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Economic interdependence as a facilitator of war?

by [Jon Western](#) on 2014-03-13 in [Duck](#) - [2 Comments](#)

Note: This is a guest post by [John Mueller](#) of Ohio State University.

The ongoing crisis/standoff in the Ukraine relates in some ways to a long-standing debate about the potential connection between economic interdependence and war. The debate is over the idea that the decline in interstate war has been caused by the fact that countries closely linked economically are unlikely to go to war with each other.

On the one hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin's foray in an area of deep economic interdependence doesn't seem to have been waylaid by potential economic cost considerations. On the other hand, as the value of the ruble tumbles, economic considerations could play a role in keeping the crisis from escalating to a more direct military confrontation. Meanwhile, those contemplating sanctions on Russia, particularly in Western Europe, have been musing about the pain they might themselves bear if they applied economic punishment to a country they depend on for so much of their energy resources.

Economic interdependence, accordingly, can be looked at in a number of ways, and it can have contradictory effects.

Many have argued, however, that, overall, it doesn't have much effect at all, noting that the countries of Europe a hundred years ago were developed and well entwined economically before they launched themselves into a catastrophic continental war in 1914.

In gauging this popular comparison, it should be pointed out that there has been one very considerable change from that era. No one today argues that advanced capitalism and economic interdependence facilitate war by reducing its downside thereby permitting it to become even more wonderful.

In a [treatise on aesthetics](#) published in 1790, Immanuel Kant groped for examples of the "sublime" and argued not only that war was exactly that but that the institution made the people who carried it out "only the more sublime." By contrast, continued Kant, "a prolonged peace generally brings about a predominant commercial spirit, and with it low selfishness, cowardice, and effeminacy, which debases the disposition of the people."

A century later, another Prussian, historian Heinrich von Treitschke, [along with many others](#) around the continent, enthusiastically marched to the same banner. Treitschke [explained that](#) war's "sublimity" and "grandeur" lay in the way it brought out "the full magnificence of the sacrifice of fellow countrymen for one another...the love, the friendliness, and the strength of that mutual sentiment." Thus, "war is both justifiable and moral," while "the ideal of perpetual peace is not only impossible but immoral as well."

Treitschke did acknowledge that war had its disagreeable side—all that death and destruction in particular. He argued of course that such defects were overwhelmed by war's many virtues: "War, with all its brutality and

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sternness, weaves a bond of love between man and man, linking them together to face death, and causing all class distinctions to disappear. He who knows history knows also that to banish war from the world would be to mutilate human nature."

Importantly, however, Treitschke also argued that capitalist development and economic interdependence were something of a godsend because they would make the institution of war, which he already considered sacred, to become even more so. They would allow Europeans and other civilized nations to engage in the sublime experience of war while limiting the rather unpleasant downside of the exercise.

He insisted that modern wars were not fought for "booty" or for "material advantage," but rather for "the high moral ideal of national honor." However, because of materialist economic advance and interdependence, "wars will become rarer and shorter, but at the same time far more sanguinary." This was because "Civilized nations suffer far more than savages from the economic ravages of war, especially through the disturbance of the artificially existing credit system, which may have frightful consequences in a modern war." Accordingly, "wars must become rarer and shorter." Indeed, he concluded, "it is impossible to see how the burden of a great war could long be borne."

Europeans entered the Great War of 1914 with such pronouncements ringing in their ears. In its early days, English poet [Rupert Brooke eulogized](#) the experience as an escape from the filth of peace:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened powers,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping...

Meanwhile, hopes about the beneficial, war-dampening effects attendant on economic advance and interdependence lingered. [Recalls one admirer](#), economist John Maynard Keynes "was quite certain that the war could not last much more than a year...When all the available wealth had been used up—which, he thought would take about a year—the Powers would have to make peace....These views were stated with extraordinary clarity and absolute conviction and I unhesitatingly believed them.... It was a great relief for us all to have Maynard's assurance on this point."

Brooke died in 1915, not in glorious battle, but from an infected mosquito bite. Perhaps war was not quite as clean as he had anticipated.

Keynes did continue on, but some of his economic ideas, like all Treitschke's, were to suffer considerable revision.

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Anita Kellogg · 5 days ago

Thanks for an interesting post. In particular, I appreciated how you tied together current events with the deeper philosophical foundations of economic interdependence. I do not, however, think that your examples challenge or complicate the interdependence thesis to the extent that you assert. With respect to the Ukraine, the fact that crisis has not escalated into a war or even produced a military fatality suggests that economic interdependence has been successful in this case - at least against the common metric upon which it is typically measured. Furthermore, if we take the causal logic of interdependence seriously - that leaders are constrained from war by their responsibility to provide economic goods, then I do not think we should have expected economic interdependence to provide much incentive to avoid war. First of all, most of the nations involved in first world war believed that their national survival was at stake. If the nation or a significant portion of one's territory is lost, then the political leader's survival is already threatened and war is seen as necessary to maintain power. Second, the concept of the economy did not really exist until the 1930's, and similarly the expectation that the state had a role in managing the economy did not emerge until the same time period. Thus, interdependence did not impose very serious constraints against leaders until the post-WWII era.

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LFC > Anita Kellogg · 3 days ago

I think this post is not really about 'the interdependence thesis' at all, but rather about changes in attitudes toward war (esp. as expressed by intellectuals, esp. Western intellectuals).

Treitschke was wrong in thinking that the economic costs of a 'modern' war would cause it to be short, but that's not, it seems to me, esp. important. What's more important is that few people today share Treitschke's view that war as an activity is wonderful because it brings out "the full magnificence of the sacrifice of fellow countrymen for one another..." Mutual sacrifice may be very admirable, but basically no thoughtful people argue today that war is a good thing and morally justifiable because it elicits such sacrifice. This marks a significant change in attitudes toward and ideas about war, a change that the post's author has written about elsewhere.

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