

Inadvertent War: Rare, yet Real

Written by Glenn Scheideler

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GLENN SCHEIDELER, MAY 17 2013

Lust for territory, desire for wealth, will to power both relative and absolute: all are possible reasons one state might deliberately engage another in war. But there are also instances when war occurs with a lack of intent, following a crisis. These cases are referred to as inadvertent wars, namely because they transpire despite either side actually wanting war. At face value, the concept sounds counter-intuitive: how can war, which is such a costly course of action to take, arise even though both sides of a crisis would prefer peace? Alexander George, in his theories on crisis management, helped shed light into the dark corner of inadvertent wars to show one possible causal path leading from a crisis. Jack Levy and William Thompson illustrate another potential underlying course in their book *Causes of War*, with their analysis of the security dilemma and ensuing spiral model of war, preemptive/preventative attacks, and other realist security concepts that closely connect. Although the strange phenomena does not appear to be a frequent occurrence, history does point to real possible instances such as World War I and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war to give credence to the theory. Through an analysis of crisis management techniques and of the consequences of the realist anarchy in the political system and the security dilemma, prospective causal paths to inadvertent war can be both demonstrated and backed-up with historical examples, though its prevalence through history appears scarce.

Since political actions and aspirations are often pressed forward and exemplified by the head of a nation, a deeper look into the management techniques of a state leader during a crisis is beneficial to eventually understand how states with a predisposition to peace end up in war. A crisis is one of the first steps to war, so the policy choices made once one develops are crucial to determining how the future unfolds. Alexander George notes that, "The tension between... protection of one's interests and avoidance of measures that could trigger undesired escalation-creates a dilemma that is the basic challenge policy makers engaged in crisis management must try to resolve" (George 1991: 23). Essentially leaders of a state are presented with two parameters between which they need to find a proper equilibrium during a crisis.

George gives policy makers certain guidelines, which he refers to as "requirements", dictating whether a crisis diffuses or escalates in a manner beneficial to the state, as long as the relevant features are followed. In a political sense there are only two: the "limitation of objectives pursued in the crisis, and [the] limitation of means employed on behalf of those objectives" (George 1991: 24). Leaders must curb their ambitions to a point where compromise is possible, while still appealing to the states' interests. They must also be weary of how they go about pushing their objectives; when one pulls out a knife in a brawl, the situation escalates to a higher level than it would have been with just bare knuckles. George alludes to Kennedy's decision to form a blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis as opposed to ordering an air strike to destroy the missiles, as proper understanding of the objective-means approach in order to put the U.S in a better position to come to a peaceful solution. Assuming Kennedy did not want war, had the U.S bombed the missile sites in Cuba, the destructive means to the objective of removing the missiles, it probably would have been perceived as an open signal of hostility and could have led to an inadvertent war.

The Cuban missile crisis is just one instance that demonstrates the power policy limitations hold during crisis management. The case of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war illustrates the mismanagement of objective limitations during a crisis leading to inadvertent war. Janice Stein in her chapter in *The Arab-Israeli War of 1967: Inadvertent War Through Miscalculated Escalation*, notes that Egypt's extended attempts to deter Israel from attacking Syria ended up catching Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in a path dependent downward spiral of policy choices and

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movements that blurred Egypt's intentions, and led to response from Israel in the form of a preemptive attack. Egypt was only brought into the picture because Syria was in a back and forth deterrent conflict with Israel, and publically criticizing Nasser for not stepping in to protect them and other Arab nations. Stein explains that Nasser "faced an aroused domestic public, the taunts of regional adversaries, and pressure from regional allies...[with] his leadership challenged in the Arab world...Nasser was unable to limit his objectives; instead he escalated the stakes for Israel" (George and Stein 1991: 126). With Israel forced to reconsider their future actions after being adequately counter-deterred by Egypt in the short run, military force became inevitable despite both sides having no intention to go to war at the start of the conflict. In a first attempt to limit objectives by telling Syria that their protective services were not applicable in those types of situations, "Egypt attempted to manage the crisis by limiting its commitment to its ally. President Nasser, however, made no explicit attempt to persuade Syria to limit its action" (George and Stein 1991: 129). At this point of the conflict the only crisis in Egypt was that Nasser was being publically embarrassed, and his reputation as a good leader diminishing, so there was no attempt to manage the Syrian crisis. The focus on the wrong objectives dragged Egypt further down the path to war.

Soviet involvement added fuel to the conflict in addition to throwing a veil of uncertainty over the eyes of all the actors. By feeding Egypt clearly false information, they hinted of Israeli intentions to attack Syria in order to push their own set of objectives. Again the limitation of objectives could have prevented an escalation of conflict, but since Nasser felt compelled to regain his former eminence over the Arab nations and the Soviets didn't realize the actual danger of their actions, war occurred. With events already set in motion, and continuous pressure from Jordan, who was stuck in a contradictory mismanagement spiral of their own, Egypt took the next step in attempting to direct the situation by asking for partial removal of the United Nations Emergency Force from the Gaza Strip. Proper utilization of crisis management on Nasser's part was met with failure on the U.N.'s because Secretary-General U Thant did not understand the importance of impeding momentum, an aspect of crisis management deemed crucial by Alexander George. If proper procedures were followed, and the necessary time was given, the situation could have been diffused, but "[t]he secretary-general used none of the available consultative mechanisms to delay [and] instead confronted President Nasser with an immediate and irrevocable choice" (George and Stein 1991: 133).

The request for partial troop removal immediately transformed into a request for complete removal, which, coupled with troop movement into Sinai region, began to exemplify a hostile situation contrary to Egypt's intentions. Israel had no way of knowing what was reality though, and was forced to interpret the situation based upon what it saw unfolding. Uncertainty riddled the crisis, and left Israel with no other option than to make strides to protect itself. Of course the situation had not yet become so dire, and plausible attempts to gain control were still possible, "after Israel mobilized its reserves, its leaders attempted to control escalation and manage the crisis...to reassure Egypt of its limited intentions" (George and Stein 1991: 133). Israel wanted to convey that they had peace on their minds, but at the same time maintain their deterrence credibility by demonstrating that they were capable and ready to fight if it came down to war; essentially they put the ball in Egypt's court. Unfortunately for all, President Nasser succumbed to outside pressure, lust for prestige, uncertainty of Israel's actual intentions, and an overestimation of relative power. Egypt stepped over Israel's line in the sand, and war ensued. At the start of the crisis, neither side wanted, expected, or had any reason to engage in, war with each other; yet, due to poor crisis management from various political leaders and entities involved, an inadvertent war was the result.

While the Arab-Israeli War was filled with instance after instance of political leaders failing to follow Alexander George's guidelines for political actions, there are other underlying characteristics that dictate political movements during crisis management. Leaders are advised to pay close attention to managing both their military and diplomatic operations, which tend to clash during conflict. Many of George's guidelines are relative guiding principles to quell growth of conflict, not necessary conditions, so some can be met and others not, while still avoiding war. In a Clausewitzian manner, George dictates that there must be political control over military features such as, "alerts, deployments, and low-level actions, as well as the selection and timing of military movements" (George 1991:25, Levy Lectures 2012). He stresses on the necessity of military coordination with diplomatic proceedings because the two can diverge quickly when not working in accordance with one another. Dire consequences can result from lack of coordination: imagine political leaders trying to pitch a peaceful diplomatic solution to an adversary, as the military simultaneously bombs them.

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The Arab-Israeli conflict did not feature so much a lack of control over those characteristics, but rather saw a misuse of military and diplomatic tools due to a failure to limit policy objectives. Egypt did not understand that “movements of military forces must be carefully coordinated with diplomatic actions as part of an integrated strategy...[and] diplomatic-military options should be chosen that signal, or are consistent with, a desire to negotiate...[and] should be selected [in a way to] leave the opponent a way out of the crisis...” (George 1991: 25). Egypt’s diplomatic and military coordination was poor, especially considering that Israel was backed into a corner, and was forced to make certain decisions “because of the offensive deployment of Egyptian military forces, which was the result of confusion and poor command and control in the Egyptian General Staff” (George and Stein 1991: 147). Of course there were attempts by Egypt to control the crisis militarily if one takes into account the request for partial UNEF troop removal. The plea would appease all parties involved, but the incompetence of the UN secretary-general warped Egypt’s quality control techniques into crude actions that compelled a war, thus preventing proper crisis management conduct. As stated earlier, the U.N. caused the series of events to plunge further down by not allowing for the possibility of necessary intermission. George acknowledges that “the tempo and momentum of military movements may have to be deliberately slowed down and pauses created to provide enough time for the two sides to exchange diplomatic signals and communications and to give each side adequate time to assess the situation, make decisions, and respond to proposals” (George 1991: 25). Since Secretary-General U Thant completely disregarded this facet of conflict resolution, Egypt and Israel, who were both attempting to act in accordance with George’s requirements, were forced to make decisions based upon faulty assumptions and misperceptions. As various entities including Jordan, Syria, the U.N., and the Soviet Union limited Egypt and Israel’s political, military, and diplomatic objectives, inhibited the two nations’ ability to manage the crisis properly and avoid a war, the case for inadvertent war is further illustrated.

However, crisis management is not the only path to inadvertent war; states taking a realist approach to international politics by making security the dominant priority can find themselves trapped in an out-of-control spiral to unintentional war. Anarchy is a crucial feature of the international system for realists, but it is also a primary cause of the security dilemma that leads to war. Levy and Thompson note that, “international anarchy induces a competition for power driven by the inherent uncertainty about the intentions of others and by the fear that others might engage in predatory behavior” (Levy and Thompson 2010: 29). The environment perceived by actors is one featuring a constant need to be in power in order to assure the clearest sense of security possible in a world of uncertainty. The hostile atmosphere is a breeding ground for the misperceptions, miscommunications, and misunderstandings that lead to inadvertent wars because actors, in trying to protect themselves, end up sending mixed signals to other actors, triggering a downward spiral of decision making. It could be the case that “States may take these actions for purely defensive purposes, but adversary states often perceive these actions as threatening...the result is a tendency toward worst-case analysis in the context of extreme uncertainty...[which] can generate an action-reaction cycle and a conflict spiral that leaves all states worse off and that can sometimes escalate to war” (Levy and Thompson 2010: 30).

This unfortunate path to war is otherwise known as the security dilemma (Jervis 1976: 111). It often leaves everyone worse off because it can arise irrespective of an immediate crisis; rather the security dilemma occurs because one state felt insecure and built its military capacity up. Jervis realizes the tragic implications of the realist system, stating that “states often share a common interest, but the structure of the situation prevents them from bringing about the mutually desired situation” (Jervis 1976: 112). This tendency alludes to inadvertent war stemming from the structure of the international system, instead of just placing the blame on crisis management failure by political leaders. States are almost forced to make decisions in a reactive manner that sometimes results in inadvertent war because the vast uncertainty prevalent in the system severely limits the possibility for certain ‘fog clearing’ objectives to be utilized. Just as outside entities limited Israeli and Egyptian political, military, and diplomatic options in the crisis management path, the anarchic international system itself serves as a limiting agent. The application and implication of both paths seems to point to a possible underlying reason for inadvertent wars: outside forces negatively restrict possible political objectives, and add a dangerous degree of uncertainty, forcing two states with no original inclination for war into fighting.

The case of World War I helps illustrate how the consequences of security dilemma and spiral model lead to an inadvertent war, although admittedly the example only applies to a certain extent, and there is much debate over the

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actual degree of intention. WWI is a complex case to break down because although the war itself was the least preferred option by all the involved states, there were a series of other possible wars in which various actors had interests. Due to both the nature of the international system and failure of crisis management, a world war developed instead. Just as with the prisoner's dilemma, the structure of the game forced actors to make rational choices but still end up in a war that no one wanted (Levy Lecture 2012). The first step in the avalanche of WWI came with the assassination of the Austria-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand. As a result Austria issued an ultimatum against Serbia, which provoked Russia to step in with Serbia, pulled Germany into the conflict, and so on until a full scale world war broke out: the conflict spiral at its finest (Levy Lecture 2012). A relatively subjective event drew the external great powers into a conflict to which they had no connection because they fell victim to the security dilemma as they saw other countries getting involved and feared both a decline in their own relative power and a dwindling sense of security.

In a similar manner to the Arab-Israeli crisis, European countries were forced to make many decisions within a fog of uncertainty, but the fog was created by haphazard foreign policy created to divert attention from domestic issues. In addition to uncertainty leading to misperceptions, states like Germany and Austria, who were pushing for a smaller scale war in order to combat a decline in relative power, ended up inadvertently fulfilling their own fears. Levy and Thompson point out "that German leaders, recognizing the rising power of Russia and the likelihood any war with Russia would invoke the Franco-Russian alliance, and fearing that by 1917 Germany could no longer be confident of winning such a war, acted preventatively to fight before its relative power continued to slide" (Levy and Thompson 2010: 47). Again, similarly to the Arab-Israeli war, states external to the original crisis ended up directly involved, and even harmed by the ordeal because they were trying to serve their own interests.

A possible underlying reason for this is present in what "German scholars investigating the causes of the First World War would call the *Primat der Innenpolitik*, the formation and execution of foreign policy to deal with domestic problems" (Kagan 1995: 69). The nations involved were all dealing with their own internal issues, but, by creating a stir in the international realm, countries were able to avert the attention of the masses from trouble at home. To mirror this tendency Levy, in *Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914*, observes, "Russian leaders also believed that domestic stability and their own political interests required an assertive foreign policy" (Levy 1990: 158). Germany followed a similar thought process – although more due to the fear of declining power. They were under the impression that "a military victory would bolster the German elites' domestic political support, and give them added time to deal with internal crises generated by industrialization and the rise of social democracy" (Levy 1990: 161). Referring back to Egypt, Nasser made many foreign policy decisions based on pressures from internal demands as well. The push to stabilize internally by creating external conflicts points to a reason a crisis would escalate into inadvertent war. Had European states dealt with domestic issues by enacting domestic solutions, a smaller war may have resulted instead of a World War that no one wanted. Considering the plethora of factors present in both the Arab-Israeli war and World War I, in addition to the general process, costs, and controversy of going to war itself, the commonality of inadvertent wars appears to be miniscule.

While a failure to properly manage crises can lead to unintended conflict, it takes more than just one or two actors misperceiving the environment to transform crisis to catastrophe. The same applies for the realist spiral model and security dilemma as well; it is the addition of actors and the consequent uncertainty to the system that leads to war. An inadvertent war would probably not occur in a two state crisis, but rather when external nations decide to interject themselves into a situation, whether to protect an ally, serve their own interests, or prevent a decline in power. The inadvertency also seems to be associated with states that join the conflict late: Israel was in a quarrel with Syria in which Egypt later became reluctantly involved. Similarly, World War I stemmed from conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, which resulted in Germany inadvertently engaging in war with Britain. The structure of the system plays as much of a role in guiding states toward war as the decision-making process of individual leaders. However, leaders are forced to play by the rules of the game, while remaining sensitive to domestic demands as well as to pleas from allied nations. Since war is so complex and costly, most of the time it is not going to be inadvertent, but a few cases do allude to their existence. Misperceptions, mismanagements, and dilemmas all support underlying pathways to unintended wars, but a consistent downward spiral is more so necessary to spur nations along the path than just a singular instance of failure.

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Professor Jack S. Levy, PS324 Causes of War lecture, spring 2012.

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