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Beginners and Winners: The Fate of Initiators of Interstate Wars Involving Great Powers Since 1495

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Abstract

All interstate wars involving Great Powers from 1495 to 1991 are analyzed in order to investigate a controversy about the success rate of war initiators

and factors that might have an impact on that success rate. We find that the initiators of wars involving Great Powers won only slightly more than half the time in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, whereas they have been about twice as likely to win as targets in the 19th and 20th centuries. The difference in success rates can apparently be accounted for in part by factors such as intervention on behalf of targets and the duration of wars, although these factors have their clearest impact only on wars in which Great Powers fight against minor powers. Wars involving Great Powers on both sides were more common in the earlier centuries, and the initiators of the increasingly uncommon wars between Great Powers have won only rarely in the most recent two centuries. The absence of wars between Great Powers in the last 50 years might suggest that Great Powers have “learned” over time to avoid becoming involved in wars against each other.

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