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Arms, Alliances and Stability: Development of the Structure of International Politics by Partha Chatterjee

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Arms, Alliances and Stability: Development of the Structure of International Politics, by Partha Chatterjee. New York, Halsted Press, 1975. Pp. 292, $19.75.

In *Arms, Alliances and Stability,* Partha Chatterjee suggests that present day Western political scientists have improperly comprehended the changes which have occurred in the structure of the system of international relations. He contends that to appreciate the changes in the international structure a historically based theory of a "Marxian" sort should be utilized. This theory must focus on the developmental stages of the international political system by identifying the characteristics which change the world power structure. The theory must isolate the reasons why the power relationships between nations are disturbed in the absence of war. It must also identify the mechanisms by which equilibrium is restored to form a new world order. Finally, the theory must identify the factors which account for the downfall of one system and the development of another. With these objectives in mind, Chatterjee seeks to provide a theoretical framework for interpreting the history of European international relations and in later stages world interstate relations over the last three and one-half centuries. The results of his labors are a theoretical proposition which provides a fertile source for further inquiries, and a framework for analyzing and interpreting modern history. Above all, however, Chatterjee's book extends an invitation to people with some expertise in history to develop, embellish and criticize his theoretical framework.

The basic assumption of Chatterjee's theory is that human society is in a continual process of transition and transformation. It is grounded, no doubt, on the author's acceptance and perception of Marx's dialectical perspective. From this assumption Chatterjee suggests that it is possible to detect qualitative differences between epochs in the manner in which nations order their interactions and seek to maintain equilibrium. The author endeavors to document these qualitative differences by focusing on essentially two pattern variables which may be utilized to characterize one system and contrast it with another. These pattern variables are the presence or absence of dominant actors and the presence or absence of strong ideological differences among the actors. Chatterjee suggests that, where there are no dominant actors or strong ideological differences to divide nations

and the actors do not perceive the world resources as limited, world order is maintained by shifting alliances of actors which form and dissolve as the need arises to restrain other actors from seeking to disrupt the system. This characterized the Classical Balance of Power System, *circa* 1648–1900.

On the other hand, when there is a limited number of actors capable of dominating the system who are irreconcilably divided by ideological differences, a very different world order is maintained. The number of actors needed to preserve world order is drastically reduced because of the dominant actors. Further, the ability of those actors to shift their weight from one side to the other is reduced by the presence of ideological differences. Thus, stability in the system must be maintained in a much more subtle manner. In the present day bipolar system, equilibrium is preserved by technological means in the form of the arms race.

An inherent requirement of a "Marxian" theory is some effort to identify the crucial causal variables which explain the transition from one epoch to the next. Although Chatterjee is vague on this matter, it appears that these variables emerge from his concept of "capability." "Capability" is defined as "that part of a nation's resources that is available for the pursuit of foreign policy objectives." Capability is drawn from a nation's material and human resources. Nations are involved, according to Chatterjee, in a continual effort to increase their capabilities. This leads them to develop their technology and look beyond their borders for increased sources of natural resources. Chatterjee suggests that these factors, the rapid and uneven development of technology and the competition for scarce resources were contradictions which accounted for the transition from the classical balance of power system to the present day bipolar system.

Chatterjee seeks to test his theory by using it to describe historically the two major stable international systems which have existed in the world from 1648 to the present: the Classical Balance of Power System (1648–1900) and the Bipolar Ssytem (1945–present); and to explain the period of transtion which filed the half-century separating these periods. Although the author does not spend a great deal of time setting out the details of that history, it is evident that his own historical orientation is quite eclectic, drawing on Western historians like A.J.P. Taylor, L.C. Seaman and Hans Morgenthau, as well as thinkers who are frequently cited by Marxist historians, like E.J. Hobsbawm, Engels and Lenin. Although Chatterjee cites a multitude of

sources, he seems to utilize Albrecht-Carries, George Liska, Raymond Aron and Morton Kaplan more than most.

Chatterjee's history portrays the Balance of Power System as a series of shifting alliances to preserve the balance of power among actors of roughly similar strength, holding roughly similar ideologies. The actors, who were at equally low technological levels, sought to increase their capabilities in a world which was perceived to possess unlimited resources. There was no need for brutal competition among nations for resources. Accordingly, when wars were fought to restrain dominance seekers, they were fought in a gentlemanly, defensive manner, rather than to conquer or punish competitors.

This system began to break down when the European nations discovered that natural resources were available only in limited quantities. This discovery resulted in a competitive scramble for scarce resources among the European nations which was aggravated by the entry of two non-European actors, the United States and Japan, in the developing fracas, as well as by the development of conflicting ideologies. As a result, conflict took on a new image as, aided by the technological development of destructive devices, warfare focused on conquest and victors sought to punish the vanquished. The result of all these influences was a period of vast turmoil which existed for fifty years until its resolution in World War II.

Stability was restored to the world order with the emergence of the Bipolar System following World War II in which two dominant superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, emerged, divided by irreconcilable ideological differences. These nations provided the poles around which the other nations of the world collected, according to their ideological commitments. Their power to affect the world order was drastically reduced by the emergence of the superpowers. Their ability to form alliances was severely limited by ideological boundaries. The device by which stability in this order is maintained is the nuclear capacity of the dominant actors. The mechanism by which equilibrium is maintained is nuclear technology, as it manifested itself in the arms race.

Chatterjee concludes his history by looking at the contemporary world situation in which the polarities remain, but their hold on the actors has weakened as a form of stability has emerged within the confines of the nuclear balance of power. This stability, according to Chatterjee, has permitted the loosening of ties to the

superpowers and the development of non-aligned blocks of nations. It permits the actors to pursue their interests and ideological struggle to exist, even militarily, within the confines of the nuclear balance of power. Finally, Chatterjee suggests that the stability of the nuclear system has developed to the point where the superpowers can slow down the arms race and reduce their nuclear arsenals to a lower level, still maintaining the nuclear balance of power.

Arms, Alliances and Stability is a seminal work, providing a rich source of leads for political scientists to pursue to test, develop, and add to the dynamic theory which the author proposes in the book. One particularly rich source of testable hypotheses may be found in the eighth chapter, in which Chatterjee expounds a theory of the arms race in the contemporary bipolar system. This chapter, although written in the practically incomprehensible language of the mathematician, suggests numerous variables which might be used to make causal inferences about the achievement of equilibrium in a modern arms race. The author sets out, by the use of graphs and algebraic terms, such crucial variables as relative missile strengths, attack or deterrence strategies, survival capabilities, cases and utility, as aspects of equilibrium. This format provides potential researchers who wish to expand or embellish the collateral notions which Chatterjee advances in his book with articulations of hypotheses which may be operationalized and empirically tested.

Perhaps the best pages of *Arms, Alliances and Stability* are those in which Chatterjee provides his concise and cogent account of two hundred years of European diplomatic history basing his interpretation on a manageable number of explanatory variables, *supra*. His account makes sense of this period and does so in a small number of pages. The only aspect of this portion of his book which might be found wanting is the author's unwillingness to expand upon the meaning of "capacity" which nations sought and fought for. He suggests that the term might be synonymous with resources or wealth, but fails to fit the need into an explanation of why European nations sought continually to expand their capacity, beyond the tautologous statement that it permitted them to achieve greater military strength more economically to allow them to pursue more capacity. The author might have tried to introduce a theory, perhaps drawing on the Marxist-Leninist literature to which he is sympathetic, to provide a clearer explanation of the role of this crucial variable. For example, he

might have tried to link the search for capacity to the development of mercantilism which developed into capitalism — the process which led to greater and greater need for material to stroke the fires of development which produced wealth and prosperity. It may suggest the missing link in Chatterjee's reasoning process. Also, it is unfortunate that Chatterjee could not have continued his historical analysis into his discussion of the present day bipolar situation. However, after his account of the transitional periods the connection between the text and the historical method which the author seeks to use becomes much more subtle and tenuous. The seemingly *ipse dixit* account of the present day world contains several assumptions which should have been empirically demonstrated or justified. For example, he glibly asserts from the very beginning of the book that the world is in a process of transformation from capitalism to socialism without bothering to justify this thesis or even tie it into his analysis. He assumes that the third world nations, with their wealth of people and national resources, cannot or will not provide a serious force to be reckoned with in the near future. In light of the dire need of the superpowers for oil and other rare mineral resources which are to be found in the third world, this seems implausible.

Perhaps the most problematic assumption which Chatterjee makes is his suggestion that the nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union provide the boundaries for the present international system, ensuring a high degree of stability which renders large-scale conventional military operations highly unlikely. However, he fails to take note of the potential consequences of tremendous concentrations of Soviet troops and weapons in East Germany, which pose a substantial threat of sudden invasion to Europe. The presence of these large troop concentrations, as well as the rapid development of a Soviet attack fleet, suggests that one side might not be prepared to accept one basic assumption of the nuclear stand-off theory: that both sides could destroy each other's centers of population and that, such an event must be avoided at all costs. What would be the effect of the Soviets moving large portions of their urban populations into the vast Soviet countryside (an option not open to the United States) or deciding that its urban populations are expendable, as it did against Napoleon and Hitler?

The author assumes, further, that nuclear capability in the modern world is, and will for some time remain, confined to two

superpowers. This assumption is belied by the fact that, at present, no less than five nations possess nuclear weapons and with the rapid improvements in technology throughout the world it is entirely possible that nuclear capability will be possessed by many more nations, or even power factions within nations, in a very short period of time. Although these other nations might not possess the capacity of engaging in an arms race, it seems that they would present a presently existing factor which could disturb equilibrium in a way that an arms race could not stabilize. Nevertheless, Chatterjee seems to be blind to this possibility.

In sum, the author's inattention to current history and facts causes him to make assumptions which might not pass muster. As a result the last portion of his book seems to be little more than a polemical apology for detente and nuclear arms reduction combined with an undiscussed and unverified statement of faith on the part of the author that socialism (undefined) will ultimately prevail in the world.

Finally, Chatterjee might be criticized for his breach of faith with Marx in failing to carry to the present the kind of analysis in his section describing Classical Europe, which sought to discover the root concepts underlying historical trends. For example, the search for increased "capacity" led nations of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to form alliances and fight wars to get their fair share. This drive for capacity was a primary element in the breakup of the "classical" system as nations resorted to imperialism, wars of conquest, punitive measures against fellow countries and, ultimately, world war. Nevertheless, with the mention of the first atomic holocaust, which heralds the coming of the current epoch, the factor of scarce resource seems to wither away in Chatterjee's discussion. In reality, however, it hardly needs to be said that this factor still plagues industrial countries. The United States need for oil has brought the word "war" to the lips of several serious thinkers. It is not inconceivable that attempts by oil producers to blackmail the United States could force military response and could provoke a major convential war involving the Soviet Union. Oil is not the only scarce resource. The Western nations also vigorously compete for scarce quantities of minerals and nuclear materials, to suggest just two areas. Thus, Chatterjee ignores what would seem a crucial variable in the last portion of his book. He seems to have sacrificed the integrity of the last portion of his book in favor

of his political biases. As a result, the value of this interesting and thought-provoking book is diminished.

Allan Barr