

THE WAR OF THE  
TRIPLE ALLIANCE:  
Three Explanatory Models\*

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The Paraguayan War, or War of the Triple Alliance, fought by Paraguay against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay (1864–1870), remains unique in the Latin American context in several respects. Dire in its duration and human toll, the war's underlying conflict was not directly related to specific boundary disagreements. Unlike other Latin American conflicts, the War of the Triple Alliance has stirred a passionate controversy involving heavy ideological connotations, with some analysts viewing it as a struggle between civilization (the Alliance) and barbarism (Paraguay) and others depicting it as a confrontation between British imperialism (the Alliance) and Latin American nationalism (Paraguay).

Many attempts have been made to explain this war. A number of studies have assumed an apologetic approach (García Mellid 1963; Pomer 1968; Trías 1975). Some contain careful and detailed chronological accounts (Cardozo 1967a), and others present in-depth analysis of the diplomatic and political dimensions of the conflict (Box 1948; Cardozo 1954, 1961). But excepting a few remarks by Robert Burr (1955), no one has systematically applied insights from contemporary research on international conflict to explain the war. Such is the goal of this article, albeit as a preliminary exercise subject to further refinement.

Numerous benefits result from applying various theories of war to the Triple Alliance conflict. First, this exercise submits previous interpretations of the war to more rigorous tests. Second, it assesses the usefulness of concepts developed in the subdiscipline of international politics. Third and even more important, it generates a healthy revision of the conceptual tools used to explain armed conflicts in Latin America

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and opens doors to more fruitful interdisciplinary study of relations among Latin American countries.

The first part of this study will briefly review the historical sequence of events that led to the war. Discussed next will be three competing models widely used in the literature on international relations to explain the outbreak of armed conflict—imperialism, balance of power, and power transition.<sup>1</sup> To ascertain their usefulness in explaining the War of the Triple Alliance, the following section will provide the data needed to test these models empirically. The last part will assess comparatively their explanatory power.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE HISTORICAL SEQUENCE

The major events preceding the war can only be summarized here.<sup>3</sup> In 1864 the Uruguayan government, under the control of the conservative Blanco party, faced a revolt led by General Venancio Flores of the liberal Colorado party. Having fought on the side of Argentine President Bartolomé Mitre in the Argentine Civil War (which ended in 1861), General Flores gained the tacit backing of the Argentine government and the open support of the Brazilian empire. Brazilian-Uruguayan relations, in contrast, were increasingly strained by boundary incidents exacerbated by the Brazilian cattle-raising elite of Rio Grande do Sul and Uruguayan claims that rebel forces were using Brazilian territory as a base of operation. The border state of Rio Grande do Sul was an important force in Brazilian politics, in part because much of the Brazilian military establishment originated from that southern state.

The Brazilian decision to use military force to extract concessions from (and eventually topple) the Uruguayan government prompted Uruguay to seek external support through an alliance with Paraguay. The attempts of the Paraguayan president, Marshall Francisco López, to mediate the dispute were rebuffed by the Brazilians, which led López to issue the ultimatum of 30 August 1864. This document stated that any occupation of Uruguayan territory by Brazilian troops would be considered a violation of the principle of equilibrium among the states in the Río de la Plata region, a matter of fundamental interest to Paraguay insofar as it guaranteed the security, peace, and prosperity of the area. Thus a Brazilian invasion of Uruguay was declared a “casus belli” for Paraguay.

In October 1864, the Brazilians moved to blockade the port of Montevideo and began landing forces “to protect the life, honor, and property” of Brazilian citizens. In retaliation, the Paraguayan government seized the Brazilian merchant ship *Marquês de Olinda* the following month as it sailed up the Río Paraguay toward the Matto Grosso. The hostilities had begun.

To reach the theater of operations, the Paraguayan army had to use the Argentine province of Corrientes (and also the disputed territory of Misiones) as a transit corridor. Paraguay asked the Argentine government for permission to cross but was denied on the grounds that Argentina wished to remain neutral. Arguing that Argentine neutrality was only a pretext for depriving Paraguay of badly needed land transit while Brazil had already been granted equivalent free use of the waterways, López declared war on Argentina on 18 March 1865 and proceeded to capture the city of Corrientes (Centurion 1894, 248–56).

By 1 May 1865, Brazil, Argentina, and the Uruguayan government (now headed by the victorious Flores) signed the Triple Alliance treaty, which was to be kept secret until its objectives were achieved. The treaty declared that the war was not “against Paraguay, but against its tyrant, López” and that after the war Paraguayan independence and territorial integrity would be respected (an English translation of the treaty is reproduced in Kolinski 1965).

Paraguayan troops never reached the actual theater of operations in Uruguay. The war became a defensive one for Paraguay after its troops were defeated by the allies in the Battle of Uruguayana. The war ended five years later, with the army annihilated and the population decimated, when Marshall López was killed on 1 March 1870 by a Brazilian battalion in Cerro Corá.

### THREE COMPETING MODELS OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

#### *The Balance of Power Theory*

The theory of balance of power as an analytical construct and a prescriptive device is the oldest and most ambiguous of the three models. In this article, it will be used as an analytical model of equilibrium, not of mere distribution of power. In other words, it will be used to characterize a particular type of distribution of power shaped by the equilibrium of forces among the members of a given system.

The balance of power theory finds its immediate empirical referent in the European situation between 1816 and 1914, brought about by the Congress of Vienna. This “system of large, medium, and small states having a perfect balance” (Ferrero 1963, vi) responded to Friedrich Von Gentz’s assumption that “if the state system of Europe is to exist and be maintained by common exertions, no one of its members must ever become so powerful as to be able to coerce all the rest put together. . . . The state which is not prevented by any external consideration from oppressing a weaker [state], is always, however weak it may be, *too strong* for the interest of the whole” (Von Gentz, quoted in Claude 1962, 63, emphasis in original).

The balance of power that maintained peace in Europe for almost a century (allowing only relatively “small” wars) has been praised elsewhere, particularly by the British, because Great Britain, the “balancer,” was allegedly responsible for keeping the system working properly. In Sir Winston Churchill’s words, the balance of power illustrates “the wonderful unconscious tradition of British foreign policy” (cited in Claude 1962, 18), a tradition of siding with the weaker to restore the equilibrium broken by the stronger.

Although many scholars and politicians have maintained that equilibrium prevents war from breaking out, some are more skeptical about its alleged positive effects while others question whether such a balance ever existed (Haas 1961; Carr 1939). In this vein, A. F. K. Organski has asserted that the historical evidence does not support the thesis that equilibrium leads to peace, that the opposite is actually the case. He affirms that “the relationship between peace and the balance of power appears to be exactly the opposite of what has often been claimed. The periods of balance, real or imagined, are periods of warfare, while the periods of known preponderance are periods of peace. . . . [N]ations are reluctant to fight unless they believe they have a good chance of winning, but this is true for both sides only when the two are fairly evenly matched, or at least when they believe they are. Thus a balance of power increases the chances of war” (Organski 1968, 294). According to this argument, a situation of preponderance will preserve peace because the stronger does not need to go to war and the weaker cannot.

In order to assess the applicability of the balance of power model, one must first ascertain whether a balance of power existed at the outbreak of the war. Because in this case the known outcome was war, discovering an equilibrium of forces would cast doubts of the traditional argument that a balance of power prevents war. Instead, the contention that equilibrium leads to war would be supported. Conversely, should the findings indicate that the region was not characterized by an equilibrium of forces among its nation-states but rather by the preponderance of one actor, then that imbalance might be postulated as a relevant causal factor. This finding would lend indirect support to the traditional balance of power theory because had such a balance been present, it could (at least theoretically) have prevented the war.

### *The Power Transition Model*

Organski (1968) elaborated his power transition model on the assumption that change—particularly economic change and modernization—rather than stability, is the key to international politics and its

conflicts. In contrast with the balance of power theory's emphasis on stability, the power transition approach stresses change as the major explanatory variable in understanding the causes of war. War thus results from changes affecting the international distribution of power.

Organski argues that when the first-ranked power in a given system is threatened with eclipse by the second-ranked power, war breaks out either because the first-ranked power wants to avoid being overtaken by the second or because the second seeks recognition of its current capabilities and readjustment of its relative position on the ladder of power and prestige, or for both reasons (Organski 1968, chap. 14, especially 338–42, 355–63). Countries are therefore classified in three main categories: those with potential power (low productivity and no industrialization), those in transitional stages of growth (rapid industrialization, urbanization, and increasing overall power), and those in a mature stage (fully industrialized). War is more likely in the second category because abrupt changes may significantly affect the preexisting distribution of power.

Organski then introduces the variable of satisfaction and combines it with power in a kind of relative deprivation theory applied to the international arena. He comes up with four new categories: (1) countries that are powerful and satisfied; (2) countries that are powerful and dissatisfied; (3) countries that are weak and satisfied; (4) countries that are weak and dissatisfied.

Major wars are unlikely to break out among countries falling into the first, third, and fourth categories, but they become very likely with countries in the second category. In the situation of a power transition involving countries in the first and second categories, war is even more likely because a powerful country may find the distribution of power inadequate and may therefore attempt to change the distribution to its advantage, or the dominant power, feeling threatened by the emergence of a new power, may launch a preemptive war.

To test Organski's argument, one must determine whether the countries involved in the Paraguayan War were either powerful and satisfied or powerful and dissatisfied. Second, one must ascertain whether the region was in a situation of power transition, that is, whether the first-ranked power was about to be eclipsed by the second-ranked or the latter had found the distribution of power inadequate and was attempting to change the situation to its advantage.

### *The Imperialist Theory*

Although the first two approaches have not been utilized thus far in analyzing the War of the Triple Alliance, the imperialist theory

has enjoyed widespread acceptance. The imperialist approach to this war is associated with the revisionist movement of the 1960s and was strengthened in the 1970s by the growing influence of dependency theory. Its broad appeal has captured the support of right-wing and left-wing scholars, the former because of their fascination with all things authoritarian and antiliberal and the latter because the Paraguayan War seems an excellent illustration of the validity of dependency theory. Atilio García Mellid's *Proceso a los falsificadores de la historia del Paraguay* (1963) at one end of the spectrum and Leon Pomer's *La Guerra del Paraguay: ¡Gran negocio!* (1968) on the other end represent two of the most influential studies among many produced by this movement.

The dependency version of the revisionist approach views the war as a clash between a Paraguay intent on pursuing an independent and nationalistic path to development and British imperialism, which was equally determined to transform Paraguay into an economic colony. That process of independent development has been traced back to Paraguay's so-called autonomous revolution (White 1978), usually viewed as an independent neosocialist regime established by J. Gaspar Rodríguez Francia (1814–1840) and continued by Carlos A. López (1840–1862) and Francisco Solano López (1862–1870), well before Marx wrote *Das Kapital*. The dependency version of revisionism largely follows the Leninist thesis that expansionism and imperialism resulted from the capitalist countries' "struggle for economic territory" (Tucker 1975, 270). As applied to the War of the Triple Alliance, the argument asserts that the war was provoked by Great Britain to open Paraguay as a field of profitable investments and a market for British exports as well as to obtain access to a raw material (cotton) that was in short supply due to the Civil War in the United States.

To explore the validity of this approach, one must establish first whether Great Britain was looking for investment opportunities, markets for its products, and cotton for its industries in Paraguay. Then it should be ascertained whether Paraguay constituted an attractive market for British capital and products as well as a potentially large supplier of cotton. Finally, it should be established whether the López government prevented Paraguay from actually becoming the market that Great Britain was seeking and the big supplier of cotton that the British needed.

#### AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CAPABILITIES

To assess the relative validity of these three theoretical approaches to conflict, a number of measurement problems must be addressed. The balance of power and the power transition models both assume the utilization and quantification of the elusive concept of power. In this article, *power* will be conceived of as the possession of

certain capabilities, that is, as the availability of material resources that could be used in a confrontation among nation-states. The three kinds of capabilities postulated here as most relevant are economic, military, and geopolitical (for a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Sullivan 1976, 102–17, 155–89). The limitations of this restricted definition of power as power resources or assets are obvious (see Baldwin 1979 for an excellent criticism), but it is nevertheless the best available tool for permitting systematic comparison across a number of cases. The concept of power defined thus as power capability will allow the development of an overall index of power capability for each nation, in turn disaggregated into economic, military, and geopolitical dimensions.

Economic capabilities have often been associated not only with measures of output (such as GNP, for example) but also with inputs, that is, with levels of consumption of strategic factors like iron, steel, and electricity (see Sabrosky 1975, for example). In the context of the Paraguayan War, such an approach is not only impractical (because of lack of data) but irrelevant because some inputs were nonexistent or less important than they are now. The economic dimensions of power capability will therefore be measured using other indicators mainly related to extractive and commercial dimensions. Three variables have been chosen as indicators of overall economic capability: trade value (exports plus imports), government revenues, and government revenues per capita. These three factors are widely considered to be the best available indicators for measuring economic capabilities in the nineteenth century; they were also selected by Wayne Ferris in his study of power capabilities of all nation-states in the period from 1850 to 1966 (1973, 33–51).

Measuring military capabilities poses even greater problems because comparable figures are available only for the size of the armed forces. The entire issue of the technical quality of equipment and training is itself a theme for another study. Consequently, army size is the only indicator used in this study, whereas Ferris's study included military expenditures and military expenditures per capita (1973, 50).

The measurement of geopolitical capabilities is straightforward, with area and population chosen as indicators. To reflect the fact that no country in the region had complete administrative control over its territory at the time, only half of that territory was computed.<sup>4</sup> Roughly one-half of the areas disputed by Paraguay and Brazil and by Paraguay and Argentina (the current Argentine province of Misiones and the territory north of the Apa river and south of the Matto Grosso) were calculated as Paraguayan territory.

Finally, because all capability dimensions are not equally important in constructing a power capability index, Ferris's adjusted weighting factors were adopted (1973, 50). Briefly, adjusting the weight

TABLE 1 Regional Power Capabilities of Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay circa 1860

Country	Trade Value Export and Import pounds sterling (%)	Government Revenues pounds sterling (%)
Paraguay	560,392 (1.5)	314,260 (4.3)
Argentina	8,951,621 (24.3)	1,710,324 (23.5)
Brazil	23,739,898 (64.4)	4,392,226 (60.3)
Uruguay	3,607,711 (9.8)	870,714 (12.0)
Regional Total	36,859,682 (100.0)	7,287,524 (100.0)

Sources: For Paraguay: Exports, imports, and government revenues as of 1860 are from Herken (1982, 108–9). Armed forces figures come from Kolinski (1965, 42), although Cardozo’s estimate of 38,173 is lower (1961, 524), as is Bray’s estimate of 40,000 to 50,000 (1958, 152). Size represents the author’s estimate based on one-half of the current size plus half of the territory considered lost to the allies. Population figures come from Williams (1979, 117). For Argentina: Export and import figures (for 1863) are based on official records corrected for contraband by A. Vaillant, as cited in Acevedo (1933, 3:127). Government revenues (1865) were taken from Randall (1977, 2:222). Armed forces figures are from Spalding (1940, xviii–xix), as cited by Kolinski (1965, 64). Although Kolinski considered that estimate too high, Acevedo cites an even higher estimate of 43,250 (1933, 3:375). Size is estimated by the author. Population figures are from Cuccorese (1966, 59). For Brazil: Exports and imports (1860) and government revenues (1864) were taken from Randall (1977, 3:217, 222). Armed forces estimates are from Kolinski (1965: 49, 57) and include 16,834 army troops, 2,384 marines, and one-half of the Guardia Nacional (estimated by Kolinski at 200,000 members). Size is estimated by the author. Population estimates are from Acevedo (1933, 3:118) and Kolinski (1965, 49). For Uruguay: Exports and imports (1862) come from Acevedo (1933, 3:126). Government revenues were taken from Acevedo (1933, 3:466–69) and were calculated as follows: Rentas departamentales (1865), 1,104,360 pesos fuertes, and Tesorería (1866), 2,988,000 pesos fuertes. Armed Forces figures come from Acevedo (1933, 3:375). Size is estimated by the author. Population figures (1864) come from Acevedo (1933, 2:118). Sources on rates of exchange: for Paraguay, Herken (1982, 108–9); for Argentina, Randall (1977, 2:202); for Brazil, Randall (1977, 3:208–9); and for Uruguay, Acevedo (1933, 3:165).

of the factors means that every unit of power is disaggregated into a number of dimensions of differing relative weight or importance. Thus trade value is given a weight of .1589, government revenues, .1905, government revenues per capita, .0762, armed forces, .4127 (thereby



<i>Government Revenues per Capita pounds sterling (%)</i>	<i>Armed Forces (%)</i>	<i>Size in Square Kilometers (%)</i>	<i>Population (%)</i>
.79 (14.2)	57,000 (27.0)	275,000 (4.6)	400,000 (3.5)
.83 (14.9)	30,000 (14.2)	1,388,328 (23.1)	1,737,076 (15.1)
.48 (8.6)	119,218 (56.4)	4,255,983 (70.9)	9,100,000 (79.2)
3.48 (62.4)	5,000 (2.4)	93,463 (1.5)	250,000 (2.2)
5.58 (100.0)	211,218 (100.0)	6,012,774 (100.1)	11,487,076 (100.0)

absorbing values that would have been imputed to military expenditures and military expenditures per capita), area, .0615, and population, .0998. Together they add up to one unit of power, although some variables outweigh others in the composition of the unit.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 includes the overall capability of the region in absolute and percentage terms. Table 2 transforms the values of table 1 into a national index of power capability.

These measures of power capabilities permit straightforward assessment of the validity of the balance of power and power transition models. But examining of the imperialist approach would ideally require some measure of the potential importance of the Paraguayan market in terms of absorbing British imports and providing vital raw materials. Lacking such a precise market indicator, this study relies on the available measures of economic capabilities coupled with data concerning European and North American cotton imports for manufacturing and Brazilian cotton exports. Although far from perfect, these indicators reflect accurately the basic economic factors that the imperialist theory tries to encompass. Cotton was selected because some analysts have argued that the shortage created by the U.S. Civil War prompted Great Britain's actions in the Río de la Plata region. Fluctuations in cotton imports are to be taken as a gross indicator of the world-market

TABLE 2 *Weighted Index of Power Capabilities*

	Weighting Factor	Paraguay	Argentina	Brazil	Uruguay
Trade value	.1589	.0024	.0386	.1023	.0156
Government revenues	.1905	.0082	.0448	.1149	.0229
Government revenues per capita	.0762	.0108	.0114	.0066	.0475
Armed forces	.4127	.1114	.0586	.2328	.0099
Size	.0615	.0028	.0142	.0435	.0009
Population	.0998	.0035	.0151	.0790	.0022
Total	1.0000	.1391	.1827	.5791	.0990

Sources: See table 1.

Note: The figures were arrived at by multiplying the country's percentage share of the regional total by the weighting factor (see endnote 3) and dividing that figure by 100. For example, Paraguay's .0024 trade value results from 1.5 times .1589 divided by 100. Totals do not add up to 1.000 because of rounding.

situation, whereas Brazilian cotton exports are to be compared with Paraguayan total exports to gauge Paraguay's cotton production potential.

#### IMPERIALISM, BALANCE OF POWER, OR POWER TRANSITION?

##### *Imperialism*

Much of the appeal of the imperialist interpretation as well as its *prima facie* factual support derive from the fact that in Paraguay the influence of the centers of power was negligible, foreign investment was insignificant and largely restricted to the commercial sector, and strategic sectors of the economy were under state control (although many scholars would argue that they were actually under the patrimonial control of the ruling family). However true this characterization may be, a causal link between imperialism and the war cannot be logically deduced from it.

Perusal of the evidence presented above readily uncovers the weakness of the imperialist interpretation. As for the hypotheses concerning British economic interests and Paraguay's economic potential, the data in tables 1 through 4 lend little support to the thesis that Paraguay constituted an attractive market for British capital and exports, as many historians have suggested. In fact, having only a small share of

TABLE 3 Sources of Supply of Raw Cotton for European and North American Manufacturing, Annual Averages in Millions of Pounds

Years	United States	Brazil	West Indies	East Indies	Egypt & Smyrna	Total
1856–1860	1,633.7	27.7	7.2	207.9	57.0	1,933.5
1861–1865	531.7	36.2	14.6	491.3	191.4	1,265.2
1866–1870	1,108.6	99.9	33.2	576.5	190.9	2,009.1

Source: Platt (1977, 257).

TABLE 4 Brazilian Cotton Production, 1861–1864

Years	Volume (in arrobas)	Value (in pounds sterling)
1860–1861	670,860	608,843
1861–1862	872,210	1,012,484
1862–1863	1,085,628	2,190,767
1863–1864	1,282,974	3,651,626

Source: Granziera (1979, 163).

Note: One arroba equals twenty-five pounds.

the total economic capability of the system, Paraguay could hardly have constituted an outlet for Great Britain. Nor is there evidence (other than the circumstantial kind presented by Pomer 1968) that Great Britain was avidly waiting for Paraguay to open its doors to British capital. Had such been the case, once the obstacle to British expansion (Solano López) was removed, the British would have invested large sums and increased trade significantly. By 1880, however, British investments did not exceed 1.5 million pounds sterling, less than one percent of its total investments in Latin America. In fact, Paraguay ranked fourteenth in British investments in Latin America, followed only by Cuba, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, which were all in the U.S. sphere of economic influence. By comparison, the British invested 38.9 million pounds in Brazil, 20.3 million in Argentina, 36.1 million in Peru, and 32.7 million in Mexico (Platt 1972, 289). It should also be noted that the 1.5 million pounds represented government bonds sold by the Paraguayan government in the London market, not direct British investments. As far as trade is concerned, not until 1903 did Paraguayan imports from the United Kingdom reach one hundred thousand pounds, and not until 1913 did Paraguayan exports to Great Britain exceed fifty thousand pounds sterling (Platt 1972, 316–19, 322).

Another version of the imperialist explanation is based on the

cotton crisis of the mid-nineteenth century. The argument holds that the U.S. Civil War had created such a severe market disruption that the British were considering Paraguay as a production outlet to make up for declining production in the Confederate states. The crisis indeed existed and was severe. But as can be seen in tables 3 and 4, when the Paraguayan War began, Britain had already located alternate sources elsewhere, particularly in the West Indies, Egypt, and Brazil. This fact is acknowledged even by Pomer (1968), one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the imperialist thesis. Furthermore, Paraguay's limited economic capabilities at that time make it unreasonable to believe that the country was about to become the major world supplier that Britain was seeking. Paraguayan exports represented less than 3 percent of total Brazilian exports. To reach even one-half of the Brazilian level within a decade would have been miraculous.

The soundest rebuttal of the explanation based on the cotton crisis and the imperialist approach comes from the actions of López himself. He was in fact interested in finding markets for Paraguayan products, especially cotton, and had sent numerous samples of the Paraguayan variety to Europe to attract the interest of possible buyers (Sánchez Quell 1973, 213). Consequently, no factual basis exists for believing that López would have in any way prevented Paraguay from exporting as much cotton as possible. Nor did any governmental obstacles exist to importing British goods, an activity carried out by the merchants of Asunción (mostly foreigners) through the port of Buenos Aires. In fact, the López family appears to have been the main beneficiary of European imports.

Another argument used to support the imperialist explanation is based on the political incompatibility of British-style liberal capitalism and Paraguayan-style state capitalism. These two models obviously differed in many respects, although the Paraguayan economy was much more capitalistic than is generally believed. But the argument that such incompatibility led Great Britain to wage a covert war has been supported only by references to the Brazilian and Argentine loans of 1865 and the papers of the British envoy to Buenos Aires, Edward Thornton, "whose distaste for both Paraguay in general and Solano López in particular was an open secret" (McLynn 1979, 30). But as Nicholas Tate (1979) and F. J. McLynn show, Thornton's preferences did not cause the British Foreign Office to increase its "very little interest in the war" (McLynn 1979, 30). More recent research on the extent of the alleged British interest, based on the war coverage by *The London Times*, yields similar conclusions (Herken and Giménez de Herken 1983). Obviously, Thornton's views alone, however anti-López, do not indicate an imperialist conspiracy.

The loans were government bonds sold to private individuals or

syndicates in the London market. Many similar operations took place well before the war, and many more afterwards. The 1865 Brazilian loan to finance the war (on the nominal amount of 6.7 million pounds sterling) had been preceded by almost 16 million pounds sterling in loans contracted between 1824 and 1860 (Randall 1977, 3:219). Similarly, the Argentine loan of 2.5 million pounds sterling (nominal 1865 value) had been preceded by the 1822, 1823, and 1857 loans in the amount of 2.6 million pounds sterling (Randall 1977, 2:190). López himself had been authorized by Congress to contract a loan of 5 million pounds sterling to pay for the war, although it could not be concluded due to the military blockade of Paraguay (Centurion 1894, 243). In sum, whichever version of the imperialist explanation is addressed, the available evidence provides surprisingly little empirical support.

### *Balance of Power*

The balance of power explanation makes sense insofar as it was the publicly declared cause of the war. Maintaining the balance of power was the rationale behind the ultimatum of 30 August, and the declaration of war on Argentina repeated the same argument. In the congressional report supporting the declaration of war (which could not have been written without López's approval), the regional situation was compared to the Russo-Ottoman wars. Alphonse de Lamartine's *Histoire de la Turquie* (1854) was cited to argue that the Argentine position resembled Austria's and Prussia's indifference to the Russian invasion of Turkey, the latter being invoked as analogous to Brazil's invasion of Uruguay.

But the data in tables 1 and 2 lend little support to the hypothesis that a balance of power existed in the region. In fact, Brazil comprised almost 60 percent of the total regional capabilities, far more than Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay combined. If the military variable is excluded (arguing that Paraguayan military figures overestimate its real military might) or if it is corrected to include factors such as naval power or military expenditures, the Brazilian preponderance becomes even greater. No balance of power existed in the sense of equilibrium in the Río de la Plata in the 1860s; consequently, there could be no threat to an equilibrium that never existed. Brazil was the undisputed, albeit not unrestrained, first regional power by any standard, and its power far exceeded that of all other regional actors combined.

Do these facts then support the hypothesis that a lack of balance, the Brazilian preponderance, led to the war? This argument seems persuasive when focusing only on the Brazilian invasion of Uruguay, which the Brazilian Foreign Ministry apparently conceived of as a limited "surgical" operation. Yet this operation escalated into a conflict of

regional proportions not initiated by Brazil in the strict sense. In other words, while the localized Brazilian-Uruguayan conflict leading to the Brazilian invasion of Uruguay can be posited as the result of Brazilian preponderance, the ensuing regional conflict cannot because Brazil was engaged in a conflict that it had not actively sought, one brought about by a regional actor who was not preponderant. Thus even though the rhetoric surrounding the conflict encourages viewing the causes of the war according to the balance of power theory, this interpretation seems to raise as many questions as it answers.

These problems are compounded by the fact that measuring power relations today bears little resemblance to whatever gross indications were available to López and his contemporaries. It is safe to assume that their reading of power relations was far more impressionistic than the one developed here. Furthermore, a disparity often exists between the perception of equilibrium or threat and the actual state of equilibrium or threat (Jervis 1976). Hence, one could hypothesize that the combination of a highly impressionistic and distorted reading of power relations and a faulty perception of threat moved López to act. He had visited Europe between June 1853 and December 1854, and it is therefore not surprising that he would apply to the Río de la Plata context the theories so widely discussed in Europe at the time, especially the balance of power theory (for an account of López's stay in Europe, see Sánchez Quell 1980, 23–52). Widespread evidence exists of European influence on López's views and lifestyle (Sánchez Quell 1973, 217–19). The phraseology used in the declaration of war on Argentina employed European parameters, depicting the situation as resembling exactly the Russo-Ottoman war. Whether balance of power considerations were merely López's pretext for an expansionistic drive (as many have argued) or a sincere, but amateurishly mistaken, reading of the situation cannot be irrefutably established. This question will remain a topic of speculation.

To summarize, the available evidence demonstrates that the balance of power theory does not reflect the power reality of the region. On the one hand, the hypothetical collapse of a balance that did not exist cannot be postulated as a relevant causal factor. The theory that imbalance led to war, on the other hand, raises as many questions as it answers, mainly because the conflict was not started by the preponderant actor. Finally, a general qualification of the balance of power theory should be made based on the role of perceptions and the eventual disparity between perceptions and reality. This perceptual dimension involved in every evaluation of conflictive situations, together with the pervasive use of language and literature suggesting that balance of power was indeed a key consideration, adds to the symbolic significance of the theory.

TABLE 5 *Economic Evolution in the 1850s and 1860s in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay*

	Exports (pounds sterling)		Government Revenues (pounds sterling)	
	1850s	1860s	1850s	1860s
Paraguay	211,801	307,798	138,659	281,043
Argentina	2,126,704	6,774,435	872,763	1,845,862
Brazil	9,257,828	13,706,407	3,661,448	4,666,897
Uruguay	1,160,714	1,347,809		870,714

Sources: For Paraguayan exports: 1850s exports, the average for 1851 through 1859 (Herken 1982, 108); 1860s exports, the average between the figure for 1860 (Herken 1982, 108) and that for 1861 (Schmitt 1963, 146). For Paraguayan government revenues: 1850s, the average for 1854 through 1858 (includes the total amount of sales, not the profit or taxes on them), from Herken (1982, 109); for the 1860s, the average between the figure for 1860 (Herken) and that for 1864 from *El Semanario* (cited in Acevedo 1933, 3:373). For Argentine exports: 1850s, the 1851 figure (Buenos Aires province alone) taken from Randall (1977, 2:204); for the 1860s, the average from 1864 through 1867 (Randall 1977, 2:218). For Argentine government revenues: for the 1850s, the 1850 figure comes from Lynch (1981, 195); for the 1860s, the average from 1864 through 1867 (Randall 1977, 2:222); rates of exchange taken from Gondra (1943, 397–98) and Randall (1977, 2:201–2). For Brazilian exports: the 1850s figure is an average of 1850 through 1859; the 1860s figure is an average of 1860 through 1867 (Randall 1977, 3:216–17). For Brazilian government revenues: the 1850s figure is an average of 1850 through 1859; the 1860s figure is an average of 1860 through 1867 (Randall 1977, 3:248); rates of exchange were taken from Randall (1977, 3:208–9). For Uruguayan exports: the 1850s figure is for 1856; the 1860s figure is for 1864 (Acevedo 1933, 2:673 and 3:345). For Uruguayan government revenues: for 1865, see sources in table 1; rates of exchange were taken from Acevedo (1933, 2:673, and 3:165).

### *Power Transition*

To analyze the explanatory value of the power transition approach, a change in the level of analysis is necessary. In exploring the previous hypotheses, a regional system of states was being discussed. In testing the power transition model, however, it is necessary to deal with pairs of states, or dyads, and assess changes over time.

Because the two main parties to the conflict were Paraguay and Brazil, this dyad must be examined first. Ironically, this dyad least supports the power transition explanation because the power distance between the poles is so great. Indeed, Paraguay's share of regional capabilities (.1391) is less than a quarter of Brazil's (.5791). It is therefore theoretically difficult to make a case for this model based on the evidence at hand.

The power transition model should not be dismissed so easily, however, because two other pairs, Paraguay-Uruguay and Paraguay-Argentina, must also be examined as possible cases of power transition.

To begin with the pair Paraguay-Uruguay, their relative shares of regional power are similar, .1391 for Paraguay and .0990 for Uruguay. Table 5 indicates that both countries experienced a period of rapid economic expansion in the late 1850s and early 1860s. In the case of Paraguay, however, this rate of expansion appears accentuated as a result of the severe contraction experienced between the 1810s and 1840s. But the figures show no pattern of significant alteration of the basic differences in economic capabilities, as the value of trade of Uruguay was 5.5 times greater than that of Paraguay in the 1850s and 4.4 times greater in the 1860s.

In addition to the lack of dramatic alteration of their relative share of power over the decade before the war, the possibility of such a threatening imbalance was not perceived by either side. In fact, the prewar situation witnessed an alliance between Paraguay and Uruguay, and had Flores failed to take over in Uruguay, the two countries could have remained allies throughout the war. Clearly, then, a power transition situation did not arise in the case of the dyad Paraguay-Uruguay.

The dyad Paraguay-Argentina presents the most promising perspective for the power transition model. Their relative shares of regional power (.1391 for Paraguay and .1827 for Argentina) seem to indicate that a power transition situation could have existed. Yet closer inspection reveals that the power distance was probably greater than is suggested by these figures. In fact, .1114 out of Paraguay's total .1391 units of power consists of the armed forces variable, and the value of Paraguay's military capability is probably inflated.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, relying exclusively on army size and disregarding the level of expenditures (and also naval power) biases the measurement of military capability against Argentina. Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, for instance, Argentina devoted 30 to 50 percent of its budget to military expenditures. In 1864 that figure totaled 37 percent of revenues of 1.4 million pounds sterling (Randall 1977, 2:211, 222). Thus in 1864, Argentine military expenditures had reached almost 520,000 pounds sterling, an amount roughly equaling the total value of Paraguayan exports and imports in 1860 (see table 1). The reasonable assumption that Paraguay was pouring about the same proportion of resources into its military establishment would suggest that Argentina was devoting almost five times more resources to the military than was its neighbor, making the power gap wider than it first appears (see table 5).

Moreover, however large a military establishment may be at the outset of a confrontation, in a prolonged conflict outside supplies and a powerful economic base are vital to the success of any military enterprise. Paraguay exhibited an evident disproportion between the size of its army and all other relevant economic indicators. In contrast, less



than a third of Argentina's total power index is accounted for by the military variable.

As for the economic indicators, no dramatic change is detected. The ratio of Argentine to Paraguayan trade value circa 1862 was about thirteen to one. In 1851 Paraguayan exports totaled sixty-eight thousand pounds sterling, while the value of exports from the province of Buenos Aires alone exceeded two million pounds, a ratio of thirty-one to one. While the gap was closing markedly over that ten-year period, it remained far too wide to warrant being described as a transition situation. One must also bear in mind that the rapid Paraguayan expansion during that decade resulted from the opening of the economy after decades of severe restrictions and was unlikely to continue at the same pace. In summary, then, the Paraguay-Argentina dyad does not present a situation of power transition either.

Yet a political dimension exists in the power transition model that the preceding figures do not adequately tap and whose analysis appears to offer the bases for a cogent overall explanation. It also seems to clarify several of the most puzzling aspects of the war—the outbreak of the conflict as well as its dragging on for five bloody years. First, why did Paraguay start the war? The plausible answer according to this model is that a disparity existed between Paraguay's assessment of its real power versus the power that other regional actors were willing to recognize. It was the case of a nation relatively powerful (by its own standards) and basically dissatisfied. The war thus constituted an attempt to redress a grievance against a status quo perceived as detrimental to the national interest. Indeed, Paraguay's basic claim was that it had the right to be consulted about any agreement concerning the Río de la Plata region, a "right of consultation" that neither Brazil nor Argentina was willing to grant.

Second, why did Argentina not side with Paraguay to restore the regional status quo upset by the Brazilian Empire? Argentina had just emerged as a united nation after the battle of Pavón in 1861. Between 1852 and 1861, two Argentinas had coexisted—Buenos Aires and the Confederation, which included the provinces of the interior. The possibility of a resurgence of provincial resistance against Buenos Aires was a source of constant worry in the capital. The new Argentine republic faced two conceivable threats. One was the possibility of Uruguay joining the provinces, thus breaking the Porteño monopoly on trade. Hence came the importance of a friendly government in Montevideo. Another threat was a possible secession by the provinces, supported or otherwise inspired by an emerging (and likely powerful) Paraguay. If the provinces lacked a potentially powerful ally, Buenos Aires would no longer need to fear them. Herein lay the interest in a weak Paraguay.

López reassured Mitre time and again that Paraguay was not after a political realignment of regional nationalities (a country comprising Uruguay, Entre Ríos, Corrientes, and Paraguay was commonly considered possible at the time) but that Paraguay sought instead to consolidate the status quo, provided that Paraguay was given a greater role. Mitre obviously did not trust his neighbor, however, because a greater role for Paraguay could have readily led to the breakdown of the new Argentine nation.

Mitre was not concerned with the regional distribution of power. Brazil had already been accepted as the preponderant nation in the region, and its actions in Uruguay were not perceived as threatening, partly because both Brazil and Argentina were supporting the rebels, although for different reasons. More important, the Brazilian action was interpreted by Mitre as limited in scope, not as a threat to the independent existence of Uruguay as a buffer state. The Argentine government was preoccupied instead with national unity, and a victorious Paraguay could have amassed enough power to threaten a new partition of Argentina, either by openly drawing the support of the provinces of the littoral against Buenos Aires or by simply encouraging their secession. In a way, some balance of power considerations were at work here. But while López, inspired by European doctrines, was focusing on the balance of power of the region as a whole, Mitre, aware of the threats to the nation-building process, was directing his attention to the balance of forces within the former viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata.

Third, why did the war not end in 1866? At the Conference of Yataity Corá, López offered Mitre almost all he could because in López's words, "the blood already spilled has been enough to cleanse the mutual offenses inflicted by the parties" (for a pro-Mitre version of the meeting, see Báez 1929, 37). From a power transition perspective, the war did not end because the problems were neither offenses nor territorial concessions (which Argentina hoped to win anyway) but the need to seal Argentine unity, an objective that could only be achieved by the complete defeat of López.

Fourth, why did Brazil pursue a war of extermination instead of being satisfied with the punishment inflicted on the Paraguayan army during the first part of the war? The answer is that the forces at work at the outbreak of the war were not the ones influencing events thereafter. For example, at the outbreak of the war, Brazil was intent on extracting concessions from the Uruguayan Blanco government. In the case of Paraguay, Brazil's intentions were to secure the release of the *Marquês de Olinda*, punish Paraguay for its "aggression," and ensure access to the Río Paraguay for Brazilian ships serving the Mato Grosso region.<sup>7</sup>

Once the war was unleashed, however, it became critical for Brazil to prevent Argentina from annexing Paraguay or reaping excessive

benefits and thus posing a threat to Brazilian preponderance in the area. The only way to accomplish this goal was to pursue the war to the end and keep control over future governments of Paraguay, which Brazil managed to do for decades after the end of the war. The same drive was also at work with Argentina and almost led to a war with Brazil.<sup>8</sup> This Brazilian-Argentine competition was skillfully exploited by Paraguayan diplomats after 1870 (see Warren 1978).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The objective of this study has been to apply insights from contemporary research on international conflict to improve understanding of the War of the Triple Alliance. This reexamination of the available evidence and reorganization of previously scattered data have shed light on many aspects of that tragic event. In general, this study suggests that a modified power transition model has greater explanatory power than the balance of power and imperialist models. When combined with knowledge of the nation-building process in the 1860s in Argentina (already emphasized in Alberdi 1962), the power transition model provides satisfactory answers to the most important questions raised by the war. The balance of power model might fare better if modified to take into account the balance of power of the territories belonging to the former viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata or the differences between perceptions and realities. This study also questions the widely accepted belief that Paraguay constituted a first-rank power in South America and places relevant data in a useful comparative framework. Finally, it shows that combining quantitative and qualitative analysis with insights from international relations may yield useful re-interpretations of Latin American armed conflicts.

A final issue is whether the War of the Triple Alliance could have been avoided. This inquiry is relevant because it raises the question of whether alternative courses of action were available, thus emphasizing the role of foreign policy and the decision-making process. The logic of power and the "national interest" seem to suggest that it was beyond the reach of the actors to stop the war. Yet the significant shift in Paraguayan foreign policy during the 1860s may have played a larger role than is generally recognized. Although the structural potential for armed conflict was high, perhaps a more prudent and isolationist foreign policy like that followed by Francia and Carlos A. López would have spared Paraguay the tragedy of the war.

NOTES

1. Marshall Francisco López's alleged megalomaniac personality has been traditionally viewed as a major, if not the main, cause of the war. I take issue with such an approach for several reasons. First, explanations emphasizing personality traits tend to substitute generalities for analysis. They conveniently pick unprovable, yet unfalsifiable, psychological traits, and in a reductionistic exercise that ignores the complexity of international interactions, attempt to convert impressions into scientific statements. In a sort of reverse teleology, such approaches arrive at the cause by way of the effect within a logical framework that prohibits independent validation. Although space precludes discussing the theoretical implications of the problem of level of analysis as applied to the interpretation of international conflict, most scholars would agree that the "individual" level of analysis cannot take precedence over the "national" or "international" level, at least not until explanations at the national and international levels have been exhausted. Second, if one were to consistently argue in favor of the "megalomaniac" interpretation, one would have to assess its explanatory power by contrasting it with alternative explanations based on, say, Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro's "sadism" or Argentine President Bartolomé Mitre's "bloodthirstiness." One or both of these factors could be blamed for extending the war well beyond the 1866 conference of Yataity Corá, when López showed himself more than willing to compromise.
2. As must be evident, this study is not a "test" of the theories of imperialism or dependency or balance of power in general but an examination of how well these theories explain one particular case.
3. For more detailed analysis, the reader may wish to consult Cardozo (1954, 1961, 1967a), Box (1948), Thompson (1869), and Carcano (1939).
4. Because this adjustment applies to all countries equally, it has no effect on the overall computation of the power index. Yet it might be useful for future cross-national studies including countries other than those in this sample.
5. "The weight selected for each variable represents the mean percent of variation it has in common with the first component or power capabilities dimension that results from principal component analysis of the nine indicator-variables" (Ferris 1973, 49). Eventually, these nine indicators were reduced to eight when trade value per capita was dropped because of its low explanatory power. I further compressed them into six indicators when the lack of reliable data forced me to merge the three military indicators (armed forces, defense expenditures, and defense expenditures per capita) into a single indicator of military power.
6. But one must be careful not to make the opposite mistake of underestimating Paraguay's military might, which was defeated only after five bloody years of battling two regional superpowers.
7. The distinction between the outbreak of the conflict and its later development is significant, especially in the case of protracted wars because as they drag on, the dynamic of the conflict transforms both the victors and the vanquished and generates a new structure of conflict. In the case of the Paraguayan War, one can discern two clearly identifiable "combat rounds" (a concept discussed in Liska 1982): the outbreak, where López's decision played a large role, and the prolongation beyond the 1866 Conference of Yataity Corá, where other factors loomed larger. Each round had a different, yet interrelated, conflict structure.
8. This development could also be interpreted as illustrating that grand coalitions do not last, thus lending support to William Riker's (1962) theory of winning minimum coalitions. Nevertheless, if the size principle—that coalitions are large enough to ensure winning but not larger—did actually operate, then why did a winning coalition not emerge in 1864? A dynamic interpretation might claim that the Triple Alliance was a minimum winning coalition at the beginning (in 1864) but eventually became a grand coalition and broke down. Yet such an argument would assume that a rough balance of power did exist at the outbreak of the war, a contention that the available evidence does not support.

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