

Can You Explain Why Internal Revolutions Often Lead to External Conflicts?

Written by James Whitcomb Riley

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JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MAR 18 2008

Internal revolutions often lead to external conflicts between neighboring states within the international system. Revolutions are characterized by the ideology and methods employed by revolutionaries, which have domestic and international implications. Domestically, revolutions cause massive upheavals of the political structures within a state, which affect its relations with neighboring states. On an international level, revolutionaries may actively export their ideology abroad by means of propaganda, by supporting revolutionary movements, or by directly deploying military forces to confront neighboring states. Revolutions threaten the prevailing international order because neighboring states perceive revolutions as a threat to their state's sovereignty, which may prompt non-revolutionary states to intervene. An analysis of internal revolutions like the French Revolution of 1793, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 reveals some of the factors that contribute to why domestic political upheavals lead to international armed conflict.

For the purpose of this analysis, the definitions of the terms mentioned above are essential to explaining why internal revolutions lead to inter-state wars. Revolutions that result in the upheaval of political establishments within a state share general characteristics. As Thomas H. Greene writes:

'It is the almost unanimous opinion of writers on the subject that revolution...means an alteration in the personnel, structure, supporting myth, and functions of government by methods that...involve violence or threat of violence...Revolutionaries, by definition, seek a major alteration in the prevailing distribution of wealth, status, and power.'

Greene goes on to state that revolution is, 'more of a process than event', which helps explain why revolutionary regimes continue to pose a threat to neighboring states that do not wish for the 'process' to spill over into their domain. The idea of exporting revolution suggests a revolutionary regime's active policy of promoting their ideology abroad. Revolutions challenge international norms like ideas of state sovereignty, a concept based on the treaties of Westphalia of 1648. Status quo powers are the prevailing institutions that make up the international system and which seek to maintain international order. The armed intervention by states against revolutionary regimes is referred to as counter-revolution. The definitions of these concepts are crucial to understanding why external conflicts arise from internal revolutions, and help explain the interactions between revolutionary regimes and neighboring states.

The French Revolution of 1793 serves as an example of why internal revolutions lead to external conflict. The French Revolution resulted in the upheaval of the power structures within France and met resistance both internally and externally. Domestically, the abolition of the monarchy and the church's role in the affairs of the state brought on numerous peasant revolts against the revolutionary regime, such as the rebellion at the Vendee. The violent suppression of these revolts was meant to strengthen overall the effects of the Revolution. At the same time, intervention from monarchical regimes at the requests of exiled anti-revolutionary French nobles threatened the success of the Revolution within France. In order to consolidate the Revolution within French borders, and ensure its

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survival from threats from abroad, the new regime focused the populous' attention on the external threats, thereby gaining a nationalistic advantage through the creation of an enemy against which the people could fight.

The initially nationalistic ideology of the revolutionary regime in the long run promoted the spread of revolution internationally. The idea of exporting revolutionary ideology leads to external conflicts with states that do not wish to experience the violent change in their power structure that revolutionaries seek. Neighboring nations fear the possibility of revolution spilling over into their territories, an occurrence which would challenge their authority domestically. The French Revolution undermined the existing international order based on state's sovereignty when it committed its resources to furthering the Revolution's interests abroad. The French Revolution's creed of 'Fraternity, Equality, and Liberty', which justified the toppling of the monarchy and suppression of domestic resistance, when diffused internationally became a policy of 'fraternity and assistance' to those oppressed by monarchies abroad. The potential and potency of this policy led neighboring European states to align against the new French regime. The alliance against France was made up of Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, Spain, and Holland. This counter-revolutionary alliance led to war between France and the rest of Europe. These events, although regarding the French revolution in particular, characterize the nature of internal revolutions that lead to external conflicts, and the fact that national events can have international effects.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 further shows why domestic conflicts become externalized, as neighboring states perceive the internal revolution of another state as a threat to their own sovereignty, interests, and ideals. Culminating in the abdication of the Tsar, the Revolution was spurred by the failures of the Provisional Government, and fueled by the continuous uprisings and revolts by workers, peasants, and soldiers who united under the radical banner of the Bolsheviks. Immediately after coming to power, the Soviet government declared an armistice with Germany, later signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Although the signing officially ended their involvement in the First World War, the revolutionary government was soon after confronted by counter-revolutionary White Armies within Russia, who initially, received support from Japanese, American, British, and French forces. Although this did not immediately escalate into an all-out war with these states, these international interventions did bolster communism within Russia after the White's were defeated, which in turn helped to consolidate the Bolshevik's Revolution and encourage the export of the Revolution abroad.

The Bolsheviks embraced Marxism and Leninism, and the new communist regime ideologically believed it obligatory to spread the Revolution. Bolsheviks viewed their cause internationally, and reckoned that it would inherently clash with neighboring capitalist states within the international system. For example, the Bolsheviks sought to initiate a revolution in the neighboring state of Poland. Poland, anticipating this, engaged the Soviets by invading the Ukraine, however, the Red Army repelled Polish forces and continued to march on to Warsaw. In the end, the Poles were able to push the Red Army back, at least temporarily hindering communist advance. The revolutionary ideology of Communist Russia continued to play an antagonistic role in various conflicts outside of its borders for nearly the rest of twentieth century, which caused interventions in countries like Afghanistan as well as others throughout the Cold War. The Russian Revolution is another example of why internal revolutions accumulate into inter-state wars.

Furthermore, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 clearly provides even more examples of why domestic unrest and revolution leads to the internationalization of internal conflicts. The overthrow of the Shah in Iran marked the triumph of the revolutionary movement within Iran that had been simmering during the second half of the twentieth century. The Shah represented monarchial oppression over Iranian citizens, and was viewed as a puppet regime for western interests. The armed insurrection of Iranian masses of students led to removal of the Shah along with the entire political structure that had kept him in power. The revolutionary ideology that embodied the Revolution was propagated as 'Freedom, Independence, and Justice', and was meant to inspire not just the movement within Iran, but others outside its borders that sympathized with the movement. Although the Iranian movement was unique in the sense that it was based on Islamic principles, it shared similarities with other revolutions in that it saw its struggle in an international context. And, like the other revolutions mentioned above, the Iranian Revolution overtly espoused the ideas of promoting the Revolution abroad. These revolutionaries viewed state sovereignty as a mechanism for oppressor states to assert their dominance, and the export of revolution

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as the means to surmount that oppression.

The Iranian Revolution threatened states interests in the region, such as the United States which had a close relationship with the Shah, supporting him in his ascent to power, so the Revolution also signaled direct hostility towards Western nations within the international system. Iran openly supported revolutionary movements within Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq; in the latter case, this led to an all-out war between Iran and its neighboring state Iraq. Iraq reacted like other counter-revolutionary had in the past. Governed by an autocratic regime that did not want Iran's Revolution to influence the Iraqi population to attempt to topple the power structures, Iraq countered Iran's efforts to export its brand of revolution. Once again, the export of revolutionary ideology led to an external conflict that in turn challenged the international norms of non-intervention established by the United Nations in 1945. The Iran-Iraq War raged from 1980-1988. During those eight years, Iran's revolutionary regime exerted its ideology abroad, concurrently strengthening the Revolution as a part of Iranian national identity.

Moreover, the tendency of internal revolutions to provoke counter-revolutionary reactions from neighboring states within the international system highlights that there is an antagonistic relationship between domestic instability and the international status quo. The basis of international relations between states is directly affected by the conditions within states that may challenge or seek to alter pre-existing inter-state relations, and depending on the ideology of any given internal revolution may result in a collision between status quo powers and emerging revolutionary regimes. For example, in reference to the English political theorist Edmund Burke, Fred Halliday writes, 'For Burke, it was not a question of waiting for the revolutionary state to attack others, it was the very fact of ideological challenge, posed by the existence of a society based on radically different foundations, to which the status quo powers had to respond.' The reactions of the states that intervened in the French Revolution of 1793, or of Poland's to the Russian Revolution of 1917, or of Iraq's response to Iran's foreign policy all point out that the ideology that shapes internal revolutions is viewed by states looking in from outside as a potential threat to their interests, sovereignty, and very way of life, which is why it leads to external conflict. The international system is composed of states, which react according to changes within the system due to political changes within the very states that make up the international status quo.

In conclusion, the examples of revolutions analyzed above offer a glimpse at some of the reasons why domestic political insurrections lead to international conflicts. Revolutionaries use their political ideology to justify their aggressive, or what is perceived as aggressive, foreign policies. The export of revolution can be a calculated international political maneuver, as in the case of the French Revolution, or a fundamental belief of revolutionary doctrine, as in the example of Russia's Bolsheviks. Because of the implications involved in exporting revolutionary ideology it is assumed that internal revolutions challenge the international status quo, norms, and order within the international system. Counter-revolution is the reaction of neighboring states to revolutionary movements and helps explain why inter-state wars commence. The French Revolution of 1793, the Russia Revolution of 1917, and Iranian Revolution of 1979 all serve as examples of why internal revolutions and the idea of exporting revolution lead to war between states. When revolutionary regimes challenge the international order with their ideology there is bound to be external conflict due to the reaction of status quo powers within the international system.

Greene (1984), pp. 11-19

Halliday (1999), pp. 1-23

Greene (1984), p. 15

Greene (1984), p. 15

Halliday (1999), p. 94

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[6]<!--[endif]--> Halliday (1999), p. 13

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[8]<!--[endif]--> Johnson (1985), p. 164

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[9]<!--[endif]--> Greene (1984), p. 32

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[10]<!--[endif]--> Kennedy-Pipe (1998), p. 16-18

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[13]<!--[endif]--> Halliday (1999), p.103

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[14]<!--[endif]--> Kennedy-Pipe (1998), p. 25

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[15]<!--[endif]--> Irfani (1983), p. 149

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[16]<!--[endif]--> Halliday (1999), p. 127

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[17]<!--[endif]--> Karsh (1987), p. 1-10

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[18]<!--[endif]--> Halliday (1999), p. 221

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*Written by: James Riley
Written at: Kings College, London
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