

## Revolution, Foreign Relations and War

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## **Revolution, Foreign Relations and War**

Walt, Stephen M. *Revolution and War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1996.

Sadri, Houman A. *Revolutionary States, Leaders, and Foreign Relations: A Comparative Study of China, Cuba and Iran*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997

A political scientist at the University of Chicago and author of *Origins of Alliances*, Stephen Walt looks for patterns in the foreign relations of seven revolutionary regimes: the American, Chinese (Communist), French, Iranian, Mexican, Russian (Bolshevik), and Turkish. Revolution is "the destruction of an existing state by members of its own society, followed by the creation of a new political order." (p. 12) This definition excludes coups, anticolonial wars and most civil wars; the latter exclusion especially can present problems, as in the case of the Spanish conflict of the 1930s.

Walt's guiding concept is the "balance of threat": revolution will most likely lead to war if a revolutionary state's neighbors perceive it as a serious threat to their external or internal arrangements. One must therefore consider not only the revolutionary state but the environment in which this state comes into being and acts. Balance of threat analysis explains very well why the recent revolutions in East Europe did not lead to war; not only did the new ruling circles not wish to challenge the West, indeed they wanted to bring their societies and policies into conformity with it. All this is fundamentally commonsensical; in the contemporary academic environment, there is much to commend demonstrating the commonsensical.

East Europe aside, new revolutionary regimes have often found themselves at war, and Walt persuasively identifies a number of reasons for this. One is mutual misperception, produced on the one hand by the inability of anti-revolutionary states to obtain good information about the revolutionary regime's intentions and capabilities, and on the other by the revolutionaries' inexperience in international politics. Aggravating such inexperience is ideological preconception; most often, the ideology of the recently successful revolutionaries portrays outside states as incorrigibly hostile. Another factor making war more likely is internal divisions within the revolutionary regime, with one or more faction viewing war as a lever by which they can obtain or maintain power.

War clearly does not require the stimulus of revolution: decades before Napoleon, Louis XIV was fighting European coalitions. But if not a necessary condition for war, Walt sees revolution as a sufficient one (p. 45): "revolutions have independent causal effects on the level of security competition and the probability of war." (p. 333) For instance, "the internal turmoil in France was directly responsible for the war that did break out and for its rapid expansion." (p. 332)

Walt usefully distinguishes revolutions from below (more accurately, from outside the government) and elite revolutions (from within it). As a rule the latter, as in the Turkish and Mexican cases, are much less threatening to their neighbors; the US certainly did not perceive the Mexican Revolution as a serious threat to its domestic order. The situation

prevailing in the international environment also importantly influences reaction to revolution: the Wilson administration might well have launched a serious invasion of Mexico had it not been distracted by its coming involvement in the Great War. In Turkey, Kemal was able to carry out his vast designs because the Allies were exhausted and at the same time free from threat from the Central Powers. Much the same could be said of the Bolshevik regime.

Walt is sceptical of the utility of outside intervention against revolutionary regimes. Revolution is hard to export; however international its ideology, each revolution is society-specific. Besides, neighboring states take the revolution as a warning, safeguarding themselves against its spread by repression, reforms and alliances. Successful intervention against a revolutionary regime requires a tremendous commitment of force, which is often lacking, as in the efforts against the French and Bolshevik upheavals. Those instances also show that intervention can strengthen the revolution rather than eliminate it. Revolutionary regimes often overestimate their own strength and the sympathy for their cause in foreign countries, as in the Bolshevik case; hostile states in their turn overestimate the weaknesses of the new regimes and the strength of counterrevolutionary sentiment. Belief that Revolutionary France was militarily weak backfired because it led Austria and Prussia to wage only a half-hearted campaign. And deep divisions plague antirevolutionary coalitions, as in the 1790s and in 1918-20.

On other hand, Walt deprecates premature efforts to reach an accommodation with a new revolutionary regime, which the latter may view as an effort to re-establish foreign influence, and which thus may increase rather than lower friction.

There is no section on Sandinista Nicaragua; Walt makes some puzzling bows in the direction of critical theory; and while the notes are excellent, one regrets the absence of a regular bibliography. But these are minor blemishes. Walt offers an impressive theoretical construction buttressed with useful synopses of complicated events and processes. The work is full of sound judgments expressed in clear prose. In fact, I like the book so well that I have adopted it as required reading for my course on Revolution.

The author of *Revolutionary States, Leaders, and Foreign Relations*, Houman Sadri, is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Central Florida. Somehow convinced that the indifference of many young Americans to world affairs harms the ability of the US to function as the world's only superpower, he has written this book to overcome that debilitating indifference. Specifically, he sets out to show that the "behavior of revolutionary states is not irregular, irrational or unpredictable as many assume." (p. 2)

Without making clear why he chose the three states in question, the author proceeds to improve the international understanding of American youth by advising the reader that "international and domestic concerns are merging in today's world," (p. 5) that "the tone of the foreign policy of a new regime is directly affected by whomever [sic] sets the policy agenda," (p. 15) that "the new leaders [of Maoist China, Castro Cuba and Islamist

Iran] seemed [sic] to use anti-American rhetoric"(p. 120), that "revolutionary Cuba's geographical position was slightly [sic] different from that of China and Iran," (p. 122) that "in practice, one does not treat friend and foe equally," (p. 127) and so on. Although revolutionary China figures large in the book, the author makes only two brief references to Mao's Great Leap, which caused the deaths of perhaps 20 million Chinese, and mentions the Cultural Revolution not at all. There is no hint that before his takeover Castro had promised the Cubans not communism but democracy. And here is the main conclusion: "The differences among the Chinese, Cuban and Iranian strategies were primarily the result of their diverse backgrounds and the different sets of conditions with which they had to cope. The main differences included such factors as size and national wealth, military capabilities, leadership, institutional means and the nature of their foreign policies." (p. 115) So much for improving the understanding of American youth.

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