Why the English School Needs Conflict Studies: Retheorising the Place of War in International Society

*Nicholas Lees*

*University of Liverpool*

**Introduction**

Hedley Bull’s *The anarchical society* (2002[1977], 88) makes the argument that war is a social institution, indeed that it plays a central role in the institutional framework of international society. Although counterintuitive, this conceptualisation provides profound insights into the place of organised violence in international society and the wider character of world politics. However, the theoretical potential of Bull’s conception of war has not been realised in the English School (or international society) tradition of research. To fully realise the potential of an international society perspective on war, the English School must be brought into conversation with a tradition of research associated with a very different methodological approach: quantitative conflict studies, which this article defines as peace research and related statistical contributions to security studies. Despite the shared concern with conflict and war, dialogue between the English School and quantitative conflict studies is rare[[1]](#footnote-1). The disciplinary division between ‘classical’ and ‘scientific’ approaches, a divide which Bull contributed to, has stood in the way of a more productive conversation between these two traditions.

This is unfortunate. Due to the centrality of the issue of organised violence for the study of international relations, mischaracterising patterns of insecurity and conflict will render theories of international relations defective. An underdeveloped and underspecified account of international war limits the insights of the English School approach. More positively, this mutual neglect also represents a missed opportunity, as research in conflict studies provides surprising support for the English School central claim that war is an institution of international society and that states coexist within a common framework of real but fragile rules that shape the use of organised violence.

The article addresses the English School’s traditional scepticism toward quantitative conflict research, clarifying some misconceptions and highlighting the surprising number of shared methodological concerns between sophisticated conflict research and historical research into the development of international society. It argues that, whilst the findings of quantitative research can be interpreted in terms of hypothesis tests, it is also defensible to regard them as descriptive generalisations about international history. Addressing concerns that quantitative conflict research is insufficiently sensitive to historical context, the article makes the case for the further research using dynamic statistical models of conflict. The article then turns to establishing that Bull’s conceptualisation of war is compelling yet theoretically underdeveloped in existing English School research. It demonstrates that, despite a rich account of the justifications for war offered by Pejcinovic, the account of the causes and circumstances of war in the international society tradition is underdeveloped and derivative of other theoretical perspectives. The article then explores a series of findings that suggest international politics is not in fact a war of all against all, but a decentralised society in which contentious issues such as territory have the potential to move states into a situation of rivalry and hostility. War is a social institution for resolving political conflicts that is shaped by fundamental international institutions, yet it is only one possible mechanism for settling disagreements.

Some of the most robust middle-range theories in conflict studies are consistent with this perspective, claiming that the state of war is the exception rather than the norm in international relations, that war originates in contested authority claims rather than a ubiquitous struggle for power, and that the institution of war is very closely related to the institution of territoriality. Not only do findings from conflict studies strengthen the plausibility of the English School’s account of the anarchical society of states, they demonstrate the fruitfulness of Bull’s conception of war as a social institution — highlighting the need for historically-sensitive research into war and the changing institutional framework of international politics.

**Conflict studies and the English School: beyond the ‘scientific’-‘classical’ divide?**

An argument for closer engagement between the English School tradition and quantitative conflict research may seem dubious or even objectionable. Scholars in the international society tradition work within a historical/sociological institutionalist framework (Schouenborg 2014), tracing the development of fundamental regulative and constitutive norms in world politics, relating them to ideas and discourses about the proper basis for domestic and international political order. In contrast, most contributions to peace and conflict research test hypotheses expressed in terms of relations between variables based on quantified empirical indicators. The two research programmes seem divided by both their practical and their philosophical methodologies.

The mutual disinterest in engagement can be traced to Bull’s critique of behavouralism and defence of the ‘classical’ approach based on engagement with history and canonical texts. Asserting that ‘the scientific approach has contributed and is likely to contribute very little to the theory of international relations’ (1966, 366), Bull argues that quantification misdirects attention away from questions of substantive importance. Nonetheless, Bull had respect for the best work produced in the scientific tradition, such as Schelling’s work on arms control. Although he thought behaviouralists misguided, he scorned facile criticism of their approach and praised them for ‘believing in the long haul’ in research (quoted in Ayson 2012, 95-6). Bull therefore was an advocate of the classical approach and sceptical about behaviouralism, but he was far from dismissive. The most sweeping claim that Bull makes is that we should accept statistical findings ‘only in cases where they confirm some intuitive impression we already have’ (Bull 1966, 374). Taken at face value, this seems like an argument in favour of anti-empirical dogmatism. A more generous interpretation is that, as a theorist responding to early quantitative research on interdependence, Bull was sceptical of how far statistical findings could rationally persuade us to accept counterintuitive theoretical claims about world politics.

Reflecting on the goals and methodology of contemporary conflict studies may help to address these sceptical criticisms. The rationale of quantitative research is to subject empirical claims about patterns in world politics to systematic evaluation. Whilst it is true that there are factors that are difficult to quantify and important questions that are not amenable to statistical analysis, it is difficult to defend the position that the question of the causes of war and peace is not of substantive importance.

The more challenging question raised by Bull is whether quantitative enquiry can ever be cumulative and generate a body of knowledge (Bull 1966, 369). This has been a perennial concern among conflict researchers: Bennett and Stam (2004, 203-5) note that not many hypotheses about the causes of war survive systematic empirical tests. But this provides us with good reason to approach the claims of theories of international relations with caution and to demand evidence. This indifference to systematic empirical evaluation is the basis of Vasquez’s broadside against much ‘neo-traditional’ research. Yet Vasquez calls for greater space for reflexive approaches to international relations as well as the study of law and diplomacy, rather than less (Vasquez 1998, 384). This is because the demand for systematic evaluation of empirical claims does not imply a rejection of more interpretative historical and sociological investigations.

Even if the need for systematic evaluation of important theoretical claims is accepted, do quantitative investigations generate cumulative knowledge? The results of an individual statistical analysis are not necessarily decisive tests for whole theories. But the repeated corroboration or falsification of a claim, using appropriate controls and checks for robustness, under a range of plausible model specifications, drawing on different independently-gathered datasets, should be taken seriously. Cashman’s review of the empirical evidence about the causes of war indicates that a winnowing-out process has taken place due to gradual accumulation of evidence, revealing some research programmes to be dead-ends (2014, 478). Although war as a phenomenon cannot plausibly be attributed to any single factor, scholarship seems to have identified several potential paths to conflict. Conflict research has gradually established ‘islands of findings’ that must be taken into account by any plausible theory of war and peace (Vasquez 2012, 329).

This highlights the caution of much conflict research. Singer’s decision to term the data-gathering project he initiated the *Correlates* of War owes to the fact that believed the discipline had a long way to go before it could plausibly discuss the *causes* of war (Geller and Singer 1998, 2). This position is quite consistent with the scepticism towards master-stories and ‘Theory with a capital T’ that Buzan and Lawson express (2016, 507). Perhaps the English School has not engaged with conflict studies because scholars such as Little identify ‘positivism’ with the analysis of the international system, and analysis of the international system with neorealism (Little 2000, 404). If ‘positivism’ is assimilated to neorealism, and neorealist arguments are found to be inadequate, then ‘positivist’ research can be bypassed. But ‘positivism’, which seems to refer to hypothesis testing using systematically-gathered data, is a methodology that is independent of any specific theory. Indeed, the sweeping, categorical claims of neorealism have not been upheld by quantitative research any more than they have been supported by the historical investigations of English School scholars (Vasquez 1998). Moreover, strongly deterministic theories of war have little purchase within the subfield. In an influential contribution, Gartzke argues that ‘war is in the error term’: given that we do not know the true beliefs and preferences of decision-makers, it is ultimately impossible to distinguish states that use deadly force and those that do not before the fact (Gartzke 1999). Scholars might be able to identify conflict-prone situations and ‘dangerous dyads’ (Bremer 1992), but identification of such patterns and regularities leaves substantial space for circumstance and decision-making.

Quantitative scholars are typically interested in identifying the average net effect of changes in certain variables on an outcome such as war. But this goal of identifying valid generalisations across cases leaves them open to the criticism that they neglect the importance of context. Tilly describes some quantitative research strategies as attempts to identify patterns across disparate historical cases by throwing them all into ‘the Great Blender’ (Tilly 1984, 116). Buzan and Lawson make a similar set of criticisms of the Correlates of War project, admonishing scholars for treating history as ‘a neutral site for the testing of theoretical claims’ (2015, 56). They argue for a historical sociological method that decomposes social phenomena into webs of interactions, examines the way in which events become threaded together in sequences, and takes account of context and interactions rather than examining factors in isolation (Buzan and Lawson 2016, 505).

Yet the methodological differences may not be as great as may first appear. Singer defends the systematic gathering of data as preferable to ‘ransacking history’ for instances that support a pre-existing theory (Singer 1969, 79). By giving equal weighting to all observations, quantitative approaches avoid assigning undue significance to cases that are more familiar to scholars. Quantitative approaches therefore offer a potential antidote to the presentism that historical scholars decry[[2]](#footnote-2). Furthermore, standard practice requires scholars to take time seriously by controlling for the serial correlation of militarised disputes between states (Beck, Katz et al. 1998). Conflicts are rarely isolated, anonymous incidents: they usually have a history. According to analysts of such inter-state rivalries, discussed further below, most international conflicts are best understood in terms of a pattern of antagonistic relations (Goertz 1994, 196-7).

Thinking about conflict in terms of rivalry is just one of the ways in which conflict studies researchers have shown awareness of the need to account for context in world politics. Lemke applies power transition theory to the regional level of analysis, finding that regions have experienced peace when a clear power ranking among states has been present (Lemke 2002). Yet he finds that the model’s fit is poor for Africa, leading him to agree with critics that existing international relations theories may over-generalise based on Western experiences (Lemke 2003, 57). He recommends that scholars should build models that take into account cross-regional differences in patterns of economic development and state-building, so as to capture ‘the international context for both developed and developing states’ (2003, 62). As part of a gauntlet of tests for hypotheses about the outbreak of war, Bennett and Stam examine whether the expected utility theory of war fails to account for ‘the tremendous variation in national culture and ideology across both space and time’ (2004, 165-6). They find that the theory is very successful at identifying conflict-prone pairs of states in Europe during the Cold War. It fares less well in other time periods and other regions, especially Africa and Latin America. This raises questions about whether existing theories in conflict studies are Eurocentric and make unwarranted generalisations from European international history to the rest of the world. Yet the English School has also been criticised for Eurocentrism, as its account of how international society expanded from a European core fails to acknowledge the way in which extra-European regional international societies were shaped by legal principles based on hierarchy and sovereignty during the colonial era (Keene 2002, ch. 3). If this is the case, it may help to explain why we observe striking variation in patterns of peace and conflict across different regions.

For Braumoeller, the problem with much quantitative research is temporal: most research has failed to take account of complexity and historical change (Braumoeller 2016). It is true that the majority of contributions to quantitative conflict research are concerned with hypotheses that are unrestricted in their temporal scope. Such approaches do indeed generalise across international history, assuming that the character of international relations is constant. Nonetheless, many quantitative conflict scholars have restricted the temporal scope of their claims, arguing that different sorts of relationships may exist in different periods of international history. Investigating arms build-ups and power transitions, Sample (2002) argues that the significance of these power political variables differs between historical periods because of the different meaning attached to these material factors within the changing international culture of diplomacy. Beyond such periodization, techniques exist that allow investigators to relax the assumption that the relationship between variables is constant over time, allowing for estimation of changes in the *character* rather than the circumstances of interstate relations[[3]](#footnote-3). Whilst employment of such techniques is not routine, they have been used to examine the dynamically changing effect of democracy and international organisations on peace (Mitchell, Gates et al. 1999).

Although a high proportion of research in conflict studies tests hypotheses, whether universal or context-specific, some scholars have seen the goal of quantitative research somewhat differently. Questions exist whether statistical tests using frequentist methods really are tests, especially as new data about inter-state war cannot be created on demand. In contrast to experimental methods, such ‘tests’ are carried out on data that has been analysed many times before (Schrodt 2014, 191). A methodologically cautious interpretation of regression results using observational data might view them as historical, descriptive generalisations: accurate summaries of patterns contained in the data (Dafoe 2011, 259). It may be more accurate to say that democracies *haven’t* gone to war with one another, rather than that democracies *don’t* go to war with one another. The fact that they haven’t, or have only rarely, nonetheless might tell us something important about international politics over the past two centuries. Yet we cannot know what relations among democracies would have been like if international structural conditions had been very different. Nonetheless, even if we cannot truly test hypothesises, quantitative methods allow us to evaluate how far our theoretical models fit the data, as well as allowing for richer descriptions of international history (Braumoeller 2013, 225).

Rather than disregarding criticisms that statistical research ignores history and context, such concerns have been acknowledged and taken seriously by quantitative scholars of conflict. Although particular studies could be criticised for offering tests of hypotheses that are unrestricted in temporal scope and insensitive to historical change, there exists a burgeoning literature of historically dynamic large-n analysis. Thus, the gap between quantitative conflict research and the historically-oriented perspective of scholars of the English School is real but not unbridgeable. Differences in terms of philosophical methodology should not prevent some form of dialogue and even synthesis between these different traditions of research. But what positive reason is there to bring the arguments of each perspective into dialogue with one another?

**War as an institution within international society**

The English School’s chief contribution to an understanding of conflict is its conception of war as an institution of international society. This a central element of its conception of international society as an institutional and normative framework that establishes and qualifies the sovereignty of states, the conduct of which is governed by intersubjectively shared notions of right and obligation. This is not to imply that the establishment of international society establishes conditions of peace. As Wight suggests ‘international society is a true society, but institutionally deficient’ (1991, 39). Indeed, it is ‘unstable, formless, insecure, and liable to collapse into war’ (ibid, 38).

But although it is fragile, international society nonetheless constitutes a decentralised ‘anarchical society’. Bull argues that such a society can be said to exist because world politics is characterised by a certain degree of order. By order, Bull does not just refer to continuity or predictability but in terms of the conditions for the elementary goals of social life: physical security, honouring of agreements and stability of possession (Bull 2002 [1977], 5). These are not the normative goals of a particular society, but are basic conditions for any sort of social existence whatsoever. That they are evident in international relations allows Bull to present a powerful counterargument against analogies between Hobbes’ state of nature and world politics. In international society, states are rarely destroyed, treaties are by and large honoured, and states largely acknowledge and respect one another’s territorial possessions. Insecurity exists, but it is not so severe that states typically push themselves into the situation of immiseration and exhaustion competing with one another (ibid, 45-7).

International relations is not, therefore, a state of war — war is a special state of affairs within an international society. A complex of rules defines international society and establishes the legitimacy of separate, territorially-bound political communities that are nonetheless united by intersubjectively acknowledged obligations (ibid, 65). Organised use of deadly force is possible, but its legitimate use is restricted to states in the particular set of conditions defined as ‘war’ — understood as a special state of relations between political authorities with its own distinct rules of conduct (ibid, 66). Violence, therefore, is both restricted and conditionally authorised as a prerogative of states under certain circumstances.

In the absence of a centralised authority, it is states themselves who must maintain the conditions for the endurance of these rules (ibid, 70). States do this by operating through certain institutions, ‘set[s] of habits and practices shaped toward the realisation of common goals’ (ibid, 71). Referred to as ‘primary institutions’ by subsequent English School scholars, for Bull these include the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, great power management and war. Compliance with the rules of each institution is expected, as breach of the rules is regarded as jeopardising international order. Without a central legislative authority, the rules constituting institutions are to a significant extent the product of custom (ibid, 58). In an anarchical society, however, compliance is imperfect and each state has latitude in the interpretation of the rules. Nonetheless, decentralised mechanisms of habit and inertia, moral censure, long-term self-interest and the ‘fear of unlimited conflict’ serve to maintain some stability (ibid, 60). The possibility of arms *control* rather than disarmament preoccupied Bull, the regulation of conflict rather than its transcendence (Ayson 2012).

Bull acknowledges that it seems counterintuitive to regard war as an institution, but insists that ‘there cannot be any doubt that it has been in the past such an institution, and remains one’ (Bull 2002 [1977], 178). He substantiates this pointthrough an analysis of war as an institutional activity in four different senses. First, war ‘in the strict sense’ is not just organised violence, but organised violence between sovereign states. War is a special category of activity that only specific actors can engage in. Bull notes that war in the legal sense does not coincide perfectly with the actual use of organised violence, but insists that the assignation of the right to make war to states has had the important effect of limiting violence and maintaining order in international society (ibid, 178). The rules are constitutive: they determine what is to count as war rather than banditry, piracy or terrorism. Second, the institutionalised nature of war is demonstrated in the regulation of the conduct of war and the restrictions on the use of force that this involves (ibid, 179). Third, states attempt to justify acts of war in terms of reasons that could establish the permissibility of the use of force in the judgement of other states. The perceived legitimacy of these claims shapes the degree to which third-parties within international society acquiesce to any political change brought about by war (ibid, 182-3). The precise rules governing war change over time, reflecting shifting values and the wider institutional and legal framework within international society (ibid, 182).

The fourth sense in which war is an institution is as a mechanism of enforcement and as a means for resolving disputes. Bull regards war as instrumental and purposive, although he recognises that war can have its own momentum (ibid, 180). Despite the nuclear revolution, Bull regards war and the threat of war as one of the ‘basic determinants’ of the international system and the strategic calculations of states (ibid, 180). Although the institutional framework of international society exists to guard against the danger of war, organised violence plays an acknowledged role in maintaining that framework. In its ‘“normal” historical function’, war provides a mechanism for enforcing international law and resolving political conflicts in favour of one party or another (ibid, 182-3).

English School theorists have built on Bull’s analysis of primary institutions. Holsti argues that the systems of rules defining the protagonists within international society are more basic and fundamental than those that regulate their interactions between (Holsti 2004). Constitutive rules about the organisation of political communities such as territorialism, nationalism and organisational centrality provide the ‘deep structure’ of international society (Ruggie 1983, 266). These provide the rationale for the existence of separate political communities and the criteria for membership of international society. Buzan and Little argue that there is something of a hierarchy among the primary institutions themselves, with the balance of power serving as one of the ‘master’ institutions (Buzan 2004; Little 2007). Pejcinovic qualifies these claims, pointing out that it is dubious to regard war as merely a ‘derivative’ institution, as war and the preparation for war have influenced the other fundamental institutional features of international society (Pejcinovic 2013, 34-5). This is consistent with Bull’s argument that the need to limit and contain violence is a basic imperative which motivates the establishment of the institutions of international society (Bull 2002 [1977], 66).

In exploring the development war as an institution, Pejcinovic focuses on the changing justifications for war and the wider normative framework and intersubjective beliefs that exist at a particular point in the history of international society. She argues that justifications for the prosecution of war involve appeals to identity, rights and necessity (Pejcinovic 2013, 10). Justifications for war based on identity appeal to the criteria for membership of international society. Historically, the rules for the prosecution of war against political communities outside of international society have been more permissive. But wars have also been justified as attempts to bring recalcitrant members of international society into line, to restore religious or ideological homogeneity (Pejcinovic 2013, chs. 2 and 3). Ralph notes the long history of wars predicated on a normative hierarchy between societies (2010, 281)

Rights-based justifications can only be made by an actor with a particular status. The status and concomitant rights of nation-states, individuals, indigenous peoples and colonial dependencies have fluctuated and varied throughout international history. As suggested in Bull’s discussion of sovereignty, the chief rights asserted by states relate to their authority to wield organised violence and to rule over specific territories, with territorial rights conceived of as analogous to the property rights of persons (Bull 2002 [1977], 18). After the Napoleonic Wars, the special prerogative of great powers was consolidated, and with it the primary institution of great power management of the international system. Pejcinovic regards the early 19th century as important in the transition from the justification of war in terms of the vindication of a state’s own rights, to the justification of war to protect the general enjoyment of rights by states — as in Pitt’s commitment to go to war with revolutionary France if it threatened ‘the general security of Europe’ (Pejcinovic 2013, 115). States are authorised to both defend their own rights and defend the framework that ensures the protection of those rights.

The third category of justifications are those based on claims of necessity, closely linked to the logic of *realpolitik* (Haslam 2002). But Pejcinovic notes that claims about necessity and identity have historically been intertwined: non-European stateless and nomadic peoples were represented by European thinkers as existing in a state of nature in which law and property rights did not exist (Pejcinovic 2013, 121). The conquest of non-European peoples was therefore represented as helping them exit the state of nature, bringing them the ‘benefits’ of civilization under colonial tutelage. Pejcinovic’s historical study demonstrates that the public justification for war has rarely been asocial and expressed purely in terms of self-interested calculation, notions of rights and of membership of a society of states have always been present.

The English School conceptualisation of war as an institution at the heart of international society is counterintuitive but compelling. War ‘in the strict sense’ is an activity engaged in by states, according to certain rules, justified in terms of a common set of reasons, employed as a means of resolving disputes. The institutions of international society both constrain and enable conflict, endorsing the state as the only actor that can legitimately employ organised violence. In an anarchical society, war is intersubjectively endorsed as a means for states to vindicate their rights, defend their common interests and effect change.

**International society and the conditions for conflict**

Yet the English School account of war is not without problems. Despite Bull’s compelling conceptualisation of war as a primary institution of international society, the English School lacks middle-range theories about war. Its theory of war is therefore highly underspecified. Because of this, when examining issues relating to insecurity and the incidence of war, theorists associated with the English School rely on middle-range theories developed by other research programmes. Although eclecticism may be preferable to theoretical sectarianism, this reliance on other research programmes makes English School arguments derivative and highlights the failure to develop its own middle-range theories. Some of the arguments that English School scholars borrow, furthermore, are inconsistent with both the underlying logic of the international society perspective and the evidence from quantitative conflict research.

Neither Pejcinovic nor Bull provides a clear account of the conditions under which states may enter into a state of war with one another. Each discusses a fairly wide range of motivations that may take a state to war. Bull identifies three broad categories of war objective: economic gain, security and promotion of ideology. However due to the rising costs of the resort to war and the decline in the benefits of territorial acquisition, however, states are now more reluctant to risk war for reasons other than security (Bull 2002 [1977], 188-9). Like Bull, Pejcinovic regards the reasons that motivate states to employ deadly force as being diverse. Her account provides a contextually sensitive account of how the permissible reasons for war have changed due to shifts in intersubjective beliefs about the legitimate use of organised violence. Nonetheless, her account does not enable us to distinguish between ideational structures in terms of how far they limit or promote violence. Nor does she identify the justifications that have been most permissive of the use of force. Existing English School scholarship therefore does not seem to provide guidelines about situations that are particularly war-prone or when the institutions of international society will constrain violence, when they will fail, and when they will enable conflict.

It may be objected that this criticism misunderstands the English School approach. Navari argues that English School research is not primarily concerned with causation but ‘directed towards analysing the historical consciousness of specific historical periods’ (Navari 2009, 49). But she notes that English School methodology acknowledges that ‘rules of the game’ in international society can generate patterns with observable behavioural effects and thus may provide causal explanations for those effects (Navari 2009, 51). This is the approach taken in this article: the rules of international society generate patterns and these patterns are amenable to statistical analysis, which in turn sheds light on the operation of international society’s rules and their influence on behaviour. This is methodologically consistent with the structural and comparative analysis of different international societies within the English School.

One of the major contributors to research on the structure of international societies, and to the revival of the English School in general, is Barry Buzan. With other scholars, Buzan has attempted to rethink core concepts from security studies and strategic studies, arguing that the concept of security should be broadened to include non-military threats, that threats themselves are socially constructed through a political process of ‘securitisation’ (Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998). Buzan has enriched English School theory by bringing the perspective into conversation with constructivism and re-examining the relationship between the concepts of international system, international society, primary institutions, and world society (Buzan 2004). However, when his theoretical discussions of security and inter-state military conflict are examined, it becomes clear that his analysis remains dependent on a set of assumptions that rest on a shaky evidential basis.

In *People, States and Fear* Buzan examines the factors that generate the dynamic of international insecurity. He follows Bull in rejecting the argument that anarchy among states implies a Hobbesian war of all against all, arguing that in a ‘mature’ anarchic society armed struggle is moderated (Buzan 1991, 176). Yet Buzan suggests that the idea of the balance of power contributes to ‘defining the problem of national insecurity’ because ‘[an] anarchic structure can only be maintained by a balance of power’ (Buzan 1991, 165). But if international relations is not a ceaseless struggle for power then it is difficult to see how this conclusion holds or why an anarchical society with a lopsided distribution of power could not exist. If the claim that the balance of power is both necessary and a constant of all anarchical societies is an empirical rather than tautological claim about the definition of terms, then it is a claim that is difficult to sustain given the paucity of evidence that states actually do form balancing coalitions or that periods of imbalance are highly unstable and insecure (Kaufman, Little et al. 2007).

Buzan’s argument about the balance of power and the origin of insecurity in international relations is not derived from more fundamental English School premises, indeed it seems to contradict them. In several other respects Buzan’s analysis of international security draws on neorealist middle-range theories, such polarity and qualitative arms racing (Buzan, Jones et al. 1993; Buzan and Wæver 2003, 61). Yet a systematic research into polarity has not produced conclusive findings. Indeed, Cashman suggests that research on polarity ‘may be a theoretical dead end’ (Cashman 2014, 405). Ray and Bentley (2010) show that the apparent connection between conflict and the concentration of military power is likely an artefact of the growth in the number of states in the 20th century. With Lawson, Buzan identifies the qualitative arms race as a central feature of world politics that has persisted since the 19th Century ‘global transformation’ (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 240). This analysis does extend existing theorisation of the competitive emulation among states through an original exploration of the systemic effects of ‘interaction capacity’ — the ‘volume, speed, range, and reliability of interaction’ (Buzan, Jones et al. 1993, 78). Yet the discussion overlooks quantitative findings on the dynamics of arms races, instead emphasising the effect of technology on the familiar *realpolitik* variable of the distribution of power (Buzan and Lawson 2015, 263-4). Whilst power ratios are relevant to the incidence of war, conflict research indicates they are only one of many significant factors in world politics. Deploying middle-range arguments developed by other research programmes might be regarded as appropriately ecumenical. Yet the reliance of one of the most prominent scholars within the English School on arguments that are both inconsistent with the core arguments of that tradition and are poorly corroborated by systematic evidence demonstrates how underdeveloped the English School account of war is.

A central weakness common to the accounts of Bull, Pejcinovic and Buzan is an underspecification of the causes of war. Without a more fully developed theoretical account of why conflicts break out within international society, English School theorists either suggest that war is idiosyncratic and occurs for too many reasons to adequately theorise, or they fall back on empirically questionable claims drawn from other research traditions. Underlying this seems to be a tacit acceptance of the Hobbesian claim that absence of a central authority is the permissive cause of war. If states under anarchy exist in a general condition of war with one another, then the reasons for particular wars are of little theoretical importance. But this is inconsistent with the English School’s powerful critique of the analogy between world politics and Hobbes’ state of nature. The international society tradition therefore lacks a convincing account of conflict derived from its own core theoretical tenets.

If war is a special situation that the framework of rules within international society nonetheless allow for, the development of middle-range theories of war should focus on the reasons why states move to and from a state of war, and how this process relates to fundamental institutional features of international society. The subdiscipline of conflict research has generated a wealth of evidence that can be brought to bear on these questions.

**Conflict in an anarchical society**

Although a great deal of conflict studies scholarship has examined the way in which the institutional framework of world politics shapes war, research into rivalry and the steps to war share the greatest affinity with existing international society research. A key finding is that the characterisation of international relations as a war of all against all is empirically hard to sustain. Historically, the odds of two countries experiencing some kind of militarised dispute in a given year has been very low, approximately 1 in 500 according to one estimate (Bennett and Stam 2004, 133). Even this figure, however, greatly overstates the risk of conflict. This is because a large proportion of militarised disputes take place among a relatively small number of pairs of states, dubbed strategic or enduring rivals (Klein, Goertz et al. 2006). Rivalries can be very long-lived and frequently result in war. Once rivalry is taken into account, the image of international relations as a Hobbesian state of nature loses much of its persuasiveness. Rivals use the techniques of power politics against one another and engage in ‘internal balancing’ to cancel out any military advantage of their rival (Gibler 2017). But this is not a general feature of international relations: if states were engaged in omnidirectional security competition then one would expect both alliances and rivalries to fluctuate along with the global distribution of military power, but they do not. Relations between states are normally cordial and diplomatic, situations in which hostility is reciprocated and war is expected constitute a small but significant minority. This set of findings is exactly as we might expect if states were members of an international society characterised by cautious tolerance and coexistence, in which a minority find themselves in conflict over rival assertions of their rights.

Where then do such rivalries come from? One approach to this question has been to resist the realist claim that military power and national security dominate other issues in world politics. Many different contentious issues might exist, each might be handled differently by states depending on the characteristics of the issue as well as prevailing norms and institutions. The issue-based approach views contention over issues as part of a process of ‘authoritative allocation of valued things’ (Mansbach and Vasquez 1981, 28). Different allocation mechanisms allocate the valuable stakes in different issue areas. These allocation mechanisms include voting, bargaining, application of principle, and force (Mansbach and Vasquez 1981, 283). Allocation mechanisms have the potential to settle a disputed issue by allocating stakes in a binding and authoritative fashion. Because the international political system is more decentralised than domestic political systems, there is greater scope for force to be used as a mechanism for attempting to settle issues favourably for one side when disputes arise (Vasquez 2009, 47). Just as Bull argues, the organised use of violence should be understood as a mechanism for settling disagreements within international society.

But although force is somewhat unique as an actor can always employ it unilaterally, Vasquez insists that war should be understood as a social and political institution. Historically, war has been regarded as a legitimate way of effecting change: military victory has conferred with it certain rights and obligations. Drawing on Grotius and Bull, Vasquez argues that war can be thought of as a contest shaped by tradition, custom and law (Vasquez 2009, 30-2). He suggests that, as an institution, war can be thought of as a social invention, a learned set of behaviours with historical origins (Vasquez 2009, 33). At some point in the historical past, political communities learned that organised violence can be an effective way of resolving certain disputes and came to regard it as appropriate. Vasquez argues that inter-state war persists in world politics because it has not been displaced by institutional alternatives providing equally authoritative mechanisms of allocation, and because of norms that endorse war as an appropriate way to handle certain issues (Vasquez 2009, 304-14).

In a rare contribution to quantitative conflict research by a scholar associated with the English School, Holsti reviews the issues at stake in wars between 1648 and 1989, finding that 62% of wars directly concerned territory and a further 22% of wars involved territorial issues (Holsti 1991). Bremer notes the tendency for wars to be fought by neighbours (Bremer 1992, 312-3). Building on these observations, Vasquez argues that territory is the actual cause of many conflicts as it is a uniquely war-prone issue (Vasquez 2009, 146-53). Investigating this hypothesis, he finds evidence that shared borders and not just proximity have been associated with conflict. Vasquez’s explanation is that aggressive techniques for establishing and demarcating territorial boundaries are deeply institutionalised. The territorial principle, therefore, is ‘an underlying force shaping world politics’ (Vasquez 1995, 159) that generates a world organised into territorial units divided by boundaries. These are frequently established or contested through force. In line with Holsti’s arguments concerning fundamental institutions, territorialism can be seen as part of the deep structure of international society, shaping other institutions such as war.

Because of territory’s high potential symbolic and material value in an age where the moral purpose of the state is to uphold the sovereignty of the nation (Hassner 2006/7), disputes over territory are especially likely to escalate from military confrontations to war (Vasquez and Henehan 2001). Senese and Vasquez argue that escalation nonetheless depends on decision-makers choosing to handle territorial disputes through the unilateral techniques of power politics (Senese and Vasquez 2008, 13-8). The outcomes of inter-state interactions are not mechanically determined by the structure of the international system, the diplomatic culture of an age influences how disputes will be handled. Beliefs about the appropriateness and effectiveness of war shape the character and conduct of international relations. If Senese and Vasquez are correct, when a *realpolitik* belief-system dominates diplomatic culture, the result is an international society in which states overestimate the effectiveness of power politics and are led through a series of steps towards war (Senese and Vasquez 2008, 31-5).

The issue-politics approach suggests that the relationship between territory and conflict is not necessarily constant, however. Allocation mechanisms other than organised violence may exist for distributing territory and determining borders. This fits precisely with Wight’s account of the international society perspective, according to which ‘the majority of the world’s frontiers are grounded on custom rather than force’ but ‘force steps in where custom breaks down’ (Wight 1991, 39). What matters is the effectiveness of different customary mechanisms for settling border issues within international society (Vasquez 2009, 161). Gibler provides evidence that territorial settlement treaties have reduced subsequent conflict between states (Gibler 1997). In the absence of such treaties and where borders do not follow geographic barriers the incidence of conflict has been much higher, as when former colonies have been left with the borders drawn by the former colonial power (Gibler 2012, ch. 7). Carter and Goemans find that international borders along previously-existing administrative frontiers have experienced fewer conflicts: the weight of institutional history seem to matter (Carter and Goemans 2011). In international society, custom matters as well as military power.

Bull’s understanding of war implies the possibility that peace does not necessarily depend on the moral or ideological transformation of world politics, but on the development of institutions that can serve as functional substitutes for war as a decision-mechanism (Vasquez 2009, 313-4). Using data from the Issue Correlates of War Project, Hensel (2012) finds that territorial claims have been settled via a range of means, including conquest and post-war negotiation, diplomacy and mediation. He finds that whilst attempts to settle issues by force have had a 10% success rate, 75% of attempts at binding third-party arbitration have been successful. International law seems to make a qualitative difference to how states contend over territorial disputes. When a state’s territorial claims are supported by the preponderance of legal opinion, it seems that it is both more likely to negotiate and more likely to escalate a conflict over the territory if one breaks out (Huth, Croco et al. 2012). States therefore are less likely to back down from a claim if they have international law on their side and expect the support of third-parties, consistent with the claim that international society endorses the resort to war to vindicate a state’s rights. By establishing principles governing the possession of territory, international society shapes both when states will use peaceful means to resolve disputes and when they will resort to force. But because it upholds the territorial integrity of states, the current normative framework of international society seems to have produced an overall tendency towards fewer wars for territorial aggrandisement. Goertz, Diehl and Balas (2016)claim that interstate rivalry has declined since 1945 because of the norm against conquest, the norm in favour of decolonisation, the norm that former colonies should inherit previous borders (*uti possidetis*) and the norm of a presumption against secession.

Zacher argues that the norm against the coercive territorial revisionism now receives almost universal support across international society, with states even restraining their allies from territorial conquest. The result is a decline of interstate war and possibly even ‘a basic transformation in the global political order’ (Zacher 2001, 246). Does this imply that the English School account of war as an institution of international society and the complimentary strand of quantitative conflict research discussed in this article are now only of historical curiosity? Not if the *mechanisms* through which war has declined are correctly identified by an international society approach. Proponents of the English School have acknowledged that institutions are not permanent and sometimes die out (Navari 2007, 594). English School theory neither asserts that the normative framework of the anarchical society is fixed, nor that there is an inevitable tendency towards order and peace. Russia’s annexation of the Crimea demonstrate that the triumph of the territorial integrity norm is not guaranteed. If the apparent decline of interstate war is the result of substitution by voluntary arbitration, the strengthening of the territorial integrity norm and the influence of international law on third-party states, then the English School account of the place of war within international society remains persuasive. The real challenge is if alternative mechanisms provide better explanations for current trends, for example if peace and war are shaped more by the global diffusion of liberalism and the preponderance of military power possessed by the US.

This is a possibility that has been explored by English School scholars (Jones 2006, 172-5). In an era of US unipolarity, war may no longer serve as an institution of international society in the sense of constituting a mechanism for resolving disputes between equals. Rather than a duel between sovereigns, war serves as an instrument of normative hierarchy as it did in the colonial era (Ralph 2010, 281). The War on Terror has been fought as an open-ended and unbounded campaign of quasi-imperial global law enforcement, predicated on a distinction between legitimate belligerents and ‘enemy combatants’. For their part, ISIS and Al-Qaeda have rejected the legitimacy of the society of states and made war upon it (Mendelsohn 2012), very much unlike anti-colonial and secessionist insurgencies that have made war in order to enter *into* the society of states.

Elsewhere, many recent civil wars have featured insurgencies lacking political goals beyond the acquisition of loot. Holsti notes this process of de-institutionalisation of war in some parts of the world, whereby ‘mayhem, crime and predation’ become the characteristics of armed conflict (Holsti 1996, 289). Making sense of the interventions by major powers into conflicts involving such groups may require a further study of past colonial conflicts, through which normative hierarchies were enforced and the boundaries of international society coercively extended. Colonial conflicts are under-researched in the quantitative tradition, despite recent efforts to generate a comprehensive dataset of historical wars involving non-state actors (Sarkees and Wayman 2010). An investigation of such wars and their relation to the institutions of international society may provide an opportunity to draw on the strengths of both quantitative conflict research and the English School, furthering our understanding of the development of regional international societies within a global framework of coercively-policed normative hierarchies.

**Conclusion**

Through an engagement with contemporary conflict research, the true potential of the English School conception of war can be realised. Recent contributions to the quantitative study of war and peace have revealed the importance of institutional factors in patterns of organised violence. The institutional framework of international society limits the use of force in some circumstances but provides the motive to use it in others. War is not the default state of relations between political communities, but rather a special antagonistic relationship that states enter under certain circumstances. This vindicates the English School perspective that world politics is not a war of all against all but a fragile, decentralised society bound together by rules. Habit, custom and enlightened self-interest help to maintain a degree of order under most circumstances. States are nonetheless authorised to use violence in the name of international society and to vindicate their perceived rights. The character of both war and peace is shaped by the global institutional landscape that states have created.

The middle-range hypothesis developed and tested by conflict researchers help to remedy the underspecification of the English School’s theory of war. Lacking a distinctive set of middle-range theories, scholars of the international society tradition have fallen back on derivative power political accounts of the causes of war and insecurity. Even Pejcinovic, who presents a sophisticated and historically sensitive account of the justifications for the use of force, does not attempt to explain the circumstances and causes of war. The English School has therefore failed to develop middle-range theories of conflict derived from its own core theoretical logic. An international society approach can be pushed much further by drawing on the insights of conflict research focusing on rivalry, contentious issues, territoriality and international law. Many of the most interesting and significant findings of conflict research point towards a characterisation of world politics that is similar to its depiction by the English School: a world in which the use of organised violence by states is rare, but enabled by the norms and institutions of international society for the vindication of rights in some circumstances. Rather than an anomic state of nature, states exist within a society that both restricts and enables the use of organised violence.

The barriers to an engagement between the English School and quantitative conflict research are not as great as may be thought. As has been demonstrated, there is an affinity between the substantive concerns of the international society approach and an important strand of research in conflict studies. Methodologically, much ‘classical’ scepticism towards the scientific approach is misplaced. Nonetheless, the claim that quantitative research is at risk of overgeneralising across regional, cultural and historical contexts has merit. Further examination of colonial conflicts and the institutional features of regional international societies could help address concerns about Eurocentrism. Time-sensitive methods that do not assume a constant character of international relations or an unchanging diplomatic culture might provide insights about the changing nature of international society. Further employment of such methods may help to establish bridges between quantitative conflict studies and historically-minded research on international society.

Bull recognised war and the threat of war as basic determinants of the international order. War cannot be thought of as merely a derivative institution within international society. Inter-state war, as a social institution, is the product of attempts to regulate organised violence. War provides a decision-mechanism for resolving interstate disputes, alongside other methods that in some historical eras have substituted for it. By drawing on the rich findings of contemporary conflict research, Bull’s conception of war can provide the basis for further empirically rigorous and historically sensitive inquiry into the changing place of war within international society.

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1. One of the few examples is Michael Nicholson (1981). Kalevi Holsti, whose contributions are analysed in detail in the article, is perhaps the only scholar to have made significant direct contributions to both bodies of scholarship. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. So long, of course, as the operational constructs used to assemble the data and the conceptual categories underpinning them can be applied meaningfully across historical contexts. This is the truly contentious issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an overview of dynamic approaches such as Kalman filtration, rolling regression and dynamic conditional correlation see Lebo and Box-Steffensmeier (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)