Revisiting Revolution and War: A Qualitative Study of the Arab Spring

Hernán Camps

Abstract

Stephen Walt’s work on Revolutions and War is a seminal study linking power considerations, domestic policy and ideology in analysing the links between States that have undergone a revolution and international armed conflict. In this paper I will study the Arab Spring Revolutions, assessing how this theory stands in relation to these events.

Introduction

The present paper will be structured in two parts: in the first one I will present Stephen Walt’s theory linking revolutions and increased international conflict. After that I will undertake a qualitative study of the countries involved in the Arab Spring, trying to estimate if there was an increase in conflict for this region. For this I will determine in the first place if the political processes initiated in the Arab countries in the year 2010 can actually be called a revolution, as defined by Walt. After that I will use different indicators to evaluate the presence of the intervening variables identified by the author. Finally I will analyze the different patterns of conflict that may have appeared from the revolution until the year 2013, evaluating the results from Walt’s theory.

Revolution and War

Stephen Walt developed his analysis on the relation between revolutions and war based on an extension from his theory on the Balance of Threat between States. For this author, the balance of power is not the only variable that countries consider when they assess potential rivals. They also take into account geographical proximity, intentions and offensive-defensive balance (Walt 1996, 19). Walt continues the realist premise that the main goal of states is their security in an anarchic world, but he introduces a perception variable in his analysis.

The four factors considered by the author influence the perception of the State over the threat from their neighbors and other powers. The first one is the aggregated power, a variable used by realist authors and, in this case it implies the sum of different indicators that contribute to the military power of a State. The second is how geographically close a state is, since this affects its capabilities to project power. If a powerful State is far away, the weaker state will consider itself less threatened (Walt 1985). The third one is intention, which can also alter a State’s behavior, making other countries use the force to eliminate it or reduce its capabilities. This can explain why some powerful states exist next door to weak countries without a security dilemma, like Canada and the United States. Finally, the offensive-defensive balance is related with the state of military technology, if it favors attack the threat will be greater and vice versa if it’s tilted towards defense.

Walt argues that revolutions can alter these variables, modifying the threat calculation, not only in the revolutionary State, but also for other countries, leading to more chances of conflict. To
explain this, the author develops different aspects of revolution that may impact in the Balance of Threats.

Walt defines revolutions as“(…) the destruction of an existing state by members of its own society followed by the creation of a new political order.” (Walt 1996, 12). This definition excludes explicitly coup’s d’état and other changes in the governing elite. A revolution implies the creation of a new state based on different founding myths, the construction of new political structures and rules. In his categorization Walt separates Mass Revolutions from Elite Revolutions, although he focuses on the first ones since he considers that these are the ones that tend to alter more the Balance of Threats.

The revolutionary processes have different characteristics that may lead to an international conflict. At first the revolution tends to diminish the capability of the revolutionary state. The destruction of the previous bureaucratic-administrative apparatus and the creation of a new one can alter significantly the capabilities of a country. On a second moment, once the new political system is in place, there are chances that it will be able to mobilize new resources in the society, incrementing the capabilities of the state. Walt tries not to focus only on this aspect of the power equilibrium, due to the indeterminacy of the realist theory on this respect. If we focus only on this theoretical part we have two competing predictions. On the one side the decline in the power of the revolutionary state would tempt others to exploit their vulnerability, and on the second phase the increase of power would make it more aggressive. Walt offers a second prediction in tune with neorealism, once that the state has more power it will feel safer and will not need to expand itself, while in the moment that he is declining in power their neighbors will feel safer, and will not attack.

Walt adds other aspects in which revolutions affect the Balance of Threats. The perception of intentions between different states is altered due to the characteristics of the revolutionary process. The elimination or exile of the old ruling class usually changes the perception in neighbor countries. A revolutionary government normally does not have a qualified diplomatic corps to execute the tasks that are assigned to them. In consequence, revolutionary states use ideology as a way to make sense of the international system, misinterpreting actions from other powers. This change in the perception of intentions also goes for the relations that great powers maintain with the revolutionary state. These countries go through their own administrative changes, like the China hands affair in the Department of State. Another influence is the role of exiles of the revolutionary state, lending their opinion and analysis in support of a foreign intervention. Since these countries usually don’t have experience or contacts with the new government in the revolutionary state, they tend to listen to the opinion of exiles. The emigration of dissidents who try to convince the new government that revolution is ripe in their own countries and trying to influence them to export the revolution also affects this perceptions.

Another change that revolution may bring is related with the different images of history between two countries. Like Walt explains, every country is the hero of its own history. After the revolution in China, Washington perceived that it had always acted in the best interest of Beijing; a
perception that was not shared by the new Chinese government. This contributed to fuel the mistrust between the United States and China, changing the perception of innocuous actions to potential threats. This change in the perceptions of the other is not helped if the revolutionary state carries on with actions that threaten other countries interests, like nationalizations, which forces domestic lobbies to push for an intervention.

All this factors contribute, in Walt’s theory, to make conflict more probable. Nevertheless, as we can see here and in the graphic that I reproduce, the causal chain identified by Walt has different paths, intervening variables and potential results. It’s important to note here that, although Walt uses war as a concept, he is not following a definition of war like the one used in the Correlates of War dataset. Here, the evidence refers to international conflict, a less strict definition than the one of war, but also to the probability that states will fall in spirals of suspicion or new conflicts of interests. This definition is wider and requires other evidence than an armed conflict between two or more countries that has more than one thousand deaths in a year.

In the following analysis I try to take into account the variables identified by Walt. To identify changes in capabilities I used information on military spending by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Although this information usually has some problems that make it difficult to compare, I hope to detect changes in the relative capabilities of the different States. For this I will compare revolutionary and border countries. Then I will choose three cases in which I will try to analyze if this theory explains the changes in interstate relations, if there were changes.

It’s important to note that in the Arab spring there wasn’t a strict ideology that the revolutionary movements were following. There were diffuse claims from the citizenship, organized through social networks and other new technologies. There was less consensus on the proposals that should be promoted once the revolution was over (Lynch 2011). Despite this I will try to identify
the ideology of the different regimes that came into power, in terms of my expectative on their foreign policy behavior.

The ideology variable is also mediated by the existence of formed diplomatic corps. To evaluate this variable I will try to identify if the ambassador and the foreign relations minister in the cases under study have experience in international relations or if they are internal cadres from the governing coalitions. I expect that the first one will reduce the chances of conflict, while the second type will increment them.

To evaluate the conflict variable I will use data from the GDELT dataset (http://gdeltproject.org/). In this database events between different countries are evaluated in a one to four scale. While one and two refer to cooperative actions three and four refer to conflicts. I will make a yearly count of events and consider the balance of relationships between states. I think that this will provide a valid proxy to evaluate relations between the states.

**Case study: Arab Spring**

**Tunisia**

The revolutionary process known as the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, with the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi after his business was impounded by the police. Although there are other structural causes behind this revolution, this event started a wave of protests that eventually expanded to the whole Middle East. Under its pressure the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali renounced the presidency and exiled himself to Saudi Arabia.

Before we continue with this analysis we have to consider if this was truly a revolution, and, if so, which were its characteristics. As we can see from the rest of the cases under study, applying this kind of qualitative definitions to a specific case is complex. In Tunisia we have a mass revolution; it didn’t follow the lead of any elite or group. Since the revolution there is a new method for the election of leaders and we can expect that the new elite will change hands peacefully in the future. There wasn’t a destruction of the previous state apparatus, even if there were major changes in the political rules and institutions.

The bottom-top characteristics of this revolution have meant that there isn’t a unified ideology backing the revolutionary movement. The government that followed the fall of Ben Ali, after a succession of Prime Ministers, is the moderate Islamic movement Ennahda.

In this new government we can observe that there hasn’t been a major change in military expenditures before or after the revolution, keeping a parity of capabilities with other states.
Another of the elements analyzed was the existence of exiles that may affect in any manner the external perception of other countries, motivating an intervention. In this moment, although the former president Ben Ali is exiled in Saudi Arabia, there doesn’t seem to be a critical mass of exiles in other parts of the world to push for an intervention.

In the case of the Tunisian Foreign Affairs Ministry, in 2013 it was led by Othman Jarandi, a diplomat with 35 years of experience. I wasn’t able to find new ambassadors with strong ideological credentials in the Tunisian embassies that I analyzed, so I can assume that this should not be a source of conflict according to the theory.

To test this hypothesis, I have used the GDELT dataset to study the relations between Tunisia and Algeria. I studied the relations between 2008 and 2012 to check their relations before and after the revolution.

In the following table we can see the yearly cooperation and conflict relations between Tunisia and Algeria, while the first table shows cases in which Tunisia initiated cooperation and conflict with Algeria, the second shows the relations in the opposite direction.
As we can see, there is a critical moment of conflict increase in the year 2011, coincident with the revolution in this country. Nevertheless, this increase is lessened by the increase in cooperation between these countries, in the year 2012 we can see a slow return to normal relations between these states.

This coincides with what we can expect from Walt’s Theory, in the presence of a revolution that didn’t destroy the State apparatus, where ideology is moderate and there wasn’t a purge in the diplomatic corps, even if we can expect a small increase in conflict as a result of the revolution, this didn’t escalate to a full blown conflict.

Egypt

Egypt received the contagion effects of the Tunisian revolution in a series of protests that ended with the exit of former president Hosni Mubarak on the 11 of February of 2011. After this the military took control of the country, transferring power to Mohamed Morsi on 2012. For the present work we will consider that the situation was similar to the one in Tunisia. Although there was a revolution, and it was mainly bottom-top, there wasn’t a destruction of the state, even if there were changes in the political institutions of the Egyptian society. This change ended with the coup d’état that deposed former president Morsi, moment in which we will conclude our analysis.
In the Egyptian case, we can observe a slow descent in military expenditure, starting in the year 2008 and continuing until 2012. Since this process began before the Arab Spring it can’t be attributed to the revolution. Nevertheless the change is not big enough to alter the threat balance with its neighbors.

The nature of the ideology of the revolution in Egypt has been the subject of numerous articles and debates that continue until today. Considering the place that the Muslim Brotherhood has in the history of Egypt and the Middle East it’s doubtful that this debate will ever be solved. Even after the Muslim brotherhood renounced violence in the sixties, its agenda continued to be the islamization of Egyptian politics, objective that placed it at odds with the military.

It’s interesting to study the relation between Egypt and the United States during the revolution. Even if Washington refused to back the government of Mubarak during the protests, traditionally the US has had strong relations with Egypt, especially with its military. This is related with the interests of the United States in the Suez channel and the relation between Egypt and Israel. These interests are sometimes at odds with the “democratic mission” of the US.

The Egyptian revolution has some parallels with the Tunisian revolution in that the State bureaucracy continued to exist, especially in its foreign relations. The Egyptian ambassador in Washington during the Morsi government, Mohamed Tawfik, is a career diplomatic, keeping its post even after the coup of 2013. The foreign affairs minister during the government of Morsi, Mohamed Kamel Amr, also comes from the diplomatic ranks, starting his career in the year 1982.
There doesn’t seem to have been a great flow of exiles or dissidents in Egypt. Considering this points we can expect an increase in tensions with the US, although not a major one. Now we will examine the relations between the US and Egypt.

As in the previous case we can see an increase in conflicts with Washington, although this increase never surpasses the cooperative relations between these two countries and then it tends towards normalization.

EGY-USA

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USA-EGY

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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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Libya

The Libyan case is perhaps the one that better resembles a revolution as conceptualized by Walt, and will provide an interesting contrast with the previous cases. After the revolution in Tunisia and Egypt, protests escalated quickly in Libya towards a civil war. In 2011 with the help of a foreign military intervention, the rebels managed their objective of establishing themselves as the main political force in the country. Nevertheless analyzing the Libyan case is not an easy task. As we can see there is no data between 2009 and 2012 for Libya military expenditures. The military balance of IISS considers that it’s not possible to estimate the state of Libyan military forces, especially considering that the groups that fought against Khadafy are not unified under a single authority.

Even if the Libyan civil war is over, we cannot say that there is a new state. We can see a rebound in the gdp between 2011 and 2012 but this is associated with the end of the civil war, and not a real growth in the economy.
For the analysis I will also examine the relations between Algeria and Libya. In this particular case it’s a non-revolutionary country that went through a period of protests, for which we can expect an increase in tensions between this two countries. Although I wasn’t able to check the information about the Libyan ambassador in Algeria, the Libyan Ministry of International Cooperation and Foreign Affairs Mohamed Abdelaziz and the Prime Minister, Ali Zeidan were diplomats in the past, defecting from the Libyan government in the 80s.

Algeria has received a number of members of the Khadafy family after the fall of the old regime. Since many of them then continued their exile in other countries we can expect that they didn’t have much influence in the Algerian government.

Considering this variables we can expect tensions to be more acute than the ones we studied before.
As we can see there is a spike in conflict between the states, although it doesn´t deviate from the previous examples.

Conclusion

In the frame of this analysis we can draw some conclusions, although we have to establish some limitations. In the first place the cases that we chose obey an interest in exploring relations with neighbor states and with great powers, It’s important to note that this is only a small arbitrary sample of the universe of cases that we could study.

In the second place we should consider the limitations of the variables that we used, the simple aggregation of events generates a series of problems. Nevertheless I think that it’s an interesting proxy for the analysis.

The analyzed cases show that revolutions are an important event in international relations. Although the cases studied don’t escalate to an open interstate conflict, there is a sharp increase in cooperative and conflictive events.

Although we would need more cases to establish this with a degree of certainty we can see the importance of the continuity of former diplomats in the deactivation of conflict between states. Based on the data we have, we haven’t been able to establish a clear link between ideology and conflict in the analyzed cases, perhaps because of the time between the revolutions and their own characteristics. In future analysis I will include more revolutions and cases inside this revolutions to establish this points with a greater degree of certainty.
Bibliography

Lynch, Marc. 2011. "The Big Think Behind the Arab Spring: Do the Middle East's revolutions have a unifying ideology?" Foreign Policy, December 2011.
