Arguably, the foremost and foundational question in the study of international relations is why war occurs. It is a deceptively straightforward question that myriad scholars have attempted to answer. Through their efforts, we know that many types of war are fought, and there is almost certainly no unifying logic of war onset.[1] In Escaping the Deadly Embrace: How Encirclement Causes Major Wars, Andrea Bartoletti adds to this voluminous scholarship by offering a new answer to the question of why conflicts that he calls major wars begin. His “encirclement theory” and impressive research into an array of wars fought since 1521 represent an important, and compelling, contribution to the debate, and will need to be reckoned with by future scholars of major wars.

Bartoletti, as noted in his title, is focused on the origins of major wars, or “overt and direct military confrontations among all the great powers of a specific region” (p. 14). Using a fairly conventional list of great powers, then, he identifies ten major wars that have been fought since the beginning of the sixteenth century: the Italian Wars (1521-59); the Thirty Years’ War (1635-48); the Franco-Dutch War (1672-78); the Nine Years’ War (1688-97); the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13); the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48); the Seven Years’ War (1756-63); the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-15); World War I (1914-18); and World War II (1939-45). Critics may question some of these inclusions and ask why other wars are excluded—a point to which I return later—but Bartoletti’s list is sensible and his efforts to reach further back in history than 1815, which has become something of a watershed date in international relations scholarship, are welcome.

The common thread linking these ten conflicts, according to Bartoletti, is that, with the exception of World War II, they were all initiated by great powers facing the prospect of encirclement by other great powers. Encirclement, he argues, leads to major war through a regularized three-step process. First, we should observe latent encirclement, which “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” (p. 12). In such a situation, a great power is faced with what Bartoletti calls the “double security dilemma” (p. 19): a choice between 1) accepting the persistent latent threat of a two-front war, or 2) attempting to break out of the position by building sufficiently powerful defenses that the surrounding states could not plausibly succeed in an attack or preemptively attack and eliminate one (or both) of the latent threats. The former path is functionally equivalent to the great power resigning itself to a state of perpetual danger and uncertainty; the latter is likely to provoke precisely the kind of two-front war that the encircled great power is hoping to forestall. Given the unattractiveness of these options, a great power facing latent encirclement is especially likely to pursue mid-range, partial solutions like seeking alliances with rivals of its neighboring states and creating buffer zones between it and its potential adversaries (pp. 20-21).

These actions by great powers facing latent encirclement then set in motion similar efforts by the encircling great powers, who are likely to work to avoid adverse security imbalances by bolstering their own military capabilities, deepening and expanding their own alliances, and generally improving their ability to launch a successful invasion. Bartoletti highlights two such actions by the encircling powers in this second step of the march toward major war that transform latent encirclement into actualized encirclement: concentration of forces and closing the circle. The former involves the encircling great powers resolving internal and external security problems such that they can bring more of their military capacity to bear on the encircled actor while the latter involves those same actors annexing territory to prevent the encircled power from establishing buffer zones (pp. 23-24). When this actualized encirclement manifests, the encircled great power not only cannot escape the threat of a two-front war, but also is facing adversaries that are both more capable and willing to launch and win such a conflict. In the uncertain, anarchic international arena, such circumstances are intolerable and virtually always lead to the encircled great power initiating a war to resolve its adverse security situation.

In the third and final step toward major war, the emergent conflict between the encircled and encircling great powers escalates horizontally to include other great powers in the region by virtue of the alliance agreements all actors concluded and bolstered earlier in the process. Actors who were initially not party to the fighting are likely to join, Bartoletti argues, to avoid having a great power ally defeated or to acquire their own spoils from the fighting (pp. 26-29). The result is cataclysmic war, involving all great powers of the region.

Bartoletti thus casts major wars as fundamentally defensive endeavors, launched by great powers seeking to escape the threat of a two-front war; the tragic dynamics of the anarchic international system ensure not only that efforts to resolve potential future threats to sovereignty often result in the manifestation of precisely those dangers, but also that other great powers are inevitably drawn into the fighting. This view of the onset of major wars is contrasted throughout the book with two alternatives: the offensive realist logic articulated by, among others, John Mearsheimer, and the logic of hegemonic war, as described by Dale Copeland. The former holds that major wars begin as a result of great powers aggressively seeking to establish regional hegemony while the latter holds that declining great powers are likely to launch such conflicts to arrest the rise of a challenger.[2] Bartoletti offers meaningful critiques of each, noting that, among other shortcomings, neither model fully theorizes or explains the three-step process toward major war of security competition, war initiation, and war contagion (p. 36); he accordingly anticipates that they will underperform his encirclement theory of major war when tested against the historical record.
In reporting his case studies of the ten major wars noted above, Bartoletti is correct: his claim does generally provide a more compelling explanation for the emergence of the conflicts than do Mearsheimer’s or Copeland’s models. Bartoletti offers three full-length case studies—examining the onset of the Italian Wars, the Thirty Year’s War, and World War I in depth—and seven shorter treatments of the remaining major wars identified earlier in the book. The cases rely on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources and are well worth reading on their own—Bartoletti’s treatment of the pre-Napoleonic wars provides a useful primer on the conflicts in addition to demonstrating the strength of his argument when tested against the historical record—and will hopefully serve as a foundation on which future scholars will build as they assess the veracity of their own claims.

Even if they are inclined to accept Bartoletti’s claim that his argument better accounts for the onset of major wars than existing theories, though, scholars of the wars that Bartoletti examines may nevertheless raise some questions about the goodness of fit between his argument and the historical record. For example, it is not clear whether, in the lead-up to the Italian Wars, the fear animating France’s efforts to escape encirclement was rooted in the structural incentives generated by Hapsburg control over the Spanish and Austrian kingdoms, or whether French concern was driven more directly by the person of Charles V, the Hapsburg king and Holy Roman emperor. Indeed, Bartoletti notes that the abdication of Charles V in 1556 “eliminated the immediate cause of hostilities” (p. 67), and, though France remained subject to latent encirclement after the conclusion of the Italian Wars, major war did not break out again for almost another century. If the person of Charles V was essential to the story, the structural claim Bartoletti offers appears at least partially incomplete. Similarly, in the discussion of the lead-up to World War I, one is struck by the absence of meaningful discussion of well-documented features of the Imperial German government, including Kaiser Wilhelm’s impulsiveness and the powerful influence of the German military and its war plans on political decisions made in Berlin. As with the person of Charles V, it may be that structural features of the European strategic chessboard swamp such factors, but additional consideration of personalities and domestic politics could have bolstered the persuasiveness of Bartoletti’s claim.

Stepping back from these kind of specific questions about particular cases, the nature of Bartoletti’s project—offering a new explanation for a hugely important phenomenon in international relations—is bound to engender a wide range of critiques. At least in the mind of this reviewer, some such criticisms have merit and thus have the potential to weaken slightly the persuasiveness of the claim advanced in *Escaping the Deadly Embrace*.

Consider, for example, the list of major wars identified. One would be hard-pressed to not notice that all ten are European conflicts. It is not obvious that this is a complete list of major wars, for at least three reasons. First, focusing inside Europe, many are likely to contest Bartoletti’s classification of the Napoleonic Wars as a simple continuation of the French Revolutionary Wars; though they are temporally adjacent, the logic of France’s use of force in the latter is not the same as in the former, and Bartoletti himself notes that, “if one separated this case in two discrete international phenomena, [his] theory could not explain the phase of the Napoleonic Wars” (p. 148). Second, using Bartoletti’s definition of major wars—“overt and direct military confrontations among all the great powers of a specific region” (p. 14)—and list of great powers over time, a global view of history would plausibly add more cases to the list. For example, the Russo-Japanese War would seem to fit, as would World War II in the Pacific, if we consider the United States as a Pacific power. One could also make a case, strictly speaking, for the
Boxer Rebellion. In none of these cases does it seem self-evident that the encirclement dynamics Bartoletti identifies were at play. Finally, it is not clear why Bartoletti imposes as a scope condition that great power involvement in wars must be overt for them to be considered major. This criterion excludes the Korean War, “because the Soviet Union was not officially belligerent and played only a covert role” (p. 14). Covert participation is nevertheless involvement, and here, too, it seems that encirclement is not a compelling explanation for the war’s onset. As noted briefly above, Bartoletti, to his credit, notes that World War II (in Europe) is a major war that his theory cannot explain; it is singled out as the only one of the ten that fails to conform to his identified encirclement dynamics. An equally plausible reading of the historical record like that noted here, however, would suggest that his claim is able to explain something like 60 to 65 percent rather than 90 percent of cases—still impressive, but the difference is nontrivial when we are thinking about exceptionally rare events like major wars.

Perhaps the most significant criticism from the vantage point of modern readers, however, is whether encirclement theory still has lessons to teach us today. The cases of major war considered in the book all predate the formation of the United Nations and the general agreement among states that established borders, with some minor exceptions, are sacrosanct. Encirclement as a driver of major war is a phenomenon that is almost inherently dependent on the fluidity of borders. From changes in territorial control that give rise to latent encirclement to the feasibility of establishing buffer zones that could help encircled great powers escape such situations to the “closing of the circle” that would manifest actualized encirclement to additional great powers joining the fray in the hopes of gaining spoils from the fighting, Bartoletti’s model of major war appears to depend on shifting lines of control on the map. A plausible explanation for the absence of major war since the end of World War II is not nuclear weapons (an argument Bartoletti deftly dispatches, pp. 156-159), but simply the international consensus that borders are meaningful delineations that should not be changed. This international norm—one might go so far as to call it an institution—seems to be a powerful barrier to the emergence of another major war as a result of encirclement. Indeed, the one possible future such conflict that Bartoletti points toward—China’s encirclement by India and Russia (pp. 159-164)—seems both politically implausible and far less likely than a major war breaking out between China and the United States not over encirclement, but rather over Taiwan’s independence. It is possible that encirclement may continue to be an important driver of major war into the future, but it seems likely that it will be one of several rather than the only.

These criticisms aside, Bartoletti’s Escaping the Deadly Embrace is an important addition to the scholarly literature on the onset of major wars. His argument is compelling in the majority of the cases surveyed and for that reason alone merits careful consideration by future researchers. The more fundamental claims underlying Bartoletti’s work, including that geography and the history of international relations prior to 1815 both matter, are additional reasons for scholars and students of international relations to take his argument and claims seriously. Doing so will undoubtedly enrich both theoretical and historical treatments of war in the international arena.

Notes

[1]. For one overview of the current state of research on this issue, see Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and John A. Vasquez, eds., What Do We Know about War?, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

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