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"Who Won the San Francisco Earthquake?" The Impact of Disasters on International Politics

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Many believe that global challenges eventually elicit global cooperation. Yet, decades of global warming and the recent coronavirus pandemic have failed to change international politics' texture. Global threats to human well-being do not appear to provoke decisive international coordination. Yet, surprisingly, some local, more limited natural or technological disasters like the Chernobyl accident or the Justinian Plague significantly impacted international affairs. Why do global disasters killing many millions leave the international order intact, while some local disasters upset international relations profoundly? I argue that only disasters transforming the international distribution of power will reorder patterns of alignments and conflicts. Conversely, disasters affecting the international community relatively evenly safeguard the balance of power since everyone suffers equally. Thus, globally shared disasters usually do not cause significant changes in the international order. Patterns of relations remain the same, and power politics does not stop. I describe a few cases of disasters provoking power shifts and of disasters impacting wars to support my causal argument. This paper significantly pushes the borders of IR and realism, which have paid little attention to disasters' impact on interstate relations.

Keywords: Cooperation, Disasters, Distribution of power, Pandemics, Realism

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INTRODUCTION

The first sentence of Kenneth Waltz's (1959: 1) classic *Man, the State, and War* asked who won the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Waltz used this metaphor to show that wars keep occurring even if most judge them like natural catastrophes: absurd, senseless bloodshed. Yet, one could answer Waltz's rhetorical question literally. Since the San Francisco earthquake ravaged the Californian coast, the loss of lives, properties, and reparation costs weakened the United States. If power is relative, as Waltz's neorealism argues, then the earthquake had winners. Mechanically, the then rivals of the United States — notably Imperial Germany during the early twentieth century — gained in power relative to Washington due to the earthquake's devastation.

More recently, many pundits believed the COVID-19 pandemic would be a watershed moment in international relations. Indeed, the "pandemic has been a truly global experience: millions of lives lost, many more damaged, economies brought to a standstill with flows of goods, services and people interrupted […] the pandemic has touched all aspects of life" (Davies & Hobson, 2023: 150). Initial hopes were that this global threat to human life would usher in a new era of international cooperation. It seems sensical that globally shared challenges like a

pandemic would elicit transborder unity. International bodies and leaders called for a worldwide truce to fight the disease (Riordan, 2020). The world had changed forever.

And yet, international politics of the 2020s appears hardly more peaceful than in the 1920s, the 1820s, or the 1720s.[1] Azerbaijan attacked Armenia in September 2020 amid the pandemic. Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, starting the largest European conflict since 1945. Optimists hoped the pandemic would resuscitate China-U.S. cooperation (Huang & Kennedy, 2021); competition is worse than ever (Wright, 2021). Political tensions prevented international organizations from playing a more decisive role (Benvenisti, 2020). In the same way, decades of warning about the danger of climate change have failed to provoke large-scale, decisive international coordination despite increasingly vocal politicians, engaged citizens, and activists.

While global emergencies appear to shake little the established order, some local natural or technological disasters significantly and lastingly impact international politics. Columbus-era imported diseases devasted Native America, thus facilitating European colonization. More anciently, the Plague of Justinian (540s A.D.) contributed to breaking the rising power of the Byzantine Empire. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident, quickly followed by the 1988 Armenian earthquake, added to the plight of a declining Soviet Union, hastening the Cold War's end and the advent of American unipolarity. Conversely, the earth-shattering medieval Great Plague killed a significant part of the Euro-Mediterranean population, yet it did not seem to have reoriented international politics or put an end to interstate competition. It stopped neither the Hundred Years' War nor Ottoman expansion.

What this short overview suggests is paradoxical. Transborder, indiscriminate disasters generally alter little the trajectory of international politics. Power politics does not stop, and patterns of alignments shift little. Meanwhile, localized events disproportionately touching a single great power or a small group of states often reorganize the international order. How to explain that global disasters that leave many millions dead seemingly alter little great power politics, while more local disasters change international relations profoundly?

I define a disaster as a natural, biological, or technological catastrophe not born out of human volition. Such catastrophes kill scores of people, massively damage infrastructures and assets, or both. A first type of disaster is climatic, comprising floods, hurricanes, and droughts. Disasters can also be geological, such as earthquakes, volcanoes, meteorites, and the ensuing ripple effects, such as tsunamis (Popp, 2006: 62). Another type of disaster, maybe the deadliest, is disease (Piret & Boivin, 2021; Price-Smith, 2008). Disasters can also be caused by human inattention or technological problems. These can include blazes, massive explosions (one remembers the 2020 Beirut port explosion), nuclear accidents, dam failures, or a durable power outage. Note that a natural disaster can engender a technological disaster. For instance, in March 2011, an earthquake followed by a tsunami damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant, leading to a nuclear accident. In March 1989, a geomagnetic storm disabled power in Québec.

'Global' disasters are near universal catastrophes that impact most, if not all, the states of a given international system in an equal manner. 'Local' disasters strike a state or a small number of states far more severely than most others. Typically, a global disaster will kill significant numbers everywhere. In contrast, local disasters will kill scores in a specific country or region but kill far less, or even not at all, elsewhere. Note that local does not equate to small. A disaster generally needs to kill many thousands to leave a visible trace on the balance of power.

My argument stresses that only the disasters that change the material balance of power will affect interstate relations. Disasters that impact the great powers relatively uniformly are less likely to cause substantial shifts in power, and their repercussions are less visible. Conversely, disasters that result in uneven, region-specific disruptions often lead to changes in the balance of power and even weigh on war initiation or termination. This study proposes

[1] Two interstate wars were initiated during the 1820s and also two during the 1920s (Sarkees & Wayman, 2010). Following the Correlates of War Project's criteria, the 2020s already have two interstate wars (the 2020 Azeri-Armenian and the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian wars).

a first-cut neorealist reinterpretation of the impact of disasters on international politics by introducing historical cases of disaster-induced power shifts and war outcomes. During the last two decades, discussing cyber threats has become a major International Relations (IR) trend. Nevertheless, natural disasters have had a far more significant economic impact on international politics than any amount of cyber-attacks (Johansmeyer, 2024). Research on this issue is thus warranted.

Yet, disasters remain largely ignored by the IR field (Hollis, 2018). The current scholarship on the relationship between disasters and international relations is limited in volume and scope. Worse, the realist approach has had virtually no interest in the issue. Other IR approaches have generally focused their inquiries on how disasters can elicit international cooperation (Falkner & Buzan, 2022; Keohane & Oppenheimer, 2016). However, this scholarship has paid little attention to whether disasters provoke conflict instead of cooperation and has not yet taken into account realist insights.[2] This article thus brings nature and the environment into the realist research program, an endeavor scarcely attempted before.

This discussion about disasters has implications for broader IR debates. Liberal scholarship generally expects collaboration against global challenges. Transnational threats harming several states simultaneously should push states to cooperate against that common hazard (Jones et al., 2009). Disasters could even help end international competition more generally (Sears, 2021; Watson, 2019). But I show here that global disasters do not usually elicit global cooperation. Following realist insights, my paper suggests that local disasters will matter more since they alter the distribution of power. Focusing on relative gains helps understand disasters' impact and thus offers policy recommendations in case of future disasters.[3]

This article's empirical part is not a full-fledged demonstration but merely a plausibility probe. It does not pretend to present definitive evidence but strongly suggests that the theory has merit and deserves further research (Levy, 2008: 6-7). It unfolds in three sections. First, I introduce a few cases where disasters led to a state's decline in material capabilities, altering patterns of international relations. Second, I present cases where foreign attacks closely followed disasters. Finally, I briefly discuss the case of the Black Death, one of the deadliest disasters in human history, to argue that even such an apocalyptic event failed to alter international politics significantly.

This article is organized as follows. First, I explain the most important concepts and justify my argument. Second, I discuss some cases of disasters inducing power shifts and influencing wars to support my causal argument. Also, I briefly describe the Black Death case to show that major global disasters often elicit little to no change. I do not attempt a systematic demonstration here and merely try to show that my argument is plausible. Finally, I introduce further avenues for research and lay out policy implications.

THE ARGUMENT

What do I mean by change? I obviously do not imply that global disasters do not matter. Many people die, economic structures mutate, domestic politics resets, and social evolutions accelerate — the coronavirus pandemic can testify to that (Alhammadi, 2022; Parker, 2013). Change in international politics can be of two types: systemic or structural. Systemic change would mean the end of the distribution of power as the organizing principle of international relations. Concretely, this could entail either a world government terminating international anarchy or the advent of a 'Kantian system' (Wendt, 1999) where power stopped mattering. Systemic change has yet to happen, as the international system has always been anarchical. Global challenges have yet to change the international system itself (Aron, 1966; Waltz, 1979). Structural change comes with the appearance or disappearance of great

[2] Rare exceptions are Grundig (2006), Kelman (2011), Lee et al. (2022), and Nelson (2010).
[3] I focus only on interstate relations. On the impact of disasters on intrastate conflicts, see Brancati (2007) and Ide (2023).

powers — the number of poles — or a shift in the balance of power among existing great powers — concentration (Mansfield, 1993). Hence, change implies a shift in polarity or the balance of military capabilities — 'noticeable' meaning that states can perceive said shift.

The intuition that disasters and international politics are linked has a long history. Most IR students know Thucydides's famous assessment that the truest cause of the Peloponnesian War "was the growth of Athenian power and Spartan fear of it" (Thucydides, 2009: 13). Interestingly, the paragraph preceding this quote deals with disasters, whose impact on the outcome of the conflict was not lost on Thucydides:

> The phenomena in the old stories, more often told than attested, now became credible fact: earthquakes, which affected large areas with particular intensity; eclipses of the sun, occurring more frequently than in previous memory; major droughts in some parts, followed by famine; and, one of the most destructive causes of widespread death, the infectious plague. All these had their impact along with this war. (Thucydides, 2009: 13)

According to realist insights, disasters should alter patterns of international relations only if they move the balance of power.[4] Common transnational issues do not automatically translate into a common response or effective international regimes due to concerns for relative gains (Krasner, 1991). For liberals, states want to avoid all types of losses to satisfy the populace and domestic interest groups, regardless of other states' gains or losses. However, realists see a small loss for state A and a big loss for state B as a net win for A since its relative strength has increased (Grieco, 1988). Universal disasters will fail to stop power politics as expected under anarchy. Despite the wide-ranging damages, states will keep engaging in competitive behaviors to secure or improve their power position. Universal disasters will not end power politics and, therefore, will not transition the international system toward global cooperation. Disasters can alter the balance of power through two main mechanisms.

The first causal relation is straightforward. A disaster wrecking a state can elicit an attack from a rival (Busby, 2008: 475-477). The death toll reduces a state's military personnel and mobilizable civilians and shatters its economy, rendering it less able to sustain a war. The disaster may even kill part or all of the ruling elite, leaving the state disorganized. Depopulation can facilitate an invasion by reducing the costs of occupation and policing, thus tempting an invader further. A climatic or geological event can physically destroy essential military and civilian infrastructures, equipment, and fortifications. It may also disrupt lines of communication with frontline units, temporarily cutting them from the rears. A disaster can cripple a military campaign and reverse battlefield dynamics. An aggressor initially reluctant to attack for fear of plunging into a costly attrition war could change its calculus and attack following a disaster due to the newfound prospect of a short, low-cost operation (Mearsheimer, 1983). Moreover, a disaster may interfere with an ongoing war. It will affect the outcome of the conflict depending on which side it harms and how much. Indeed, there are clues that victims of disasters facing strong rivals expect them to employ the opportunity. For instance, in 2008, a typhoon utterly ravaged Myanmar. The Burmese regime had poisonous relations with the United States, and Burmese leaders sincerely feared that the United States would use the occasion to invade the country (Selth, 2008).

Second, long-term relative decline is a less visible causal relationship between disasters and international politics. The human toll decreases a state's population and, therefore, its military and economic potential. Fewer taxpayers are left. The state must redirect human effort and budget to rescue the victims and rebuild what can be. The aftermath can often cramp the state treasury for years or even decades. A state hit by a massive disaster or a series

[4] Among realism's foundational works are Mearsheimer (2014), Morgenthau (1973), and Waltz (1979), the leading figures of offensive realism, classical realism, and defensive realism, respectively.

of disasters will find it harder to maintain its troops' readiness, training standards, and technological edge. Lasting psychological trauma can impede a full return to normal for years or decades. Notices Walt (2020), "the plague that struck Athens in 430 B.C. and persisted for more than three years […] may have killed about a third of Athens' population—including prominent leaders such as Pericles—and it had obvious negative effects on Athens' long-term power potential."

Arguably, the two categories sometimes overlap, as relative decline renders an attack more alluring. The difference is in the timing and long-term impact. Some decline-inducing events may not immediately weaken a state's warfighting capabilities (like Chernobyl) but worsen existing trends or erode a state's social cohesion. Conversely, an attack-inducing disaster may have little long-term repercussions but cripple a state's defense posture for a few months.

Emphasizing relative gains explains why global disasters do not reorganize international relations. Since everyone loses equally, the global balance of relative power does not shift. The fundamental parameters of international politics remain unchanged. States have no incentive to revolutionize their foreign policies or make concessions because they are not weakened relative to their competitors. The threat posed by others does not diminish, and the lack of trust (Rosato, 2021) and the traditional coordination problems of world politics prevail.

Since several economists believe that some types of disasters can fuel economic growth in the long run (Kim, 2010; Skidmore & Toya, 2002), one may counterargue that disasters could somehow benefit states more than harm them. This may be marginally true, but disasters still likely hurt more than they elevate a state's position in power politics. First, whatever the economic impact is, the dead will not return. The loss of workers, consumers, and potential soldiers is definitive. Power cannot be reduced to economic vitality. Second, long-term recovery will not matter much if the state's weakening excites a foreign attack right after the disaster. Third, the human and economic disruption may have given a rival power enough of a lead that even future growth will not bridge easily.[5]

Generalizing the impact of disasters is a simplification. An earthquake will produce effects radically different from a pandemic. Furthermore, some types of political regimes and institutions may be more competent at preventing damage and rebuilding than others. The size of the country relative to the disaster's scale also matters. Losing a city does not mean the same thing in Singapore as it does in China (Popp, 2006; Skoufias, 2003). Nevertheless, it remains a reasonable assumption that a post-disaster state will at least be a little weaker than its pre-disaster baseline.

DISASTERS, POWER SHIFTS, AND WAR

In this part, I briefly introduce cases that suggest a causal relationship between disasters of all types, power shifts, and wars. A disaster can elicit change through two mechanisms. First, a disaster can start or quicken the long-term relative decline of one or several states relative to rivals. Second, an aggressor may use the disaster-caused disruption to attack the victim. Therefore, in such historical cases, the aggressor consciously understood the enemy's weakness and attacked during or after the disaster. Finally, I introduce the medieval Black Death case. I show that the deadliest disaster in history only marginally impacted international politics. This suggests that universally-shared disasters often matter less than localized ones.

These case vignettes often come from long-bygone eras rarely touched upon in the IR field. For this work's purpose, going back far away in time is necessary because disasters large enough to influence the distribution of power are rare occurrences. Some may counterargue that cases from ancient eras cannot offer insight into more recent ones (Meibauer, 2023; Schroeder, 1994). However, in the neorealist approach, the key variable is the

[5] There may be a feedback loop between decline and disasters. A declining state may become less able to balance its budget between military spending and public welfare. Thus, it may be less prepared to face disasters and thus suffer more when catastrophe strikes, which in turn heightens decline.

distribution of relative power. Hence, the texture of international politics remained constant throughout history regardless of cultural, social, or technological changes (Waltz, 1979).

Relative Decline

A massive volcanic eruption destroyed the island of Santorini circa 1613 B.C. It was one of the most powerful volcanic eruptions in human history and had profound consequences in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Notably, some scholars believe that the ensuing tsunamis ravaged the Crete-based Minoan civilization, killing many and potentially even destroying its fleet. It has been argued that the Mycenaeans (from mainland Greece) used this weakened state to conquer Minoan settlements (Friedrich, 2013).

In 464 B.C., a devastating earthquake ravaged Sparta, then Greece's most potent military power. The quake severely weakened the city-state and excited a revolt from the Helots, an oppressed class of Spartan society. Sparta had promised to support Thasos, a city rebelling against Athens. However, the Spartans failed to help the Thasians due to their sudden weakness. The earthquake and subsequent events accelerated the outbreak of the First Peloponnesian War in 460 B.C., as Athens had become more confident in defying Sparta and its allies (Sealey, 1957; Thucydides, 2009).

Ancient Greece also witnessed the epitome of a disaster that represented a total catastrophe for one state and a costless massive gain for another. A powerful earthquake followed by a flood utterly destroyed Helike, a city-state of the Gulf of Corinth, in 373 B.C. The neighboring Aigio annexed its territory, and Helike disappeared as a polity (Katsonopoulou, 2002; Kontopoulos et al., 2017).

Emperor Justinian ruled the Byzantine Empire from 527 and endeavored to restore the Roman Empire's greatness. In the 530s, the Byzantines launched an onslaught on the entire Mediterranean world and waged bloody wars against the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, the Franks, and the Persians. They came close to rebuilding the old empire, but Byzantium encountered a significant setback in the form of a devastating plague (541–549) that resulted in a substantial loss of life. As a result, the Byzantine Empire's economy suffered, and it growingly struggled with recruitment impairment. The plague had probably a more devastating impact on Byzantium than on the more rural European states. Indeed, Constantinople was reliant on personal tax revenues, while most European states relied more heavily on taxing land exploitation. Hence, they were less exposed to the loss of taxpayers (Piret & Boivin, 2021: 3; Sarris, 2022). Other great powers like Francia and Persia appear less impacted (Bachrach, 2007; Faure, 2021; Schindel, 2022). This relative decline played a clear role in curtailing Byzantine ambitions of restoring the Roman Empire and in ending the Gothic War. The disease also likely weakened the Ostrogothic Kingdom, which was finally destroyed in 553, although it is unclear whether it would have survived against the superior Byzantines even without the disease (Rosen, 2007; Welford, 2018: 20-35; also, Motin, 2022: 188).[6]

Pandemics played a crucial role in breaking Native American polities' power and opening the door to European colonization. Introducing Old World diseases into the New was incredibly destructive since "the initial outbreak of a disease previously unknown or absent from a particular area […] usually result in extremely high rates of morbidity and mortality" (Alchon, 2003: 7). Smallpox reached Tenochtitlan soon after Hernán Cortés landed in Mexico in 1519, helping him soften Aztec resistance. Diseases also wrecked South America, depopulating the Inca Empire and fueling a civil war. When the Spanish invasion came, the Incas were already significantly weakened. The same patterns reoccurred throughout the Western Hemisphere. A historian writes, "the Spanish conquests in the Americas would not have been possible without disease" (Herzog, 2020). The drastic population decline eliminated resistance possibilities, thus facilitating annexation by the Spanish colonizers (Garfias & Sellars, 2021).

[6] Nevertheless, according to an observer, "the Empire of the Ostrogoths was actually destroyed by the serious epidemic rather than by any other cause" (Yang, 1947: 31).

In 1755, a powerful earthquake followed by a tsunami and blazes ravaged Portugal, and especially its capital, Lisbon. A severe economic depression ensued, and the Portuguese military, already feeble, was reduced by half. Amidst the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), it became clear to Lisbon that war with Spain was imminent. The Portuguese knew they could not resist and were forced to seek Britain's alliance. Spain ultimately invaded in 1762 (Baugh, 2011: 592).

In 1879, Chile declared war on Bolivia and Peru over territorial claims. Nature was not kind to Chile's enemies; "in 1879 Bolivia was a country battered by disaster. Earthquake and plague had devastated the nation's population" (Sater, 2007: 29). Peru, too, was frequently weakened by earthquakes and tsunamis, such as in the case of the city of Arica, destroyed in 1868 (Fernández Canque, 2007). Disaster-induced decline mattered because "the fundamental cause for the eruption of hostilities was the mounting power and prestige and the economic and political stability of Chile, on the one hand, and the weakness and the political and economic deterioration of Bolivia, on the other" (Pike, 1977: 128).

Eliciting Attack

There is no shortage of historical instances when a disaster was followed by an enemy attack or determined the course of a war. In 479 B.C., Persian troops besieged the coastal Greek city of Potidaea. However, a giant tsunami allegedly surprised the Persians deployed near the water's edge. Many perished, and the Potideans easily killed the survivors (Strassler, 2009: 654-655; also, Mathes-Schmidt et al., 2019).

The Roman emperor Lucius Verus's war against Parthia is deeply intertwined with the devastating Antonine Plague (165–180). The Roman army got ill while fighting the Parthians in Mesopotamia. The disease soon convinced the Romans to withdraw the following year, bringing back with them the plague within the Empire's heart (Duncan-Jones, 1996; Harper, 2021; Littman & Littman, 1973; Welford, 2018: 18-20).

The Plague of Cyprian stroke from 248 to 270 a Roman Empire already fragilized by domestic strife. The decimated population became too small to sustain Rome's enormous military, and Roman finances suffered greatly. Unsurprisingly, barbarian enemies were quick to attack the Empire's borders. Worse, the sole other great power of the Roman world, Persia, seized the occasion and launched a major war against Rome in 258 (Motin, 2022; Orsag et al., 2023).

In 1139, an earthquake ravaged current-day Azerbaijan, then part of the Seljuk Empire. It resulted in an estimated death toll of 230,000. Neighboring Christian Georgia was often at war against the Muslim Seljuks. The Georgians immediately took advantage of the disaster to invade the region and brought back with them fabulous loot (Dowsett, 1958: 482-483).

The impact of the Mexico smallpox epidemic (1519–1520) is widely known and requires little elaboration. Hernán Cortés and his band of Spaniards landed in Central America in 1519. They made local allies such as the Tlaxcalans, who had been fighting against the Aztecs for many years. The Spaniards had brought with them smallpox, which soon decimated the locals. This rendered the Aztec Empire less able to resist Cortés, and the newfound Spanish hegemony ended the war for good between the Aztecs and their neighbors in 1521.

The Bhola cyclone struck Bangladesh — then East Pakistan — and in November 1970. It was one of the deadliest cyclones ever, killing at least 300,000 people. The catastrophe weakened Pakistan's grip on Bangladesh. Soon, Bangladeshi independentists launched a secession war, in no small part fueled by the Pakistanis' poor relief effort. India seized the opportunity to deal a blow to Pakistan and entered Bangladesh in December 1971. East Pakistan's already meager defenses were stretched thin due to the civil war and held less than two weeks before Delhi secured victory and Bangladesh gained its independence (Hossain, 2018; Islam et al., 2023).

When Nothing Happens: The Black Death and Medieval International Politics

The Black Death, also known as the Bubonic Plague, was a devastating pandemic that occurred from 1346 to 1353. It is believed to have originated in Asia and spread rapidly throughout Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The disease was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, carried by fleas that infested rats. It is estimated that the Black Death left a staggering 75–200 million dead worldwide. The pandemic profoundly impacted numerous aspects of society, causing labor shortages, increased wages for surviving workers, socioeconomic upheaval, and changes in religious practices. Politics was also influenced. For instance, Italy's Siena saw its longstanding stable government, the 'Council of Nine,' fall partly due to the Plague's impact on domestic politics (Byrne, 2004; Welford, 2018: 36-72). This is not a mere historical reconstruction; contemporaries were well aware of the enormity of the event they were living through. For the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406):

> Civilization both in East and West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out in the entire inhabited world. (Quoted in Cantor, 2015: 6)

However, this cataclysm failed to reorient international politics or elicit peace and cooperation to face a common natural disaster. Edward III of England had launched the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) against France a few years prior to the outbreak. While the plague started spreading, England inflicted a decisive defeat on the French at Crécy in 1346. The pestilence ravaged both England and France; "nearly half the population of England died in something like 18 months" (Horrox, 1994: 3). The plague durably complicated England's war effort by decreasing the recruit pool and thus pushing the salaries of the troops upward (Cantor, 2015: 213-214). After the plague struck, "the French government saw tax revenues decline sharply yet wages of mercenary soldiers rise, and fewer feudal soldiers to fill in the gaps. As a result, the French copied the English by instigating a lower-paid, professional army" (Welford, 2018: 63). The intensity of the fighting decreased, but "the war continued, commanders learning to pause when plague was noted nearby and to avoid areas where disease was present" (Byrne, 2012: 179). The pandemic influenced events on the battlefield and in the rear but did not end the war. While traversing such a calamity, it is telling that both sides focused on finding ways to keep their war effort going instead of recovering from the disaster.

The two other great powers of the time, the Golden Horde and the Mamluk Sultanate (Motin, 2022), were also impacted, but this did not change the international structure. The plague deeply weakened the Golden Horde (Schamiloglu, 1993), but it limped along until 1395, when Timur destroyed it. Similarly, the plague harmed Mamluk Egypt and played a role in its decline (Neustadt, 1946), but it disappeared only in 1517 after its conquest by the rising Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the other major trend of the time was the rapid rise of the Ottoman Empire. The plague hit the Ottomans hard but did not thwart their expansion (Varlık, 2015; also, Ayalon, 2015).

To sum up, the deadliest pandemic in history severely impacted the four Euro-Mediterranean great powers of the time (England, France, the Golden Horde, and the Mamluk Sultanate). Yet, the Black Death did not affect the polarity of the system, and its effects were diffuse and long-term — it contributed to the decline of the Horde and the Mamluks. Still, it would take many decades before the two eventually exited the ranks of the great powers. The pestilence did not even stop the Hundred Years' War between England and France, which went on until the mid-fifteenth century. This momentous event elicited no general truce or visible global appeasement against the disease.

CONCLUSION

Even the deadliest pandemic ever failed to bring peace or change international relations. Hence, it is unsurprising that calls for a global truce and wholehearted international cooperation to fight COVID-19 came to nothing.

Indeed, I argued in this piece that globally shared disasters are likely to elicit little international change because they do not affect the balance of power among the leading states. On the contrary, it is more localized disasters that have the most prominent and direct consequences. A local disaster will weaken one or several powers but not all, thus strengthening some states over others and sometimes exciting war.

If one considers current climate change a single ongoing worldwide disaster of great importance to everyone, then the odds for global, concerted cooperation to fight it appear low. Global-scale disasters like climate change and pandemics are unlikely to elicit frank general cooperation. In order to solve global challenges, decision-makers will need to find alternative paths, as shared challenges rarely bring forth a common response. Great powers will remain focused on power politics and wait the crisis out. However, one can see climate change as engendering or intensifying local crises like catastrophic climatic events, floodings, or diseases. In that sense, each state will be affected by climate change differently. Some will suffer more than others, thus affecting the balance of power moving forward.

This discussion of disaster brings back to structural realism the importance of hazard and *fortuna* (Heuser, 2023). Ingenious or competent leaders à la Alexander the Great or Genghis Khan can afford their state to box far above their category. This, in turn, changes the international structure. Disasters have the same impact, unexpectedly altering the balance of power. Reemphasizing the importance of luck — or here, the absence thereof — deals a blow to over-deterministic approaches like defensive realism.

Indeed, defensive realism expects balancing to automatically block the rise of an aspiring hegemon, therefore ensuring the maintenance of the balance of power. Yet, as some have shown, shrewd, capable, or especially combative states sometimes succeed in overturning the balance and reaching hegemony (Hui, 2005; Kaufman et al., 2007). Nothing guarantees the balance of power will survive, notably when disasters occur. For instance, if the Justinian Plague had not happened, Byzantium might have had more success in its hegemonic bid, and world history would have taken a very different path. Although the international structure gives its order to international politics, *fortuna* can make or break it.

Further avenues for research are manifold. It stretches the imagination that Russian planners did not consider the COVID pandemic's impact on Ukraine's ability to resist an attack. Before the war, COVID infections were on the rise in the country, and Kyiv reported its highest daily number of new cases on February 10, 2022 (Armitage, 2022). Hence, the pandemic may have bolstered Russia's confidence in the likelihood of a decisive victory, facilitating the decision to attack. Azerbaijan might have made similar calculations before challenging Armenia in late 2020 (Chekijian & Bazarchyan, 2021). Further research on the influence of COVID on Azeri or Russian decision-making would probably bring interesting insights.[7]

Moreover, my argument implies that localized disasters can sometimes lead to more cooperation. A state facing a powerful rival and weakened by a disaster will likely receive additional support from likeminded partners. One thinks of the 1755 Portugal earthquake pushing Britain to reinforce Lisbon against the Spanish threat. Conversely, a disaster devastating a strong state may alleviate tensions with its rivals since it is less able to threaten them than before. Further elaboration on how disaster can elicit cooperation would be valuable.

A few policy recommendations flow from the argument. First, great powers like the United States should make an inventory of what kind of disasters their allies are exposed to. Indeed, a disaster could durably weaken the balance of power in an essential region of the world and thus destabilize international politics. Resilience-building aid should prioritize the states that matter the most for maintaining a favorable balance of power. For Washington, bolstering allies' resilience in the Indo-Pacific is the utmost priority due to the Chinese challenge. The United States and its allies should train for scenarios such as securing a disaster-ravaged theatre quickly before an enemy does.

[7] Going one step further, the Russians may have hoped that the mayhem of the invasion would worsen the sanitary crisis and thus soften long-term resistance.

Risk mitigation to decrease the damages caused by disasters may also help prevent attacks.

Second, policymakers should be on high alert when disaster strikes a state with neighboring rivals or a predatory power. Indeed, neighbors of revisionist great powers hoping to grow their borders and spheres of influence, such as China and Russia (Motin, 2024), are at greater risk of being attacked after a natural disaster. This should be taken into account to maintain deterrence successfully. Some of China's traditional targets, like Taiwan and the Philippines, could suffer from catastrophic earthquakes or typhoons. In that case, Beijing may want to seize the opportunity to attack a stunned enemy. The Caucasus Region could also be subject to major earthquakes, which could incentivize Russia to intervene in Georgia or Azerbaijan. If such disasters happen, concerned decision-makers should quickly ready their armed forces to reestablish deterrence.

The United States itself contains several vulnerable regions where catastrophic earthquakes or storms could happen. After all, contemporary society is always only a few power transformers away from chaos. U.S. allies should prepare contingency plans for a scenario where Washington suddenly becomes unable to project power outside, and they would be left to fend off for themselves.

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“샌프란시스코 지진에서 누가 승리했는가?” 재난이 국제 정치에 미치는 영향을 중심으로

Dylan Motin

Pacific Forum

많은 사람들은 세계적 도전들이 결국 전 세계적인 협력을 이끌어낼 것이라고 믿는다. 그러나 수십 년간의 지구 온난화와 최근의 코로나바이러스 팬데믹에도 불구하고, 국제 정치의 구조는 크게 변하지 않았다. 인간의 복지에 대한 전 세계적인 위협이 결정적인 국제적 공조를 촉발하지 않는 듯한다. 그러나 놀랍게도 체르노빌 사고나 유스티니아누스 역병과 같은 일부 지역적이고 제한적인 자연 또는 기술적 재난은 국제 관계에 중요한 영향을 미쳤다. 왜 수백만 명을 죽인 전 세계적 재난은 국제 질서를 그대로 유지하는 반면, 일부 지역 재난은 국제 관계를 크게 변화시키는 걸까? 본 논문은 국제 권력 배분을 변화시키는 재난만이 국제 정치를 재편한다고 주장한다. 반대로, 국제 사회에 비교적 고르게 영향을 미치는 재난은 모두가 고통받기 때문에 권력 균형을 유지한다. 따라서 전 세계적으로 공유되는 재난은 대개 국제 질서에 큰 변화를 일으키지 않는다. 저는 권력 변화를 유발한 재난과 전쟁에 영향을 미친 재난의 몇 가지 사례를 설명하여 이 인과적 주장을 뒷받침한다. 이 논문은 재난이 국가 간 관계에 미치는 영향에 대해 적은 관심을 기울인 국제 관계 이론과 현실주의의 경계를 크게 확장한다.

주제어: 협력, 재난, 세력 분포, 팬데믹, 현실주의

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