Austrian decisions to initiate the July crisis to declare war against Serbia was driven by the fear that Russia would *annex territory* along its borders.⁸⁵ Since the diplomatic victory with the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (1908-1909), Austria-Hungary was alarmed by the Russian schemes to undermine its position in the Balkans. In particular, the strengthening of the ties with Serbia was particularly problematic because it fomented the Slavs within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Furthermore, in the months that preceded the war Austria-Hungary received numerous reports regarding the Russian conviction that the favorable time to settle its disputes in the Balkans was approaching. Austrian leaders were worried that the Russian expansionism in the Balkans could even lead to the “encirclement” of Austria-Hungary:⁸⁶ “the general international situation as it has developed over the years increasingly pushes the Monarchy into the most exposed position. It cannot be too much longer before it will be so surrounded that its enemies will feel themselves downright challenged to attack it”.⁸⁷

Assessment of Hegemonic Theories of WWI

This analysis of the origins of WWI provides ample support for my argument that the latent encirclement of Germany triggered a double security dilemma with France and Russia, that the

84 Prince Lichnowsky to Bethmann-Hollweg, December 3, 1912. Mombauer, *Origins*, p. 84.

85 Günter Bischof, Ferdinand Karlhofer, and Samuel R. Williamson, *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of WWI* (New Orleans: University of New Orleans Press, 2014).

86 Schoroeder, “WWI as Galloping Gertie,” 101-127.

87 Berthold Molden's memorandum, July 6. Mombauer, *Origins*, p. 198.

Russian construction of strategic railroads increased the operational ability of the surrounding great powers (actualized encirclement) and led to the German attempt to break the Franco-Russian alliance in the July Crisis, and that the other European great powers were dragged into this dyad conflict for preventing their respective immediate rival from increasing its invasion ability.

These findings undermine hegemonic theories of WWI, according to which Germany manipulated the July Crisis with the goal of provoking a continental war before Russia would become too powerful.⁸⁸ The decision of launching a preventive war was reached during the First Balkan War but postponed to 1914, when Germany reached the peak of its power and could quickly defeat France before Russia could mobilize its armies. I identify several major anomalies of hegemonic theories of WWI.

First, this argument is based on the presumed connection between the “War Council” of 8 December 1912 and the *Septemberprogramm* and on the ability to implement the Schlieffen Plan. However, the war council was deemed as inconclusive⁸⁹, Germany failed to prepare economically and militarily for a continental war,⁹⁰ and there was a striking lack of coordination with Austria-Hungary.⁹¹ Moreover, the *Septemberprogramm* did not detail any premeditated

88 Scholars disagree on the mechanism that led to the German decision to launch a preventive war. I argue that Germany did not initiate war for either achieving or preserving hegemony (Mearsheimer's and Copeland's theories, respectively) or because of domestic politics (Fischer's thesis).

89 In his account of the meeting, Admiral von Müller remarked that “the result amounted to almost 0.” Mombauer, *Origins*, p. 86.

90 General von Moltke complained about the lack of sufficient funding in 1913. Nial Ferguson, “Germany and the Origins of the First World War,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sep., 1992), 742-752; Ulrich Trumpener, “War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914,” *Central European History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Mar., 1976), 83-85.

91 Only when war became imminent, Germany asked Austria-Hungary to concentrate its forces against Russia instead of attacking Serbia, but its ally refused. This lack of coordination is even more remarkable if compared with the thorough military connection between Russia and France since the First Balkan War. Norman Stone, “Moltke and Conrad: Relations between the Austro-Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909-1914,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1966), 201-228.

program for hegemony but, rather, it shows that Germany entered into the war for breaking the Franco-Russian encirclement.⁹² Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg planned to create two buffer zones on the two German borders by making Belgium and Russian Poland two “vassal states” to guarantee the “security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time”. Additional support to the underlying limited goal of creating a buffer zone that would reduce if not eliminating the two-front war problem was the conclusion of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia.⁹³ The agreement entailed the extension of German sphere of influence in the Baltic States, which were considered important for creating a buffer zone that would protect east Prussia from Russian invasion.

Second, hegemonic theories do not identify a compelling mechanism of escalation. Static explanations, such as Mearsheimer's offensive realism, cannot explain the reason why Germany did not take advantage of the military weakness of Russia between 1905 and 1912 and launched an attack against France. Copeland's explanation is not dynamic enough, as gradual power shifts in the future cannot explain the sense of urgency of German leaders during the July Crisis. My theory identifies a truly dynamic factor – the Russian construction of strategic railroads in Poland – as the catalyst for war initiation.

The previous crises in the Balkans show stark similarities with the dynamics of the July Crisis, from the German “blank check” to the partial mobilization of Russia and Austria-Hungary. The key difference was the increase of the invasion ability of Russia, which had reduced significantly the time for mobilizing its troops on the eastern German border (days, not weeks). This implied that the Russian order of partial mobilization during the July Crisis

92 Wayne C. Thompson, “The September Program: Reflections on the Evidence,” *Central European History*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Dec., 1978), 348-354.

93 On the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918), see Borislav Chernev, *Twilight of Empire: The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917–1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

hindered de-escalation, as Germany was compelled to act quickly to prevent actualized encirclement, that is, a two-front war against France and Russia.

Third, German officials were not convinced of the feasibility of achieving a quick victory against France but, rather, considered a protracted war to be inevitable.⁹⁴ The difficulties of the Schlieffen Plan were clearly understood by General von Moltke since he assumed the role of Chief of General Staff: even a war with France alone “cannot be won in one decisive battle but will turn into a long and tedious struggle with a country that will not give up before the strength of its entire people has been broken. Our own people too will be utterly exhausted, even if we should be victorious.”⁹⁵

The concerns over the possibility of carrying out the Schlieffen Plan were based on the insufficient military power of German armed forces.⁹⁶ In July 1914 German military power was not sufficient to be considered near-preponderant and for attempting to dominate the system; quite the contrary, the European system should be considered balanced in 1914.⁹⁷ This argument is not only proved by the comparison of material capabilities of great powers, but also by the assessment of both German leaders. Even the most belligerent official, General von Moltke, believed in May 1914 that “the situation among our potential opponents has shifted in a very significant way to our disadvantage. [...] We must not close our eyes to these facts which are so unfavourable to us!”, as “we do not have superiority over the French”,⁹⁸ let alone the

94 Keir A. Lieber., “The New History of WWI and What It Means for International Relations Theory,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), 167-183.

95 Stig Förster, “Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871-1914,” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914*, eds. Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 363-364.

96 Kenneth Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War: The Myth of German Military Superiority* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999), 39-47.

97 John F. V. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983), 79; William C. Wohlforth, “The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance,” *World Politics*, Vol. 39. No. 3 (Apr. 1987), 360-363.

98 Mombauer, *Origins*, 138-139.

combination of France and Russia.

Fourth, the lack of military preparedness and of conviction over the prospects of victory in 1914 undermines the claim that Germany planned a continental war at the peak of its relative power in relation to the surrounding great powers; quite the contrary, it supports my argument that the Kaiser decided to escalate the July Crisis as a measure of last resort. The fact that Germany did not exploit its relative military advantage to bid for hegemony is clear by the decision not to take advantage of Russian military weakness from the Russo-Japanese War up to the First Balkan War. Germany considered that “from a military point of view the present [1908] would be the best moment to settle accounts with the Russians”⁹⁹ but, instead of taking advantage of the Russian complete inability “to fight even the Turks”¹⁰⁰, it refused to risk a two-front war by launching a preventive attack against one of the surrounding states.

Lastly, the behavior of the other great powers also undermines the claim that Germany was preponderant and that in 1914 the time for preventive war was ripe. Both surrounding great powers were willing to go to war and considered the July Crisis to be a favorable moment. After the First Balkan Crisis French generals were “in favour of a war now as being a good opportunity, France [and] Russia being ready [and] Austria in a state of confusion.”¹⁰¹ In January 1914, during a meeting of the Russian Council of Ministers, War Minister Sukhomlinov affirmed categorically that “Russia was perfectly prepared for a duel with Germany, not to speak of one

99 Röhl, *Abyss*, p. 710.

100 Count von Pourtalès, in St. Petersburg, to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, June 16, 1910. E. T. S. Dugdale, Dugdale E. T. S., *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914 Volume III: The Growing Antagonism, 1898-1910* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1928), 393.

101 Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy,” 9. The military already advocated for war during the First Balkan War, fearing that France would not receive the Russian support in a war between Germany and France, but the French government refused to escalate the crisis (February 24, 1913): “soldiers are of the opinion that it would be far better for France if a conflict were not too long postponed. Their reasons are that if it would come now it would be in consequence of the Balkan difficulties, and therefore they would be able to secure the wholehearted support of Russia. [...] They impressed upon Wilson that Russia was now exceedingly strong [...]. Russia was now well able to look after herself, and might be inclined to take a line of her own.” Mombauer, *Origins*, p. 97.

with Austria.”¹⁰² During the July Crisis French General Joffre was even confident that France would win a quick and certain victory against Germany.¹⁰³

Conclusion

In this article I elaborate a new theory on the origins of major wars that stresses the fundamental importance of encirclement and the intervening factor of the invasion ability of the immediate rival. The presence of one or two great powers at two distinct borders creates a two-front war problem for the encircled great power, which initiates a war against the surrounding great powers for preventing them from acquiring the operational ability to launch a simultaneous attack (actualized encirclement). The other great powers in the region are dragged into the conflict because of the network of rival-based alliances with the goal of preventing their respective immediate rival from increasing its invasion ability. I explored my argument in the outbreak of WWI, which was caused by the encirclement of Germany and by the increase of France and Russia to launch a two-front war because of the construction of strategic railroads in Poland.

The findings of this article make two main theoretical contributions. First, my theory implies that the encircled great power triggers a major war for the limited aim of eliminating its two-front war problem rather than the absolute goal of achieving or preserving hegemony. Second, I provide a novel explanation on the causes of WWI that identify the key distinction that compelled Germany to initiate war in 1914 instead of the previous crises in the Balkans: the Russian construction of railroads in Poland enabled it to quickly mobilized troops on the German

102 McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 32.

103 Kieger, *France*, 125-128.

eastern border (general mobilization) and to implement a two-front war strategy with France (actualized encirclement).

My theory has important implications for the prospects of future major wars. There are no great powers that face a two-front war problem at the moment, but I anticipate that in the long term the Asia-Pacific region will likely be characterized by the emergence of a new encircled great power: China. I consider the rise of India to great-power status, in combination with Russia, it will create a two-front war problem for China.

The concept of strategic encirclement is embedded in Chinese culture. For instance, *wei qi* is an ancient board game that is centered around the goal of preventing your adversary to surround – *encircle* – your pieces.¹⁰⁴ During the Cold War Mao became increasingly worried that the Soviet Union would project its power in the southern border of China during the Vietnam War. As Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai remarked noted in April 1968: “for a long time the USA has been half-encircling China. Now the Soviet Union is also encircling China. The circle is getting complete, except [the part of] Vietnam.”¹⁰⁵ In turn, the rapprochement with the United States in the 1970s and the war with Vietnam (Sino-Vietnamese War, 1979) stemmed from the Chinese fear of encirclement.¹⁰⁶

Although the current situation is not yet characterized by encirclement, but we can already observe an intensification of the Sino-Indian rivalry.¹⁰⁷ When India emerges as a new great

104 David Lai, “China's Strategic Moves and Counter-Moves,” *Parameters*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter 2014/2015), 11-25.

105 Odd A. Westad, *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977* (Washington D.C.: Cold War International History Project, 1998), 130.

106 Nicholas Khoo, “Breaking the Ring of Encirclement: The Sino-Soviet Rift and Chinese Policy toward Vietnam, 1964–1968,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (Winter 2010), 3–42.

107 Davis Scott, “The Great Power ‘Great Game’ between India and China: ‘The Logic of Geography’,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2008), 1-26; John W. Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, “China's Anti-encirclement Struggle,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2010), 238-261; Lyle J. Goldstein, “China's Biggest Fear: U.S.-Indian Encirclement,” *The National Interest*, February 11, 2015; Sergio Maricola, “The Indo-Pacific 'Encirclement': How is China Reacting?,” *ISPI*, June 4, 2018; Zella Carroll, *Pakistan-China: Strategic Encirclement of India's*

power, China will face a two-front war problem. The evolution of the double security dilemma will result in a strengthening of the relations between the two surrounding great powers (India and Russia) against China. The presence of ongoing territorial disputes between India and China is a powder keg that will risk to explode when India and Russia can concentrate their forces in a simultaneous attack against China. This situation will not occur in the short term, given that actualized encirclement will require Pakistan to become incapable of acting as a counterweight to India and NATO expansion to stop posing a threat to the Russian western border. However, the seeds of discord have been sowed and a potential major war looms on the horizon.

Although one should be careful of drawing analogies with the past, World War I could give us important insights of what to expect. As the German attempts to escape the Franco-Russian deadly embrace led to the outbreak of World War I, “China’s efforts to enhance its influence as a rising power in an assertive way will backfire and result in an unintended encirclement of China by her neighbors. The irony is that this ‘security dilemma’ was exactly what happened in Europe when Kaiser Wilhelm II, confident of rising power of Germany, began to practice a muscular diplomacy in 1890.”¹⁰⁸

Core Interests (New Delhi: Alpha Editions, 2018).

108 Yoon Young-kwan, “Only A Grand Compromise Between U.S. And China Can Reduce East Asian Tensions,” *New Perspective Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 49-51.