

GREAT POWERS SUBVERSION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REALISM THEORY

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Annotation. The article delves into a comprehensive analysis of the realist theory of subversion among great powers, shedding light on a relatively overlooked phenomenon within the expanding body of literature on subversive statecraft. By employing a simple, rational cost-benefit calculation, the article demonstrates how this theory effectively explains the varying degrees of subversion observed among non-belligerent and belligerent great powers. Moreover, it emphasizes that subversion tends to occur more frequently, violently, and on a larger scale when directed towards weaker targets. To illustrate and provide initial support for the theory, the article presents concise case studies of mid-twentieth century subversion involving the Soviet Union and the United States. These case studies vividly highlight the theory's applicability and validity. In combination with empirical evidence, the analysis demonstrates that the circumstances conducive to highly consequential subversion among great powers are both limited and reversible in nature. On the other hand, belligerent great powers, driven by a heightened sense of competition and the pursuit of strategic advantage, tend to employ higher levels of subversion. Their motivations are rooted in a more aggressive and confrontational approach, seeking to undermine and weaken rival powers through covert actions. This heightened level of subversion is a product of the intense power struggles and rivalries that exist among these states. Consequently, the article introduces a healthy dose of skepticism regarding claims that the contemporary strategic landscape has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of great power rivalry, assigning subversion a newly central role. The theory and supporting evidence underscore the notion that the conditions necessary for such significant subversive actions among great powers are relatively rare, casting doubt on the argument that subversion has become a paramount aspect of contemporary international relations.

Key words: great powers, interference, international relations theory, meddling, realism, subversion, non-belligerent and belligerent powers, balancing behavior

Basic provisions

The storms instigated by Russia's malevolent meddling in US domestic politics have not only captured the attention of policymakers but also posed vital inquiries for scholars in the field of international relations. However, it is evident that the current state of academic research is ill-equipped to address these pressing questions effectively. External interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states has been a subject of significant academic interest. Yet, the majority of existing knowledge is primarily derived from cases where powerful nations intervened in weaker ones, leaving a notable gap in our understanding of interference involving great power pairs.

Historically, much of the research has focused on foreign-imposed regime changes, electoral interventions, foreign manipulation of domestic institutions, and

subversion through support for insurgents. However, these studies have largely overlooked instances where two major powers engaged in covert statecraft against each other. As the global political landscape continues to evolve, there is a critical need for scholars to expand their scope and explore the complexities of interference between equals, which can have far-reaching implications for international stability and security. The growing body of literature on covert statecraft also exhibits a similar bias, emphasizing cases where weaker targets were manipulated, while neglecting more nuanced scenarios involving major powers vying for influence. Such an asymmetry in the available evidence limits the depth of our analysis and hampers our ability to develop comprehensive frameworks to address current and future challenges posed by malicious foreign interference.

To bridge this gap in knowledge, interdisciplinary collaboration between political science, history, international law, and related fields is essential. Scholars must adopt a holistic approach to examine the principle of state sovereignty and its corollary of non-interference, with a focus on all instances of great power involvement, irrespective of the relative strength of the targeted state. By doing so, researchers can provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of external meddling in international politics. Additionally, exploring case studies of covert statecraft, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion between major powers will shed light on the strategies employed by nations to undermine each other's domestic affairs. This research can offer valuable insights into the motivations, tactics, and potential consequences of such interventions, helping policymakers develop more robust strategies to safeguard their countries against future interference. Furthermore, adopting a comparative approach to study instances of meddling in both weaker and equal states can help identify patterns and trends that may not be immediately apparent in single-case analyses. Comparative research can unveil underlying mechanisms and factors that drive meddling behavior, paving the way for more effective policy responses and international cooperation to counter such actions.

Therefore, the objective of this article is to delve into the complexities of foreign interference between great power pairs, focusing on covert statecraft and the implications for state sovereignty and non-interference principles. Through a thorough examination of historical and contemporary case studies, we aim to provide the reader with a nuanced understanding of the motivations, strategies, and potential consequences of such meddling. By doing so, we hope to contribute to fortifying nations against future attempts to subvert their sovereignty and safeguarding the stability of the international order.

Introduction

Nowadays interference for the purpose of either weakening a target state or changing its behavior is routine state practice. Political scientists, international legal scholars and pundits said as much to people alarmed about Russia's meddling in the 2016 US election. Americans should 'look in the mirror', as Jack Goldsmith put it, invoking the United States' long history of interfering in the internal affairs of other states. That message is certainly true, but because it is based mainly on evidence of

great versus small power meddling, it tells us little about whether recent events are a departure from the norm among great powers. Moreover, most IR scholars would expect the politics of subversion to play out differently among the materially and institutionally most powerful states atop the global hierarchy than in interactions between stronger and weaker actors.

To put the Russia-US case in perspective, to assess Moscow's own counterclaims about American interference in its affairs, to know when a given instance of interference is 'unprecedented' or constitutes an 'escalation', to determine whether the new cyber environment has truly altered the strategic landscape of interference, and to be in a position to suggest policy responses, scholars need to know more about how violations of the non-interference principle tend to play out among great powers. To our knowledge, IR lacks a theoretically informed general study of subversion among great powers, and therefore provides less advantage on current developments than it might.

To begin to better equip IR to grasp the role of subversion in great power rivalry, we present a realist theory of great power subversion. We argue that at its core, subversion is statecraft aimed at undermining sovereignty, and that to be a coherent theory of international politics, realism must explain why sovereignty endures despite incentives to the contrary. For centuries, theorists have focused on how the balance of power preserves the anarchic sovereign states system in the face of repeated attempts by aspiring hegemons to transform it into a hierarchy. It thus identifies incentives states to try to conquer the system but also structural constraints that counter that impulse and result in the enduring reality of the familiar sovereign states system. In this article, we show that realism also posits precisely analogous incentives to undermine sovereignty internally via subversion that run up against more potent countervailing constraints. Simply put, for balance of power theory to work, states must defend against the internal threat of subversion as well as the external threat of hegemony. Classical realists from Thucydides to America's founding fathers knew this all too well, but it was lost in the externally oriented mid-twentieth century origins of modern realism [1].

Description of materials and methods

Our premise is that empirical research and policy analysis uninformed by theory are of little lasting value. More controversially, we contend that the realist school of scholarship is a good place to start when thinking about great power politics even if it turns out to be incomplete if not entirely wrong. Much of the modern history of international relations scholarship can be written as a sustained argument between realists and their critics. Our purpose here is to begin such an argument on the topical question of great power meddling in the domestic politics of peer rivals.

We start by defining precisely what we mean by subversion. Then we deploy the familiar realist system of explanation to understand great powers' incentives to deploy this tool of statecraft. It turns out that all the conceptual tools needed to do this are lying on the shelf in standard realist works. Indeed, the large potential gains to subversion raise a puzzle: why do we not see more of it among great powers in

peacetime, even though they routinely embark on major subversion against lesser states? We find that answer also lies within the standard realist toolkit that highlights rational cost-benefit calculations in terms of power and interest. Also, we examine this simple cost-benefit theory in action in brief case studies of mid-twentieth century statecraft. Finally, we extract preliminary implications for current debates. A key initial lesson emerges: the conditions that are conducive to highly consequential subversion among great powers are quite limited and reversible. This gives rise to skepticism concerning claims that today's strategic environment has fundamentally transformed the nature of great power rivalry to accord a newly central place to subversion.

Defining subversion. Clausewitz defined war as 'a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. What remains peculiar to war', he stressed, 'is simply the peculiar nature of its means'. The same goes for subversion: it is an act of statecraft defined by its means. By its dictionary definition, subversion is an attempt to weaken or undermine an established institution. In international politics, the institution at issue is the state, which is defined by the conventions of sovereignty. Sovereignty is the bedrock organizing principle of international politics. Its essence is the idea that a recognized government is the sole legitimate authority over its territory and hence that other states may exercise political authority there only with its permission. Applied to international politics, therefore, subversion involves two key elements: it affects domestic processes within the target directly by causing things to happen on its territory as opposed to indirectly by altering the external environment, and it contradicts the target's interests as defined by its government [2].

A definition follows: Subversion in international politics is a statecraft designed to directly influence domestic politics in a target in a manner prejudicial to its foreign policy interests. It falls into two categories: weakening the target; and altering the target's policy from the path the target's government initially intends to follow.

Realism and great power subversion. The conventional wisdom among scholars is that statecraft aimed at domestic politics is an anomaly for realist theory, which predicts that domestic processes are of little relevance to states, and especially, great powers external behavior. We disagree.

Incentives. Great power subversion is a potentially cheap substitute for or complement to massively expensive and risky conventional statecraft. Subversion to weaken a great power rival is equivalent to balancing and war. Subversion to change a rival's policy is equivalent to coercion, deterrence, or diplomacy in which hugely expensive commitments, threats or quid pro quos must be offered to induce policy change in the target. Think of the enormous costs of arms-length statecraft among great powers. For example, scholars – notably Jack Levy and Randall Schweller – count roughly 20 preventive wars among great powers in modern history. By that count, on twenty occasions a declining state feared a challenger's rise and chose to fight a major war at staggering human and material cost. Why not instead subvert the challenger either to try to get it to direct its enmity elsewhere or to weaken it? Operating directly within a target is hard, for sure, but building gigantic armed forces

and engaging in bloody battles surely is a strikingly inefficient way to reduce the power of a rising challenger. Why not at least attempt direct action via subversion?

Results

To balance rivals, great powers devote huge amounts of scarce resources to build up their power and accept the risks attendant upon alliances of being entrapped or drawn into allies' conflicts, as fatefully occurred in July 1914. Why not try to avoid those costs and risks by subverting a rival to affect its geopolitical alignment? To illustrate, imagine there are three great powers, A, B and C. In B there are two factions, one sees A as the main enemy and the other reckons C is the main enemy. Say they are closely matched in domestic politics. If A could support the A-loving and C-fearing faction in B such that B turns its enmity to C, that's equivalent to an expensive balancing alliance. On the other hand, imagine that B contains a large restive minority denied political power that would revolt if provided political or material support from outside. If A could cause the difference between the minority in B rebelling or not rebelling, it holds in its hands the possibility of massively weakening B. The effect on the balance of power might even be equivalent to a hugely expensive military buildup or possibly a war.

The idea of using subversion to weaken a great power rival flows seamlessly from all forms of realism, for all of them recognize that the theory's chief independent variable – power defined as material capabilities – is fundamentally domestic in origin. To be sure, realism stresses that power is only politically meaningful in relative terms, but the origin of A's power relative to B is essentially domestic. Power drives the theory, and it comes from domestic institutions. In the competitive environment of anarchy, each thus faces incentives to undermine the sources of the other's power [3]. There is no argument in realism that suggests that these domestic institutions are wholly insulated from the influences of outside actors. Indeed, whereas constructivists, English school theorists, and liberal institutionalists would argue that the institution of sovereignty itself has independent constraining force that might stay the hand of a malicious rival, for realism the only thing protecting a government from the hostile subversion of rivals is its own capabilities [4]. That is what the words 'anarchy is a self-help system' mean. There is simply no argument within the realist family of theories in which an external actor when presented with the opportunity to undercut the power of a rival by subversion would refrain from doing so if it anticipated net benefits.

The idea of using subversion to affect the policy choices of the target runs up against the objection that 'one of the central tenets of Realism is that a state's domestic leadership is irrelevant for explaining its international behavior'. However, that claim only applies to one variant of realism, Mearsheimer's offensive realism, which stipulates that great powers will resolve uncertainty about each other's intentions by always assuming the worst. Setting aside the objection that that stipulation is inconsistent with theory's assumption of rational behavior, other versions of realist theory acknowledge that uncertainty is central to foreign policy and its essence is that reasonable people can disagree about the optimal response. The minute you accept that reasonable people can disagree about a great power's

estimate of the threat posed by a rival, and hence about optimal choices on such matters as how and how much to arm and with whom to ally, the door opens to subversion as a means of nudging the response in directions favorable to the intervener. If A cares about B's goals, is uncertain about them, and thinks subversion can decrease the probability of B challenging it, it faces an incentive to do so.

Granted, the effects of domestic factional politics within the target may seem small from the perspective of a structural theory – for example, delaying a balancing response by a few years, causing a temporary alliance shift, or altering slightly the military posture of the target. However, it pays to remember that these are small effects on powerful targets. From the intervener's perspective, the net gain of nudging a great power rival just a bit may dramatically outweigh the expected return to some much bigger act of subversion against a weak target. Moreover, when it comes to classical and neoclassical realism, the arguments and evidence for potential gains to great power subversion are everywhere. As Schweller has shown, for example, domestic dissensus frequently impedes what might be postulated as optimal balancing behavior. Although he does not explore it, his neoclassical realist theory of 'underbalancing' resembles a primer for how a rising power could subvert targets to forestall counterbalancing. It follows seamlessly from his work that states face incentives to cause or abet strategic dissensus in their rivals.

Discussions

The puzzle of restraint. Realism, in sum, posits huge potential gains to great power subversion such that one might expect it to loom large in strategic competition among great powers. Yet, amidst abundant evidence that states see incentives for subversion, the observable long-term pattern shows that attempts to realize those gains among great powers are highly constrained. The existing IR literature on subversive statecraft exemplifies this: high salience, large scale and more coercive subversion is commonplace between great powers and weaker states and does occur between belligerent great powers, but it is conspicuous by its absence among great power peers in peacetime [5]. Alex Downes and Lindsey O'Rourke count over 100 overt foreign-imposed regime change operations since 1816 – none of which occurred between great power peers in peacetime. O'Rourke's data reveal that the US attempted covert regime change in the Cold War against 54 targets, only three of which (France, China and the USSR) were great powers [6]. John M. Owen's data show forcible efforts to impose domestic institutions on great power rivals almost exclusively during wars, with the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon being the prime post-Westphalia examples.

Melissa Lee's research is especially relevant – and intriguing. She defines subversion as 'the empowerment of third-party proxies – local nonstate groups – with the aim of degrading the target state's authority over its territory'. Lee argues that subversion of this type has the same potential benefits we have ascribed to our more capacious definition of the phenomenon: changing the target's policy or weakening it. Consistent with other research on subversive statecraft, she finds cases of subversion as she defines it featuring exclusively weak targets.

Why do we not observe more such subversion among great powers? This restraint is not for want of potential opportunities. No one can understand 19th century geopolitics, for example, without such staples as the Irish Question (perennial fears in Whitehall that external powers might intervene on behalf of Irish independence), the Polish question (fears in Berlin, Vienna and especially St Petersburg concerning external support for Polish independence), or the Great Game (fears in London that Russia would catalyze fissiparous tendencies in British India). Minority identities were daggers poised at the hearts of some of the century's most formidable great powers. Yet the period's leaders confined the impulse to use that subversive tool to weaker targets. When it came to action that could really stick the dagger into a potential great power opponent, leaders shrank.

The key exception is wartime. When Clausewitz's 'peculiar means' of organized violence are in play, constraints on great power subversion weaken. The best-documented cases of great powers seeking to subvert each other with means including efforts to empower local proxies or factions occur in war or its immediate aftermath. Regime change occurred (though not by intent) in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and was a war aim in World War I (though the entente powers did out carry it out) and World War II. France and Britain undertook bold subversion against each other in the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon – the list goes on. Even standout cases in peacetime appear causally related to war. Consider Bismarck's subversion of France. It entailed an extraordinarily deep entanglement of German power within intricate domestic French political choices. It also involved a large range of tools from direct collusion with French politicians to various covert and overt propaganda measures. But at the core of the intervention was the creation of a climate of fear in the French electorate, equating the choice for a conservative-monarchist government (whose victory promised a form of government Bismarck assumed would yield a more formidable great power competitor across the Rhine) with war. The ability to foster that climate was the direct result of France's recent defeat and occupation, and could not have been induced in a more normal setting.

It takes only a brief examination to see that within great powers there were often factions with diametrically opposed preferences for alliance choices, as in the fierce debates within Britain and France in the 1930s over allying with the USSR against Germany. Yet this potential rarely becomes real. To be sure, great powers also constantly seek to influence each other's domestic politics using subtler forms of subversion [7]. Propaganda, disinformation, bribes, forgeries and the like are all standard fare. This reached familiar proportions in the mid-twentieth century, with the Cold War superpowers developing large and well-funded bureaucracies whose main purpose was subverting the other side [8]. But the dog that does not bark is striking: non-belligerent great powers do not subvert rivals in a major way. In particular, they appear to hold back from large-scale and especially material support for domestic factions or groups in rivals.

Conclusion

In sum, great power subversion gets serious only when far more weighty resources are expended in war. The reason IR has little to say on the subject is that

scholars have focused on observable things that seem clearly consequential, like wars and arms races. It is hard to identify a case in which subversion substantially affected the trajectory of a great power rivalry.

Great power subversion in action. Off-the-shelf realist theory thus portrays the great-power subsystem as one in which the temptation to subvert peer rivals recurs, but it is checked by powerful restraints. A crazy world of real anarchy, in which governments constantly seek to undermine each other domestically, is always waiting to burst forth, but it is held in check by power politics itself. The theory presented here explains the comparatively low-subversion equilibrium among great powers exactly as balance of power theory explains the preservation of the sovereign states system against its hierarchical subjugation by one state: as the endogenous outcome of realpolitik. A low subversion order thus emerges among great powers, but it is constantly tested, tends to break down in wartime, and does not embrace weaker states. Defense dominance – home field advantage – means that subversion operations need to be big to get consequential results, but big operations send seriously malign signals, invite potentially costly retaliation and risk escalation. The key is that the theory predicts that great powers will always be managing trade-offs between the potential cheap gains to subversion versus its substantial risks.

We have argued that there is a need of a better handle on how the politics of subversion play out among the world's most powerful states and suggested a realist theory to account for a broad pattern of comparative restraint in subversion among non-belligerent great powers. We hardly need note that such a sketch of such a blunt theory raises more questions than it answers. It cannot tell us why great powers tolerate as much subversion as they do, nor can it account for variation in levels of subversion over time. All of that will require actor- and case-specific detail. Moreover, it raises the very same explanatory debate as the original realist theory focused on arms-length statecraft. Constructivists will attribute levels of subversion to changing 'cultures of anarchy'; English School aficionados will cite settled rules of a society of states; liberal institutionalists will look to institutional effects and reputational dynamics. Distinguishing the subtleties of those arguments from the blunt arguments presented here will take precise process-tracing. However, raising new questions and pushing research in new directions is precisely the point. It opens the door to a new arena of statecraft that has been obscured by the way we've divvied up the study of international politics, assuming that realism has nothing to say about domestic politics and making the study of espionage and covert statecraft a separate, specialized area.

To sum up, we presented evidence that mid-twentieth century great powers did indeed probe the potential for subversion to substitute for or complement sovereignty respecting statecraft, but their efforts conflicted with constraints that were endogenous to the power politics of the era. It was not just the fear of escalation to war that stayed the subverter's hand. A probing politics largely played out below that level, as decision-makers assessed or anticipated various kinds of cost-imposition responses from target governments. As seemingly subvertable as great power target governments may become, they still hold in their hands most of what other governments want and need, a reality that induces restraint in all but rare and

extreme circumstances. And that implication defuses at least some currently popular pessimism about democratic great powers' staying power in the 21st century rivalry against their authoritarian peers.

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РЕАЛИЗМ ТЕОРИЯСЫ МӘНМӘТІНІНДЕГІ ҰЛЫ ДЕРЖАВАЛАР ДИВЕРСИЯСЫ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала ұлы державалардың диверсиялық әрекетінің реалистік теориясын жан-жақты талдауға арналған, бұл диверсиялық мемлекеттік басқару туралы әдебиеттердің өсіп келе жатқан көлеміндегі салыстырмалы түрде бағаланбаған құбылысқа жарық түсіреді. Қарапайым, ұтымды шығындар мен пайданы есептеуді қолдана отырып, бұл мақала реализм теориясының соғыспайтын және соғысушы ұлы державалар арасында байқалған диверсияның әртүрлі дәрежесін қалай тиімді түсіндіретінін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, диверсия әлсіз мақсаттарға бағытталған кезде жиі, зорлық-зомбылықпен және кең ауқымда жүретінін атап көрсетеді. Теорияны суреттеу және алғашқы қолдауды қамтамасыз ету үшін мақалада Кеңес Одағы мен Америка Құрама Штаттарының қатысуымен XX ғасырдың ортасындағы диверсия туралы қысқаша кейс-стади ұсынылған. Бұл зерттеулер теорияның қолданылуы мен дұрыстығын айқын көрсетеді. Эмпирикалық дәлелдермен бірге талдау ұлы державалар арасында жоғары зардаптармен диверсияға ықпал ететін жағдайлар шектеулі және қайтымды екенін көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, жоғары бәсекелестік пен стратегиялық артықшылыққа ұмтылудан туындаған соғысушы ұлы державалар диверсияның жоғары деңгейлерін қолдануға бейім. Олардың мотивтері неғұрлым агрессивті және қарама-қайшылықты тәсілге, жасырын әрекеттер арқылы қарсылас державаларды әлсіретуге деген ұмтылысқа негізделген. Диверсияның бұл қарқыны осы мемлекеттер арасындағы билік пен бәсекелестіктің қарқынды күресінің нәтижесі болып табылады. Демек, қазіргі стратегиялық ландшафт ұлы державалардың бәсекелестік динамикасын түбегейлі өзгертіп, диверсияға жаңа орталық рөл берді деген пікірлерге күдік тудырады. Теория мен растайтын дәлелдер ұлы державалар арасында осындай елеулі

диверсиялық әрекеттерге қажетті жағдайлар салыстырмалы түрде сирек кездеседі деген идеяны көрсетеді, бұл диверсия қазіргі халықаралық қатынастардың маңызды аспектісіне айналды деген дәлелге күмән келтіреді.

Тірек сөздер: ұлы державалар, араласу, халықаралық қатынастар теориясы, интервенция, реализм, диверсия, соғыспайтын және соғысушы державалар, тепе-теңдік мінез-құлқы

ДИВЕРСИЯ ВЕЛИКИХ ДЕРЖАВ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ТЕОРИИ РЕАЛИЗМА

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена всестороннему анализу реалистической теории подрывной деятельности великих держав, проливающей свет на относительно недооцененный феномен в растущем объеме литературы о подрывном государственном управлении. Используя простой, рациональный расчет затрат и выгод, статья демонстрирует, как эта теория эффективно объясняет различную степень подрывной деятельности, наблюдаемую среди невоюющих и воюющих великих держав. Более того, в нем подчеркивается, что подрывная деятельность, как правило, происходит чаще, насильственно и в большем масштабе, когда направлена на более слабые цели. Чтобы проиллюстрировать и обеспечить первоначальную поддержку теории, в статье представлены краткие тематические исследования подрывной деятельности середины двадцатого века с участием Советского Союза и Соединенных Штатов. Эти тематические исследования наглядно демонстрируют применимость и обоснованность теории. В сочетании с эмпирическими данными анализ демонстрирует, что обстоятельства, способствующие подрывной деятельности с высокими последствиями среди великих держав, являются как ограниченными, так и обратимыми по своей природе. С другой стороны, воюющие великие державы, движимые обостренным чувством соперничества и стремлением к стратегическому преимуществу, склонны использовать более высокие уровни подрывной деятельности. Их мотивы коренятся в более агрессивном и конфронтационном подходе, стремлении подорвать и ослабить соперничающие державы посредством тайных действий. Этот повышенный уровень подрывной деятельности является результатом интенсивной борьбы за власть и соперничества, которые существуют между этими государствами. Следовательно, статья привносит здоровую дозу скептицизма в отношении утверждений о том, что современный стратегический ландшафт коренным образом изменил динамику соперничества великих держав, придав подрывной деятельности новую центральную роль. Теория и подтверждающие доказательства подчеркивают идею о том, что условия, необходимые для таких значительных подрывных действий среди великих держав, относительно редки, что ставит под сомнение аргумент о том, что подрывная деятельность стала важнейшим аспектом современных международных отношений.

Ключевые слова: великие державы, вмешательство, теория международных отношений, интервенция, реализм, подрывная деятельность, невоюющие и воюющие державы, уравнивающее поведение

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