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Why Do Neighbors Fight? Proximity, Interaction, or Territoriality*

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Most interstate wars are fought or begin between neighbors. This relationship between contiguity and war has long been known, but ignored within peace research. The major reason for this is that it has been seen as essentially a trivial relationship, reflecting the opportunity for war rather than the real underlying cause of war. Recent work on territory and the issues over which wars are fought has begun to question that interpretation. This article maintains that the clustering of war among neighbors may be theoretically significant. It presents a territorial explanation of the relationship and juxtaposes it with the proximity and interaction explanations. Each of the three explanations is appraised in terms of explicit criteria to see which is the most adequate. Ultimately, however, each explanation must specify a set of tests that would falsify it, and this article does so for the territorial explanation. The article concludes with some implications for peace in the post-Cold War era if the theoretical explanation is correct.

1. Introduction

One of the signs that a social science is maturing is the presence of findings that are so compelling that competing theoretical approaches offer an explanation of the findings. Although this means that different explanations claim a particular hypothesis as its own, and therefore cannot be distinguished from a competing theory on the basis of that hypothesis, it is a sign of maturity for a discipline to have such quandaries because it means that there is widespread consensus that an empirical regularity has been identified. In international relations, generally, and peace research, specifically, we have not had such a clear empirical identification of patterns of behavior that theories share a corroborated content. Instead, the problem has been finding any theory with any kind of corroborated empirical content at all (see Vasquez, 1983, p. 12).

That may be beginning to change. A number of scholars have seized upon the finding that democracies do not war with

each other. Although based on a small number of cases, the problem has been to try to explain theoretically why this is the case. This finding has been ignored until recently, although clear statistical evidence has existed for some time (see Babst, 1964; Small & Singer, 1976; Rummel, 1983). In this article, I examine another basic finding in peace research that has also been long ignored; namely the fact that most wars occur between states that are neighbors. If it is, as some have said, a law that democracies do not fight each other, then it is equally a law that most wars occur because neighbors fight each other. Since I do not see human behavior as so determined, I prefer to speak in terms of propensities and probabilities rather than laws. Nevertheless, the relationship between wars and neighbors is a strong one that has been overlooked.

Why do neighbors fight? Most realists have assumed that because international politics is a struggle for power, all of history shows that nations are either preparing for, actively involved in, or recovering from war (Morgenthau, 1985, p. 52). In this case, neighbors fight simply because all states are prone to war. This ignores the rather strong finding that wars are unusually concentrated among neighbors. The more sophisticated response has been that wars are concen-

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trated among neighbors because only a few states have the capability or the opportunity to fight wars with non-neighbors. The implication of this realist approach is that given sufficient capability and opportunity, wars between non-neighbors would emerge because of the underlying struggle for power.

For these reasons, most researchers have dismissed the relationship between neighbors and war as spurious and/or trivial, and therefore not of any theoretical significance. I argue that this is a mistake and that by overlooking the finding we may be ignoring a line of research that holds promise not only for our theoretical and empirical understanding, but also for our ability to develop policy solutions to some of the major issues facing us in the post-Cold War era.

I begin the analysis by detailing the evidence that there is a strong relationship between being neighbors and fighting in wars against each other. Next, I detail the three major explanations why neighbors fight each other – because of their proximity, because of their high interactions, or because of their territoriality. In this section, I present arguments that raise questions about the theoretical adequacy of the proximity and interaction explanations to account for the existing evidence, while at the same time showing that a territoriality explanation is more powerful. In the third section, I argue that in order to resolve the theoretical quandary each side must specify one or more tests that will distinguish its empirical accuracy from its competitors. I then propose a number of empirical tests for the territoriality explanation. I conclude by offering several policy implications of the territoriality explanation for the post-Cold War era.

2. *Contiguity, Neighbors, and War*

Lewis Richardson (1960, p. 250) showed a generation ago that the typical war is dyadic, with most wars rarely expanding beyond four parties. Of the 200 wars he found from 1480 to 1941, over half (117) were dyadic, 28 more involved three parties,

and 12 had three against one, and so forth. Since Richardson wrote, we have a considerable amount of empirical evidence that shows that most wars are between states that are territorially contiguous by land or within 150 miles by sea.

In a study of major states from 1815–1976, Wallensteen (1981, pp. 70–72, 84) found that contiguity is an important source of conflict that leads to militarized confrontations and to war – 93% of the contiguous pairs have at least one militarized confrontation and 64% have at least one war. In a study of interstate rivalries from 1816–1980, Diehl (1985, pp. 1206 f.) found that one of the main characteristics distinguishing serious disputes (what Wallensteen called militarized confrontations) which escalate to war from those that do not is whether the dispute occurs in a site within or contiguous to one of the rivals. Approximately 25% of these contiguous disputes escalate to war, as opposed to about 2% of the non-contiguous disputes. Diehl also showed that 12 of the 13 rivalries that go to war begin with a militarized confrontation involving contiguous territory or the territory proper of one of the rivals. Diehl's analysis suggests that crises or militarized disputes that emerge within a site contiguous to two major states are much more prone to lead to war than other crises that might emerge between these states. The Wallensteen and Diehl studies provide limited evidence, because they deal only with major states or a subset of them.

Studies by Gochman (1990) and Bremer (1992) overcome this limitation by examining, respectively, all militarized interstate disputes from 1816–1975 and all interstate wars from 1816–1965. Gochman (1990, Table 8) finds that about 66% of the states involved in militarized disputes are contiguous. More importantly, as the level of force in a dispute increases from verbal threats to displays of force, to open warfare, the percentage of contiguous states increases from 63.8% to 78%. Bremer's (1992) findings are even more impressive; he demonstrates that of seven theoretically critical factors that are seen as increasing the probability of war, contiguity is the most important. Of equal significance is the fact

that the other six factors have a potent effect only when combined with contiguity. Such a finding would be produced if most wars were being fought by neighbors.

Direct evidence that wars are in fact overwhelmingly clustered among neighbors can be found in the Correlates of War project data (on wars fought since 1815). Singer (1990, p. 9) shows that over 80% of interstate wars are among neighbors. Another analysis of the same dataset (Small & Singer, 1982, pp. 82–85) shows that all but 8 of the 67 interstate wars (88%) fought from 1816 to 1980 *start* as wars between neighbors, and these 8 wars are all imperial wars involving major states (see Vasquez, 1993, pp. 134–135). The pattern also seems to hold for interstate rivalries and for wars before 1815 (Vasquez, 1993, pp. 134–135). Using Holsti's (1991) list of major wars fought from 1648–1814 as a database, it was found that 91% (53 of 58) were started by neighbors. Similarly, 86% (24 of 28) of the interstate rivalries (as defined by Wayman & Jones, 1991) were between neighbors. Neighbors then seem to account for most of the wars and recurrent militarized confrontations in the system.

When taken in conjunction with Richardson's (1960) study on the sizes of war, all the evidence on contiguity strongly implies that the typical war in the modern global system from 1495 to the present is a war between two neighbors. Few would dispute this conclusion either as a statistical finding or a historical fact. The question is whether this highly confirmed pattern has any theoretical significance. Put another way, how do we explain (or explain away) this high concentration of warfare among states of a certain class?

3. *Assessing Competing Explanations*

When more than one explanation exists for a finding, it is possible to appraise their relative merits by: (a) examining their logical coherence and plausibility, (b) comparing their consistency with all the relevant evidence, including studies indirectly related to the question, and (c) specifying tests in which the different explanations offer differ-

ent predictions. The first two criteria will be applied in this section and the third in the next.

3.1 *Proximity and Interactions*

Explanations

The explanation which, until recently, had widest currency was that the relationship between contiguity and war was due to proximity; that is, wars can only occur between states that can reach each other. Bolivia and Botswana (or the Bahamas, for that matter) are not going to fight each other, because they are so far apart. In some cases war does not occur because distance makes each side physically unable to strike and in other instances because distance makes interaction so low that it is inconceivable the parties would have anything to fight about. Distance affects both the opportunity for war and the willingness (motivation) to engage in it (Most & Starr, 1989).

On a more sophisticated level, this relationship is explained in terms of a loss-of-strength gradient (Boulding, 1962). Since the strength of a state decreases the further away from its homeland it must project its force, it follows that a state is more able to use force closer to home. It is assumed that a war between two states at great distance from each other is less likely because the state that took the war to the other side would be at a greater disadvantage.¹

Part of the reason, but obviously not the only reason, that the proximity explanation appears plausible is that the early findings produced on contiguity and war were couched in terms of proximity and used distance between capitals as their main measure. Thus, both Gleditsch & Singer (1975) and Garnham (1976) found that states that fight wars are closer to each other (in terms of the distance between their capitals) than states that do not fight wars. Although such a finding is probably a function of the fact that most wars are fought between neighbors, the distance-between-capitals measure encourages one to think in terms of a loss-of-strength gradient.

The main difference between the proximity-as-opportunity explanation and the interaction and territoriality expla-

nations is that the proximity explanation focuses on a characteristic that is relatively constant. Logically, a relative constant, like contiguity or proximity, cannot be a cause of something fairly infrequent, like war (see Allan, 1983, p. 7). Since contiguity is a constant, what determines when contiguous states go to war? Put another way, states are usually contiguous to some other state; neighbors are generally neighbors for long periods of time, yet they do not fight all the time. How can proximity, then, be a *cause* of war?

In a real sense, it cannot, and a closer examination of the proximity-as-opportunity explanation reveals that it does not say proximity causes war, but that proximity provides the opportunity for war. This suggests that proximity acts more like a necessary condition of war, but it is a necessary condition only in the trivial sense that distant states cannot reach each other.

The latter claim implies that as technology improves the capability of states to extend their global reach, the opportunity for wars between non-contiguous states should increase. Major states already exhibit this tendency. The USA, for example, was able to fight in Vietnam. Britain and Argentina have fought over the Falklands/Malvinas. Japan and the USA fought in the Pacific in World War II.

What is really involved in this explanation, then, is not so much proximity but military reach. As the limits of military reach are raised, war should be less concentrated among neighbors. The shift from airpower to missile capability (including the ability to penetrate outer space) all suggest from the perspective of the proximity-as-opportunity explanation that the relationship between war and neighbors should decline with improvements in military reach. Such improvements in technology would reduce the loss-of-strength gradient.²

The proximity explanation sees the finding between neighbors and wars as spurious and trivial. It seems to me that the logic of this explanation implies that this relationship will disappear or at least weaken in the future as military reach improves. If this is a plausible expectation, then Gochman (1990)

provides findings that undercut the proximity explanation. Gochman (1990) predicts on the basis of the logic outlined above that technology has shortened distances and that therefore contiguity should not be as much a factor in the industrial era as before. He finds, contrary to his expectations, that after 1870 contiguity is more associated with militarized disputes than it was in the earlier part of the 19th century. This is an importance piece of evidence that is inconsistent with the proximity explanation and must be explained away.

Gochman (1990) attempts to do so by arguing that the finding may be due to a rise in disputes among non-industrialized states. While this is probably true for the 1946–76 period (when disputes rose because of the rise of new states), this ad hoc explanation makes less sense for his other test periods (1871–90, 1891–1918, 1919–45). As will be seen later, a territoriality explanation is not inconsistent with Gochman's (1990) findings and can give a more plausible explanation of the differences found in Gochman's five periods. Because the proximity explanation must rely on an ad hoc explanation to explain away the finding, it must be seen as less adequate than an explanation that need not rely on ad hoc explanations.

Unlike the proximity explanation, the interaction explanation sees the relationship between contiguity and war as theoretically significant. According to this explanation, wars arise because of fundamental conflicts of interest. As the number of interactions between two states increases the number of disagreements is apt to increase (as is the number of agreements). Some of these disagreements will involve fundamental conflicts of interests, and a certain number of these may give rise to the use of force and violence, which in turn increases the probability of war. Since contiguity is the single largest factor promoting interactions, contiguous states are more likely to have serious disputes and wars.

While this explanation has a certain plausibility to it, its main theoretical flaw is that it fails to explain why greater interaction leads some dyads in a more cooperative direction and others in a more conflictive

direction. From a statistical point of view, which this explanation seems to embody, greater interaction should lead to both greater cooperation and conflict, and this pattern should result in cross-cutting moderation, rather than persistent conflict that escalates to war.

This explanation also contradicts two other strands of thought in the literature. One is the neoliberal view that greater economic interaction, communication, cultural exchanges, transactions, and other interactions of a certain type should reduce the probability of war (see Kegley, 1995). The second is the widely accepted notion that repeated hostility leads to a reduction in interactions and a break in economic and diplomatic relations, as in the Cold War. From the latter perspective, contiguous dyads that would be most prone to militarized disputes and war would be the ones that had the least interactions, not the most.

There have not been any systematic tests of the interaction explanation, primarily because of the dearth of long-term data on diplomatic interactions. Even though the interaction explanation has not been tested directly, like the proximity explanation, it also seems to be strained by Gochman's (1990) findings. As technology and economic interdependence make the world smaller, more interactions should occur between non-contiguous dyads. Inevitably, some relationships between non-contiguous dyads should rival in importance those of contiguous dyads, especially at the diplomatic level. If this is the case, then one would expect that in the 20th century, particularly in the post-1945 period, the relationship between contiguity and military confrontations should weaken in comparison to earlier periods. As Gochman's (1990, Table 3) test shows, the opposite has happened.

A more stringent test would want to ensure that increased technology actually made for increased interactions among non-contiguous states. From this perspective, war would only be expected when the interaction of a non-contiguous dyad equals the interaction level of the typical contiguous dyad. In other words, since interaction

rather than contiguity is the key, when a non-contiguous dyad interacts as frequently as the typical contiguous dyad, the non-contiguous dyad should have as many wars as a contiguous dyad.

This particular test also has the advantage of overcoming the objections of some scholars who argue that improvements in technology do not necessarily make for comparatively more war and interactions. Access to a car, the argument goes, may make it possible for one to take longer trips, but chances are one will make many more short trips. The above test overcomes this objection by saying that when the interactions of a non-contiguous dyad reach the level of contiguous dyads, then the probability of war should be equal regardless of contiguity.

3.2 *Territoriality Explanation*

The territoriality explanation, unlike the proximity explanation, does not see wars emerging simply because there is an opportunity for them. Nor does it see war as a product of increased interactions. Rather, it sees war arising from specific territorial disputes between states that have been unable to be resolved by other means. Elsewhere (Vasquez, 1993, chs 1 & 4), I argue that war is a social invention (see Mead, 1940) that a collectivity resorts to in order to handle certain kinds of situations. The situation that states in the modern global system are most likely to deal with by the use of force and violence is one in which their territory is threatened. From this perspective, while proximity provides the opportunity for war, territorial disputes provide the willingness to go to war.

This means that not all issues are equally likely to give rise to war. Wars are clustered among neighbors because neighbors have territorial disputes. Wars are less frequent among non-neighbors because even though they may have ideological, economic, or political disagreements and even power rivalries (e.g. Anglo-Russian or Soviet-US, they usually do not have territorial disputes. Territorial issues are sources of conflict (disagreement) that if not handled

correctly have a greater probability of ending in war than other sources of conflict.

Within international relations inquiry, the view that collective violence is focused on only one type or even a few issues is not accepted. For realists, war can and does occur for any issue, because any issue can give rise to a struggle for power (see Morgenthau, 1985, p. 31). One of the main distinguishing claims of the territoriality explanation is that war is relatively rare and limited to certain kinds of disputes.³

Why human collectivities are more prone to fight over territory in the modern global system than other issues, even highly salient ideological issues, is not obvious. Human collectivities have learned in history that if territorial issues cannot be resolved, it is efficient and legitimate to resort to war under certain circumstances. In part, they have no doubt learned this from their experiences in history. War may have been selected out as an efficacious practice for dealing with territorial conflict.

The reason for this is not entirely known and is an area in great need of interdisciplinary research. One would naturally turn to the life sciences for some hypotheses and in doing so a plausible case can be made that humans fight over territorial issues more than other issues because of an inherited tendency toward territoriality.⁴ This in turn is probably related to the fact that territory provides space, food and resources for living (Alcock, 1989, pp. 518–520; Ferguson, 1987, pp. 6–7, 9; Vayda, 1976; Wilson, 1975, pp. 247–248; see also Goodall, 1990, ch.10). Whatever the source of the behavior, humans, like all other vertebrates, are territorial (see Valzelli, 1981, p. 81 for documentation) and, like other animals, humans use aggressive displays to keep and gain territory (Wilson, 1975, p. 256; Goodall, 1990, pp. 100–101, 104). Unlike most other vertebrates, however, humans have also learned to use collective violence in the form of warfare as one way of resolving territorial disputes.

Why territory looms so large in human history and why humans have a proclivity toward territoriality cannot be fully answered without an awareness of work in eth-

nology and biology. It would be erroneous, however, to think that those disciplines have a single view on the question of territoriality, even if there is some consensus about observable behavior. My view agrees with that of Somit (1990, p. 569), which sees humans not as ‘hard-wired’ in some deterministic fashion, but ‘“soft-wired” to favor certain behaviors and cultural options’. All this means is that humans seem to learn certain kinds of behavior and practices more easily than others.⁵ One of the things humans appear to have learned, at least in the modern global system and probably long before then, is that territorial issues can often give rise to situations that are ‘best’ handled by the use of force and violence, even if those situations are not frequent or inevitable.

This position is fundamentally different from two other positions commonly thought of as the predominant ‘biological positions’ by political scientists; namely, the view that sees aggression or territoriality as a drive or the view that sees them as instincts. A drive, like hunger, thirst or sex, functions by generating a chemical or hormonal state that motivates humans to take a certain kind of action, the specific shape of which may be learned. The defining characteristic of a drive is that once the action is taken, it satisfies this internal state until the chemical or hormonal state builds up again, then the pattern repeats itself. War appears to be too rare to be a function of some sort of internal drive.⁶ There is no drive that builds up, gives rise to aggression, is satiated, and then builds up again – so many in the life sciences reject this position.⁷ A proclivity in human behavior, like the human proclivity toward territoriality, is not necessarily the same as a drive, because it is not connected with a hormonal or chemical state that produces the behavior, nor is the chemical state ‘satiated’ by the behavior.

An *instinct* is usually distinguished from a drive in that while a drive is defined solely as an internal state, an instinct needs an external stimulus to give rise to a behavior (McGuinness, 1987, p. x). If war and territoriality were a product of instinct, then warfare should not vary as widely as it does

nor be susceptible to other influences (such as norms) as it seems to be. Nor does this position take account of the fact that primates also have a genetic inheritance for peace-making (de Waal, 1989). It seems much more plausible that humans learn both how to go to war and how to establish peaceful relations. It is this learning rather than an instinct that I assume produces the pattern of behavior associated with territoriality and with war.

I define human territoriality simply as the tendency for humans to occupy and, if necessary, defend territory. For many theoretical purposes, it can be treated as an exogenous variable. For purposes of international relations theory, territoriality can be treated as an axiom drawn from other disciplines:⁸ all other factors being equal, it can be posited that two states bordering on each other will use aggressive displays to establish a border in areas where they meet. Assuming for the moment that humans engage in collective violence because of some territoriality tendency, which is learned, then what follows? Four propositions follow from this axiom: (1) collectivities would divide the Earth, often through the use of force, into territorial units; (2) collectivities would pay a great deal of attention to their boundaries and be vigilant in their defense; (3) on the whole, the boundaries between any two contiguous states that are relatively equal in capability would be expected to be established through a struggle involving the use of force; (4) any new state that emerges could be expected to pose a threat to existing territorial divisions, and, if these fears were not allayed, then conflict and violence would become likely (Vasquez, 1993, pp. 140–141).

It would be a misunderstanding from what has been stated so far, however, to conclude that territoriality directly causes war or is a constant source of war. All that is being said is that territorial issues are sources of disagreement that can, *depending on how they are handled*, lead to war. In that sense, they are a source of conflict that can lead to war, but they need not result in war. To explain the onset of war one must go beyond territoriality and examine how

states learn to deal with their territorial proclivities and needs. War arises not from territoriality, but from the interactions states take in their attempts to demark boundaries and/or maintain and expand their territory. There is a host of intervening variables between the rise of territorial disputes and the onset of war. War is not inevitable.⁹

Nor need war be persistent. Even though territoriality may, as stated in proposition 3, lead to war to establish boundaries, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that once boundaries are established and *accepted* by all concerned, the probability of war becomes very unlikely. This can occur even if the boundary is established by the use of force, although typically only an overwhelming use of force will lead to acceptance of a boundary (see Vasquez, 1993, p. 147). This means that boundary conflict and hence war need not continue for the entire relationship of two neighbors, but can be confined to one period of their history. Once boundaries are accepted, peace can reign. This is a very different view from that of the realist paradigm, which sees conflict and war as constant and endemic.

Likewise, a system's norms and rules can affect how states interact and how they deal with territorial disputes (see Goertz & Diehl, 1992, ch. 3). Territorial conflict can be reduced or confined if certain norms have been developed for dealing with territorial claims or transfers. The more precise the rules, provided there is widespread consensus on following them, then the more able they will be to resolve or adjudicate claims. A number of writers have observed that the ambiguity of norms governing territorial transfers is associated with territorial disputes (see Luard, 1986, p. 87). Likewise, a shift in norms governing territorial claims, such as the shift from dynastic succession to nationalism in modern Europe, can give rise to a host of territorial conflicts and hence wars as contending parties use the different norms to make their claims.

This analysis suggests two final propositions: (5) once boundaries are mutually accepted, the probability of war between neighbors becomes unlikely; (6) the frequency of war in a historical system can vary

Table I. Frequency of Wars Involving a Particular Issue^a

Type of issue	Historical Periods				
	I (1648–1714)	II (1715–1814)	III (1815–1914)	IV (1918–41)	V (1945–)
Territory ^b	17 (77%)	26 (72%)	18 (58%)	22 (73%)	27 (47%)
Territoriality-related Issues ^c	2 (86%)	4 (83%)	8 (84%)	6 (93%)	19 (79%)
Subtotal Cumulative					
None of the Above	3 (14%)	6 (17%)	5 (16%)	2 (7%)	12 (21%)
Total Wars	22	36	31	30	58

^a Frequency based on classification of historical judgments listed in Holsti (1991, pp. 48–49, 85–87, 140–142, 214–216, 274–278).

^b Includes Holsti's (1991, p. 308) 'territory', 'boundary', 'strategic territory', and 'irredenta' issues.

^c Includes Holsti's (1991, p. 308) national liberation/state creation, secession/state creation, national unification/consolidation; maintain integrity of state/empire, dynastic/succession.

Source: Vasquez, 1993, p. 130.

depending on whether it has established widely accepted and precise norms governing territorial disputes and transfers.¹⁰

How sound are these propositions? The first two propositions on the division of the planet into territorial units and the sensitivity of states to boundaries are consistent with some very obvious patterns of behavior in the modern global system to which not very much attention has been paid in peace research. Less obviously, the first two propositions also suggest that of all the issues over which collectivities can fight, territorial issues tend to be the most prone to war. There has not been much empirical research on this question, since there is not much scientific data on the issues that give rise to war (see Diehl, 1992). Indeed, one of the main ways in which the territoriality explanation differs from the proximity and interaction explanation is that it insists that it is territorial disagreements that give rise to the unusual concentration of wars, rivalry, and militarized confrontations between neighbors and not just proximity or interactions. If the territorial explanation of war is correct, it would be expected that the actual issues at stake in wars should involve one or more territorial issues. Conversely, since the proximity and interaction explanations do not see any particular issue as more war-prone than others, they would accept the null hypothesis.

One of the major criticisms made of the

territorial explanation is that the association between contiguity and wars does not necessarily mean that contiguous states actually fight over territory. If it turns out that they do, then this would be evidence in support of the territorial explanation of interstate war, while if they do not this would be a falsification of the explanation. In a recent analysis, K. J. Holsti (1991, p. 19, pp. 307–309) presents some important statistical evidence (covering major wars from 1648 to 1989) that territorial issues dominate most historical periods of warfare. Although his codings are based on historical judgments as to what decision-makers stated they were fighting over (Holsti, 1991, p. 19), he is not trying to support or even test a territorial explanation, so we would not expect his coding to be unduly biased in favor of or against the territorial explanation. Indeed, one of the problems with his study is that he sometimes divides a number of issues related to territory into distinct issues, such as separating 'strategic territory' and irredenta from 'territory' (Holsti, 1991, pp. 51–52).

Elsewhere (Vasquez, 1993, pp. 129–131), I have re-analysed Holsti's listings to see if territorial issues are more prevalent in wars than other issues.¹¹ Table I reports the results. The first row demonstrates that territorial issues, defined fairly narrowly, have dominated warfare for almost 350 years. No other single set of issues has persistently

been present in wars across such a wide range of historical periods. Indeed, only in the post-1945 period have territorial issues not been in a majority of wars, and this may be due to the sample of 'wars' included in this period.¹²

If issues related to territoriality, more broadly defined as any issue associated with a proclivity to occupy and defend territory – such as Holsti's issues of 'creation (or unification) of a national state, maintaining the integrity of a state or empire, empire creation, state/regime survival, and dynastic rights/succession (as basic principle for transferring territory) – are combined, then the percentages (reported in row two) go up to the 80% range. Very few other issues are present in wars. In the first period, only 3 of 22 wars (14%) have no territoriality issues at stake, and in the most recent period, only 12 of 58 (21%) wars have no connection with territoriality.¹³ Likewise, Holsti (1991, p. 308) shows that some highly touted war-prone issues, like balance of power, are present in only 9%, 1%, 3%, 3%, and 0% of the wars in each of the respective periods.

These findings demonstrate that of the variety of issues over which war can logically be fought, territorial issues are usually the ones that are involved in war. This provides impressive evidence that it is not simply distance or interactions that is underlying the relationship between neighbors and war. Although further research is needed, it seems highly likely that wars among neighbors are wars over territorial disputes. This means that territorial issues are not like other issues. They are special in their volatility and ability to give rise to collective violence. This does not mean that other issues, like ideological questions, cannot give rise to conflict that leads to war. It means simply that territorial issues are more apt to give rise to disagreements and that those disagreements have more often ended in war than disagreements over other issues. This is the core of the territorial explanation of war, and the findings reported in Table I provide evidence that the territoriality explanation is empirically accurate.

The third proposition, that contiguous states will engage in a struggle to establish

boundaries, is not as obvious as the first two propositions and has not been systematically tested. The third proposition is derived from the axiom on the basis that if territoriality is so important and territorial issues so war prone, then it should leave traces in the history of relations between neighbors. This proposition provides a new major test of the territorial explanation, especially since it implies, along with proposition 5, that once boundaries are established, the probability of war between neighbors will decrease, even if proximity and interactions (and all other factors) remain constant. Since the territorial explanation sees warfare as a function of territorial disputes, once these disputes are resolved the probability of warfare becomes less. The proximity and interaction explanations deny the time-bound nature of warfare, because they assume either that international politics is a permanent struggle for power and/or that war can be generated by a variety of issues.

Although the third proposition is an important future test, it also theoretically suggests other hypotheses, which have been tested and which can therefore be used to assess its adequacy. For example, the proposition implies that states with more borders should experience more wars, since they must contend with more neighbors. Hence, the proposition predicts and offers a theoretically powerful explanation for Richardson's (1960, pp. 176–177, 197) finding that the number of frontiers a state has (including colonial frontiers) is correlated with the number of wars a state has. Richardson found an impressive 0.77 correlation between these variables, a finding confirmed by Starr & Most (1976, 1978).

The third proposition also implies that if territoriality is so powerful it should explain not only war, but also other forms of severe conflict. Thus, as shown in the first section of this article, not only are nearly 90% of the interstate wars started between neighbors, but roughly 85% of the interstate rivalries since 1815 occur between neighbors.

The fourth proposition, which maintains that the emergence of new states or a fundamental change in regime is associated with

war, also has evidence supporting it. Although they do make much of it, Small & Singer (1982, pp. 130, 141) clearly documented for the post-1815 period that the more states in the system the more wars. Maoz (1989, p. 202) finds a strong relationship between the number of states in the system and the number of serious disputes (see also Gochman & Maoz, 1984, pp. 592f., pp. 600f.; Goertz & Diehl, 1988). The proposition on fundamental change is supported by the research of Maoz (1989) and by that of Wallensteen (1981). Maoz (1989, pp. 216f.) shows that revolutionary changes in regimes are associated with increased conflict. The latter finding reconfirms an earlier finding of Wallensteen (1981, pp. 76f., 84f.) which showed that major states that have a fundamental change in their ruling ideology are more likely to be involved in both wars and militarized confrontations than are other states. From the perspective of the territorial explanation, these findings would be explained by the fact that revolutionary regimes would be more apt (or be perceived that way) to challenge existing understandings about borders. Thus, the territorial explanation can take a well-established finding, like that between system size and war, as well as a less obvious finding, like that between revolutionary regime change and war and militarized confrontations, and give them a theoretically significant explanation.

From the perspective of the territorial explanation, interstate wars and other severe forms of conflict, like interstate rivalries and militarized confrontations, arise from the attempts by human collectivities to demarcate territorial units. Aggressive displays and force are frequently used to establish boundaries, and this under the right circumstances can lead to war. Because boundaries are often established or challenged through force, it is not an accident that most wars are between neighbors. Nor is it an accident that the more states in the system, the more wars there are, or that the more borders a state has, the more wars it experiences. Likewise, any threat or fear of a threat to existing borders (as often happens when there is a revolutionary change in regime)

can lead to militarized confrontations and war. All these patterns of behavior, many of which have long been known, but not always connected, can be explained theoretically by the territorial perspective. They are not explained by either the proximity or interaction explanations, and they tend to be dismissed as trivial by the dominant realist paradigm which sees all international politics as a struggle for power and all issues equally prone to war because they can all be reduced to the issue of power.

3.3 *Evaluation*

In terms of assessing the theoretical adequacy of the various explanations, where does this leave us? First, the territorial explanation can explain all the findings that the proximity and interaction explanations can explain, but in addition it can explain a number of other findings (such as system size and regime change). In terms of Lakatos's (1970, p. 116) criteria for appraising theories, this gives the territorial explanation greater empirical content. Second, it can offer theoretically significant explanations of long-known patterns of behavior, like system size and war, the territorial division of the planet, the sensitivity to borders, and the concentration of warfare among neighbors. Third, the proximity and interaction explanations can offer a simple explanation of the concentration of warfare among neighbors, although not of some of the other findings, where it offers little theoretical guidance. Under the rule of Occam's Razor, this is the main advantage of the proximity and interaction explanations. However, this simplicity seems to be accomplished at the price of theoretical validity. Both the proximity and interaction explanations suffer from important logical flaws – proximity in terms of its being a constant trying to explain a variable, and interactions in terms of its failure to explain why greater interaction does not produce cross-cutting and muted conflict rather than war.

Fourth, both the proximity and interaction explanations have given rise to empirical anomalies associated with the growth of technology and communications, as illustrated by Gochman's (1990) test. From the

logic of the proximity explanation, the technological reduction in the loss-of-strength gradient should make wars and militarized confrontations more likely, and this has not happened. Indeed, to a certain extent, Gochman (1990) finds the opposite. From the logic of the interaction explanation, as interactions among non-neighbors equals that of neighboring states, the probability of war between neighbors and non-neighbors should be equal. This contradicts some widely-held beliefs derived from neoliberalism and is not consistent with Gochman's (1990) findings, although he does not provide a direct test of interactions per se.

Finally, the territorial explanation provides new theoretical insights and areas of research that promise to be fruitful and potentially very policy relevant in the post-Cold War era, which fulfills another criterion that Lakatos (1970, p. 118) sees as critical – namely, that a research program must be progressive rather than degenerating. The territorial explanation, unlike the others, maintains that some issues are much more prone to collective violence than others. Of all the issues that can give rise to war, territorial issues are most prone to war. The proximity and interaction explanations see all salient issues as having an equal probability of escalating to war, and that is patently not the case (Holsti, 1991, pp. 307–309; Vasquez, 1993, pp. 129–130).

Also, the territorial explanation, unlike realism, does not see war as inevitable and all relations between states as a struggle for power. It maintains that once boundaries are established, peaceful relations between neighbors can become commonplace. The territorial explanation sees norms governing territory and its transfer as critical for maintaining peace in the system.

On a number of grounds – theoretical adequacy, explanatory power, empirical accuracy and content, ability to give rise to new research areas and theoretical insights, and policy potential – the territorial explanation shows greater promise than the proximity or interaction explanations. Only on the criterion of simplicity do the proximity and interaction explanations do better, and satisfaction of this criterion cannot over-

come the other deficiencies. Nevertheless, there are still a number of empirical tests that can be conducted to discriminate between the territorial explanation and the other two. If peace researchers can develop a consensus on which of these tests might be crucial for resolving the theoretical debate, then research can progress and be more cumulative. In the next section, I offer a number of tests from the perspective of the territorial explanation.

4. *Specifying Crucial Tests*

In peace research we have a tendency to test hypotheses against the null hypothesis, but it is always better to test hypotheses against counter-hypotheses. The tests below are all based on this kind of research design. I will list each test, delineating why each explanation would logically entail different predictions.

1. The proximity explanation maintains that wars occur between neighbors primarily because the close distance provides an opportunity for wars; therefore, the relationship between contiguity and war is trivial. The territorial explanation recognizes that proximity provides an opportunity for war, but insists that wars are concentrated among neighbors because territoriality, under the right circumstances, provides a *motivation* for war and hence a willingness to go to war. With the proximity explanation, the opportunity is fairly constant; hence the probability of war between any two neighbors should be fairly constant over history, *ceteris paribus*. The territorial explanation deviates from this prediction in several areas. First, it maintains that once territorial questions are settled between neighbors to the satisfaction of the parties and are accepted as legitimate, the probability of war goes way down, even if other highly salient issues (provided they are not linked with any territorial issues) arise to cause conflict. There should be a clear statistically significant difference in the probability of war between dyads that accept the legitimacy of their borders from those that do not. There is no constant struggle for power between neighbors; such struggles

and attendant rivalries are usually associated with an underlying territorial dispute or threat, *ceteris paribus*. Second, typically the history of neighbors is one in which dyadic war is characteristic of one phase and not of the entire relationship, if boundaries come to be accepted. The proximity and interaction explanations see no such periodicity, except when one side may gain a power advantage over the other. From the perspective of the territorial explanation, changes in power do not lead to war between neighbors if there are no territorial issues. Thus, the territorial explanation predicts a period of stable peace after boundaries are accepted as legitimate; whereas the proximity does not, and sees peace as only temporary.

2. The territorial explanation sees the creation of buffer states as a way of solving intractable territorial disputes among neighbors because it creates mutually acceptable and legitimate borders. From the perspective of the proximity explanation, the creation of such a state need not reduce the probability of war unless it greatly alters the loss-of-strength gradient, which it usually does not. From the perspective of the interaction explanation, the probability of war between the buffer state and its neighbors should remain the same or even go up if interactions go up. Both the proximity and interaction explanations have difficulty explaining how buffer states produce peace and must rely on some sort of power explanation.

3. From the perspective of the territorial explanation, a shift in norms governing territory should lead to wars as states raise territorial issues on the basis of the new norms and demand transfers. Likewise, the more ambiguous norms are, the more wars; the less ambiguous, the fewer wars. From the perspective of the proximity or interaction explanations, a change in norms would not lead to war unless proximity decreases, interactions increase, or power shifts.

4. The proximity and interaction explanations see wars arising between neighbors from a variety of issues; therefore wars should not contain an overabundance of territorial issues. This should be particularly

the case with dyadic wars. The territorial explanation would predict that most dyadic interstate wars and rivalries have territorial issues at their core. If the proximity or interaction explanation is correct, there should be no clustering of wars around territorial issues.

5. The territorial explanation assumes a sense of territoriality. Therefore, a state with non-contiguous (but not necessarily colonial) territory will be just as apt to fight for it as it will for its core area. The proximity explanation would see the probability of defense as a function of the loss-of-strength gradient – the farther away, the less likelihood of war. The interaction explanation has no clear prediction about non-contiguous territory, but it can be assumed that defense would be a function of the number of interactions. Few interactions with one's own non-contiguous territory might not produce a strong defense.

6. From the territorial perspective, natural frontiers that have clear salients – like rivers, mountains, deserts, lakes, and oceans – are more likely to lead to a mutually acceptable demarcation of boundaries, especially if people are not living in these areas. Countries that have such frontiers are more apt to overcome their war phase and move toward peaceful relations with their neighbors. Countries that lack these features may have a more difficult time. From the perspective of proximity or interactions, such features will abet or restrain war only if they directly affect, respectively, the loss-of-strength gradient (mountains would decrease war, rivers increase it) or the number of interactions.¹⁴

7. According to the interaction explanation, neighbors are more prone to war because they interact more frequently than non-neighbors. Hence, as the world shrinks because of technological innovations, it would be expected that *some* non-contiguous dyads would have the same number of interactions as the typical contiguous dyad. Although some would deny that this condition is likely to be realized, *if* it occurs these non-contiguous dyads should have the same probability of war as neighbors. On the whole, the interaction explanation would

seem to predict greater war among non-contiguous dyads as distances are reconfigured because of technological change. Similarly, technological innovations should reduce the loss-of-strength gradient for a number of states, particularly with the spread of naval power, nuclear weapons, missiles, and access to outer space. This means that the proximity explanation would also predict greater warfare among non-contiguous dyads in the future. The territorial explanation would actually see no such increase. Dyadic war among non-contiguous dyads is rare and usually involves colonial territory. Wars among non-contiguous states that do occur usually result from war diffusion or contagion and must be treated as a special case (see Vasquez, 1994).

5. *Conclusion: Some Policy Implications*

While not definitive, these tests are intended to initiate process that will clearly specify the evidence that each side will accept for rejecting the explanation it holds. Science, after all, is a procedure for resolving empirical disagreement. However, the differences between the territorial explanation and the proximity and interaction explanations are not confined simply to theory. A useful scientific theory should also have an ability to offer some policy guidance or at least perspective. More of a focus on the role of territory in the onset of war can provide such guidance and help us learn how to create and maintain peace. The proximity and interaction explanations by comparison do not.

In delineating these implications, an important caveat must be kept in mind – these are implications of an untested theory. War and peace are complex processes, and no single set of propositions is likely to capture that complexity. Furthermore, even if a theory were supported by replicable evidence, it is not always the case that political implications are correctly derived or that they are applied in a manner that would work and would have no negative side effects.

Nevertheless, because the territorial explanation thinks it has pinpointed an im-

portant, albeit underlying and indirect, cause of interstate war, it provides a number of implications for establishing peace. These seem more relevant than ever in the post-Cold War era. One of the major contributions of the territorial explanation is to make us aware that territorial issues are the single most dangerous issues any state will face. Unlike realist approaches, it sees war as concentrated on certain issues and clustered in certain periods in the history of two states. This approach is much more hopeful and optimistic about actually being able to do something to control war and bring about peace than the dominant realist approaches. It promises that focusing our scientific and policy efforts on learning how to handle territorial issues better can have very big payoffs.

From the perspective of the territorial explanation, any two neighbors can avoid war by reaching a mutually acceptable demarcation of their borders. As Burton (1984) argues, issues that involve fundamental needs are not apt to go away until they are resolved in a manner that satisfies the needs of both parties. Elites within states who wish to promote peace should try to reach agreements that will legitimize borders and legally bind future generations to those agreements. They should also try to establish procedures and clear precedents for dealing with future territorial disagreements.

It follows from the above that a system or region in which all the major states have reached agreements with their neighbors on their boundaries is going to be much more peaceful than a system or region that has not. This is one of the reasons why North America has had fewer wars than Europe. The major reason, of course, is that there are only three states in North America. Likewise, a system or region that has a major state able to facilitate conflict resolution and binding agreements among states is going to have fewer wars. This is one of the main reasons why Latin America has had fewer wars than Europe.

The territorial explanation also makes it clear that decisions about territory are, in part, norm-driven with norms being deter-

mined by the system as a whole. Scholars and intellectuals need to pay much more attention to the effect norms about territory have on war. A system that has stable norms regarding who has a right to territory and under what circumstances territory can be claimed or transferred will experience less war than a system that has competing norms or vague norms.

In the post-Cold War era, intellectuals need to re-evaluate the existing norms on territory. With the beginning of the modern era, nationalism gradually replaced dynastic succession as the major legitimizing criterion for claiming territory. Nationalism and its ties to the principle of self-determination are so ingrained in the global modernist culture that they are taken as principles that are right and natural. We forget that they are a product of history and that, as with any norm, how good they are must be determined in terms of their consequences, as well as their deontological claims.

Today the greatest threats to peace come from nationalist claims for new states. Nationalism maintains that any nation has a right to its own state and territory. Increasingly, ethnic groups are making territorial claims on the basis of nationalism. From the perspective of the territorial explanation, this increases the probability of war in two ways. First, it raises new territorial issues and delegitimizes existing boundaries. Second, it increases the number of states in the system who must then demark their boundaries. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence has produced wars and conflict in part because of these two effects.

Even in Yugoslavia, the breakup of the country along 'nationalist' lines and the creation of new states led, as would have been predicted by the territorial explanation, to a struggle to demark boundaries. The danger of nationalism as a principle, which the rest of the world should be learning from Yugoslavia, is that once applied in one circumstance, it cannot (because of questions of fairness and equity) be suspended in the next instance. Thus, if Slovenes and Croats can secede from Yugoslavia on the basis of nationalism and self-determination, then

why cannot Serbs in Croatia or Italians in Slovenia secede on the basis of the same principles? There is no convincing ethical response to this query.

The implications of the nationalist principle are serious because there are literally hundreds of ethnic minorities in the world who do not have states, and many of these minorities are exploited or the victims of injustice. Nevertheless, the territoriality axiom makes it clear that each time attempts are made to rearrange existing borders, the probability of war increases. It behoves scholars interested in peace to rethink nationalism and its effects. One way of doing this is to re-examine the deeper values and concerns nationalism and self-determination are meant to serve. It is not clear, for example, that identity issues need to be tied to territory. National or ethnic identity is not zero sum, although nationalism can produce zero-sum perceptions by granting a nationality exclusive control of a piece of territory. Linking identity with territory has in the past produced war and continues to do so now both between states (as among some of the successor states of the USSR) and within states. This demonstrates the dangers of linking identity issues to territorial issues.

One way to increase peace might be to 'de-territorialize' identity issues. When an issue is delinked from territory (i.e. its demands are not tied to controlling a piece of territory), then it is less likely to produce war, even though it may generate conflict. For example, in the mercantilist era, trade was territorialized, and thus trade wars were real wars (see Holsti, 1991, p. 315), but in the capitalist era, trade became 'de-territorialized' and trade wars although conflictive are not violent. Of course, 'de-territorializing' is only going to be accepted if the needs that make ethnic groups want their own territory – needs like dignity, rights to their own language, a decent standard of living, and so forth – are addressed and met.

The territorial explanation points out the dangers to peace in norms and messianic movements like nationalism. Whether the subsequent wars are worth what is being striven for is a separate question. The terri-

torial explanation recognizes the wisdom of the OAU's decision not to redraw the colonial borders of Africa according to tribal or ethnic lines. It suggests a similar decision for the successor states of the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

Not all nationalist groups will accept such a solution, especially if they have large majorities in a region. Here the territorial explanation suggests that rules and procedures be developed for transferring territory. There is already a fairly extensive body of international law dealing with border questions and this has made it easier to settle and in some cases mediate boundary disputes without going to war. What needs to be done in the post-Cold War era is to develop a similar body of international law to deal with the problem of devolution, succession and civil war. If the territorial explanation had been more prevalent and known by intellectual elites and policy-makers, it is unlikely that European states would have been so quick to extend diplomatic recognition to Slovenia and Croatia.

Finally, the territorial explanation provides important lessons for those who wish to employ conflict resolution techniques in the post-Cold-War era. It tells them that if territorial issues can be de-coupled from other issues, the probability of violence will drop considerably. At the same time, it warns those wedded to the status quo that without addressing some of the other needs of ethnic groups they will turn toward nationalist and territorial solutions. It also suggests that conflict resolution theorists examine previous solutions to interstate violence, like buffer states, as a way of dealing with intractable internal disputes (see for example Burton's (1984, pp. 92–99) zonal functional proposal).

These suggestions merely scratch the surface and are meant to show that the territorial explanation can provide relevant and new approaches to peace for the post-Cold war era, making us aware of both the pitfalls of past practices and the opportunities for peaceful solutions that we may not have considered because our latent theories of the causes of war did not recognize the importance and centrality of territorial dis-

putes. Each of these suggestions will need considerable investigation and refinement before they can be taken seriously. In the meantime, scholars must give more attention to the territorial explanation of war and its empirical accuracy. One of the best ways of doing that is to critically re-examine the proximity and interactions explanations of the relationship between contiguity and war. If the analysis presented in this article is correct, the finding that most wars start between neighbors may contain within it an overlooked key for unlocking the door to peace.

NOTES

1. One way of making a test of the territorial explanation less biased in favor of non-contiguous dyads being at peace would be to exclude dyads like Bolivia and Botswana, where existing levels of technology and armed forces do not permit them to reach each other.
2. Some disagree with Boulding and the analysis here about the impact of technology on the loss-of-strength gradient. Gleditsch (1994), for example, argues that technology might reduce absolute barriers to distant countries, but not relative costs, so that war is still more probable between neighbors. While this is logically valid, it is also the case that the reduction in absolute costs has to make the probability of war between distant states higher than it was prior to the reduction even if relative costs are the same. Two questions are crucial, and both are empirical and not logical questions. First, will relative costs remain constant, even if absolute costs go down? Gleditsch (1994, p. 2) assumes that 'transportation costs increase monotonically with distance'. This is not always the case, because frequency of interaction (or use) can produce an economy of scale that reduces absolute and relative costs associated with distance. Thus, it is considerably cheaper to fly or phone between New York and Los Angeles than it is to do the same between New York and Lincoln, Nebraska. The same can be true for international trade. My argument is that technology can reduce not only absolute, but under certain conditions, relative costs as well.

Second, even if relative costs remain constant, can it be assumed that states are motivated solely by relative costs (see Kegley, 1995)? It is an empirical question whether states are motivated primarily by relative costs and gains, absolute costs and gains, or whether the motivation varies by issue or some other third condition.
3. According to Small & Singer (1982, pp. 59–60), there were only 67 interstate wars and 51 other wars involving a nation-state during the 1816–1980 period. Although these wars involve a considerable amount of suffering, they do not constitute the

- kind of extensive warfare reflected in Morgenthau's (1985, p. 52) 'all history shows' claim, especially since most of these wars involve only two states.
4. Of course, one must be very cautious in applying findings from animal behavior to humans; for some guidance on this see Huntingford (1989, pp. 29–33). Nevertheless, discussions of human behavior should reflect an awareness of the biological basis of human behavior and of relevant studies in ethology and not simply rely on some simplistic view of human nature derived from Western political philosophy, as is all too often the case. For a convincing argument on the need to examine the life sciences, see Masters (1989), as well as Shaw & Wong (1989, pp. 6–10).
 5. See Wilson (1975, p. 255) on the connections among the capacity to learn, genetics, and evolution.
 6. A nice critique of the innatist position in biology on the question of war is provided by Ferguson (1984, pp. 8–13).
 7. See Huntingford (1989, pp. 26–27) and Bateson (1989, p. 41); see also Valzelli (1981, p. 67).
 8. This means that whether territoriality is biologically based or purely a social construction governing a certain historical period, as Sack (1986) argues, will not change the theoretical predictions of the territorial explanation given below. My position on the determinants of territoriality is that it is an empirical question that must be decided in light of all of the evidence, including that of the life sciences and not decided by dismissing biological explanations a priori because of philosophical prejudices, particularly when these insist on treating all biological explanations as innatist, when they are not. As noted above, rejecting explanations based on drives and instinct (as I have done), or even sociobiological explanations, does not logically entail rejecting all ethological explanations and findings (see Somit, 1990). Although I have presented what I think might be the sources of territoriality, this view remains tentative and open to further research outside of political science.
 9. Indeed, territoriality itself may be unlearned, although this remains an open question. For an analysis that sees territoriality as decreasing in some areas see Ruggie (1993).
 10. These six propositions provide an overview of some of the more important aspects of the territorial explanation. For a complete analysis, including various caveats, see Vasquez (1993, ch. 4).
 11. When combining territorial and territoriality-related issues directly from Holsti's (1991) tables, there is a danger of double counting wars, since a war may have more than one territorial issue at stake. To avoid this problem, I coded Holsti's (1991) 'raw data' (which he published in the book) on each war.
 12. In the post-1945 sample, Holsti deviates quite considerably from the Signer & Small operational definition of war, including a number of rebellions, like the 1947–8 Jewish settlers rebellion against Britain, and conflicts with fewer than 1000 battle deaths,

like the killing of US Marines in Lebanon in 1982 (see Holsti, 1991, pp. 111, 273–278).

13. The presence of non-territoriality issues shows that territory and territoriality are not being defined so broadly as to include every possible issue. Issues not associated with territoriality include among others: commerce/navigation, protecting nationals/commercial interest, protecting religious confrères, protecting ethnic confrères, defending an ally, ideological liberation, government composition, enforcing treaty terms, and balance of power.
14. Because they are navigable, rivers have historically been easier to transverse than land. Contact and trade, therefore, have followed rivers as have military fortifications.

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