

MILITARY POWER AND THE CAUSES OF WAR: EIGHT HYPOTHESES

- I. FIRST MOVE ADVANTAGE (or "crisis instability"). "The greater the advantage that accrues to the side mobilizing or striking first, the greater the risk of war." See Schelling, Arms and Influence, chapter 6 (assigned).
 - A. Dangers raised by a first-move advantage (FMA):
 1. Opportunistic war. ("If we strike first we win, so let's strike and capture the benefits of winning!")
 2. Preemptive war. "We fear they will strike, so we must strike to deny them the first-mover advantage." Examples: Israel's 1967 attack on Egypt; Russian and French pre-mobilization in 1914. And two extensions:
 - "Accidental War." Example: 1890 Battle of Wounded Knee.
 - "The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack"--Schelling. ("We fear they fear we fear they will strike; so they may strike; so we must.") This is the common formulation of the problem but the least realistic. History shows that reciprocal fear almost never happens, perhaps because states seldom see themselves as threats to others so they seldom expect others to fear themselves.
 3. The dangers of candor. States conceal their grievances and their capabilities because they think: "We must lull them into believing we are weak and benign; otherwise we can't gain surprise." This makes inadvertent war and wars of false optimism more likely.
 - a. States conceal their grievances: China vs. USA 1950, Egypt vs. Israel 1973, Prussia vs. Austria 1740.
 - b. States conceal their capabilities, leaving others undeterred: China vs. USA 1950, Egypt vs. Israel 1973.
 - c. States conceal their misperceptions, leaving others unable to correct these misperceptions: North Korea regarding U.S. intentions 1950; China regarding U.S. intentions 1950; Britain and France regarding U.S. intentions 1956, Prussia regarding other powers 1740, Japan regarding U.S. will 1941.
 - B. Types of war caused by FMA: first mobilization vs. first strike; preemption of opponents vs. preemption of neutral states.
 - C. Features of a first-move advantage.
 1. First-**strike** and first-**mobilization** advantages are both dangerous.
 2. First-move advantages are two-sided. If you gain by moving first, it also pays your opponent to move first, to deny you the advantage of moving first.
 - D. Elements of a first-move advantage.
 1. A military move can be made secretly, catching the target by surprise. This is a function of two factors: (a) the degree of concealment of the attack; (b) the speed of the attack.
 2. A successful secret move can change the force ratio in the

- attacker's favor.
3. The offense is strong relative to the defensive in warfare. If so, gains from moving first can be parlayed into further gains. If not, states gain little by moving first even if they can change force ratios in their favor by stealthy first moves.
- E. How can a first move advantage be prevented? Antidotes to a first-move advantage include the following:
 - > Transparency measures that make sneak attacks difficult.
 - > Limits on fast-to-target weapons.
 - > Strong defenses to protect forces that would be targeted by the first strike.
 - > Arrange a defense-dominant world where conquest is hard.
 - F. How common are first-move advantages? Answer: very rare. Yet states often perceive large first-move advantages! FMAs are scarce but the illusion of first-move advantage is common and causes lots of trouble.
 - G. A current example to worry about: North Korea's elite may believe that the first mover will have the advantage in a U.S.-North Korean war. See assigned reading by Vipin Narang.
 - H. How could the first-move advantage hypothesis be tested?
- II. "WINDOWS" OF OPPORTUNITY AND VULNERABILITY (causing "preventive war"): "The greater the fluctuations in the relative power of states, the greater the risk of war."
- A. Varieties of preventive war:
 1. Domestic events within states can shift their relative power. Windows are opened if one state grows its military forces, or its economy, faster than its adversary. Examples: Germany vs. Russia 1914, Germany vs. Britain and France 1940, Germany and Japan vs. USA 1941, Israel vs. Egypt 1956, USA vs. Iraq 2003 CE, Sparta vs. Athens 440 BCE. "What caused the war was the rising power of Athens and the fear this caused in Sparta"--Thucydides.
 2. Shifts in alignments among states can cause shifts in their relative power: Japan vs. USA 1941, USA vs. Britain 1812; indeed all wide wars...
 3. Tactical vs. Strategic windows.
 - B. Windows make declining states more aggressive:
 1. Attack pays for the declining state (it thinks "war is better now than later, and since war later is likely let's start a war now!"); and belligerent diplomacy makes more sense for the decliner (it thinks "a war now would not be such a bad thing, let's risk it!") (USA 1950s.)
 2. Promises by the rising state have less credibility; hence others won't settle disputes with it. (Others think: "After they gain strength they will break any promises they make now so agreements with them are worthless!") Arabs and Israelis 1930s.
 3. Haste, truncated diplomacy ("We must resolve any disputes before our power wanes"):
 - a. Shortened negotiation ---> No agreement. Examples:

USSR vs. Finland 1939, Britain vs. France 1755 (7 Years War), Europe 1914.

- b. No time to warn ---> one side underestimates another's will. Examples: Germany misread Britain, 1914; Finland misread the USSR, 1939.
 - C. Windows may also make rising states more aggressive. Risers (says Bob Gilpin) believe their greater power entitles them to higher status, and to more trappings of status, e.g., a wider sphere of influence. Their demand for these trappings leads to conflict with other states.
 - D. How common are windows? Answer: they are common in perception, rare in reality. As German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1862-1890) said, preventive war is usually to "commit suicide from fear of death." Why are nonexistent windows often imagined?
 - E. Applications to today.
 - > Would nuclear proliferation open dangerous windows? In 2002 the Bush 43 Administration embraced a doctrine of preventive war against rogue states that reach for nuclear weapons and attacked Iraq for this reason. The Trump administration has voiced similar thoughts. Is this good policy or "suicide from fear of death"?
 - > Some U.S. policymakers now advocate attacking North Korea or Iran to forestall them from developing intercontinental nuclear arsenals.
 - > Would nuclear disarmament open dangerous windows?
- III. FALSE OPTIMISM: "If losers could foresee their defeat they would not fight; hence false optimism on the outcome of war raises the risk of war." (See Blainey, Causes of War, chapter 3, "Dreams and Delusions of the Coming War," assigned.)
- A. Three types of false optimism:
 1. Optimism about relative power: Hitler vs. USSR 1941, Arabs vs. Israel 1967, Israel vs. Arabs 1973, France vs. Prussia 1870, Saddam Hussein 1990-1991 (He proclaimed to the U.S.: "We will walk on your skulls!"); US vs. Iraq 2003.
 2. Optimism about relative will: Japan vs. USA 1941, The Confederacy 1861, USA vs. Vietnam 1965, Saddam Hussein of Iraq 1990-91 and 2003 ("The Americans have no stomach for casualties!").
 3. Optimism about relative access to allies: Germany 1939, North Korea 1950, Germany 1914.
 - B. Causes of false optimism: First-strike advantages? Arms races? Self-glorifying nationalist myths? Multipolarity? Personality disorder? Narcissism and related personality disorders cause decision making pathologies in government.
- IV. CUMULATIVE RESOURCES: "The greater the cumulativity of resources--that is, the more that control of one resource enables control of another--the greater the risk of war." Examples of cumulative resources:
-- Buffer Room: "We need to control our lifelines/backyard

etc."

-- Resources that can be converted into military power, e.g., industry.

-- Credibility of threats and promises.

How does the nuclear revolution change things on this score?

V. CHEAP WAR: "War is least common when its costs are greatest."

VI. OFFENSE-DEFENSE THEORY. "War is more likely when conquest is easy." Offering this idea: Rousseau in 18th C ("Island states are more defensible, hence less involved in wars"), Jean de Bloch 1899, Hugh Gibson 1932, Robert Jervis 1978. A summary is the assigned reading by SVE, "Offense-Defense Theory in a Nutshell." A related idea: the "security dilemma."

- A. What is the "Security Dilemma"? It arises when states' efforts to secure themselves leave other states insecure.
- B. Are offensive forces and force postures distinguishable from defensive forces and force postures? (Sometimes.) Does the offense-defense balance vary across time and space? (Yes; compare the battles of France, 1914 and 1940.)
- C. Ten (10) Dangers that Arise When Conquest Is Easy:
 1. Opportunistic aggression. When conquest is easy cheap gains can be had by war, so states go to war.
 2. Defensive aggression. States are less secure because their borders are harder to defend and their neighbors are more aggressive. Hence they seek to expand to make their borders more defensible; to cut their neighbors down to size; and to oust hostile nearby regimes.
 3. Fierce resistance to others' expansion. Small gains by an enemy can snowball, so every gain by the other must be strongly opposed. This intensifies the collision between expansionist states and others.
 4. First-move advantages are larger because states can make greater territorial gains with any military advantages gained by mobilizing first or striking first.
 5. Windows are larger for the same reason. Small force-ratio advantages can be converted into large territorial gains, and small force-ratio disadvantages may translate into large losses, so states are anxious to strike while they have the upper hand if they see themselves in relative decline.
 6. *Fait Accompli* tactics:
 - a. These are more tempting to adopt ("We must gain our aims, since our safety is threatened if we fail; hence we should adopt even reckless diplomatic tactics if they will work.")
 - b. These have more dangerous effects if adopted.
 7. Alliances are tighter, hence wars have a greater propensity to spread (e.g., 1914). (States think: "We can't let our allies go under or we'll be next; so we must join every war they get into, even wars they start.")
 8. Secrecy is tighter, hence false optimism and misperception

- are more common; and errors flowing therefrom have more catastrophic and less reversible consequences. (States think: "If they knew our plans and forces our enemies could conquer us; hence we must observe dark secrecy.")
9. Arms racing is more intense, giving rise to windows of opportunity and vulnerability, and to false optimism.
 10. Offense-dominance is self-feeding: offense breeds offense. ("Offense is the stronger form of war; we should buy what works so let's buy offensive forces.")
- D. How can these hypotheses be tested? What are their observable implications? Tests and what they show:
1. In the past states were often driven to war by the search for security. In a world of very strong defenses this search would not be necessary, and the wars caused by this search could be avoided.
 2. War has been more common when and where security was believed scarce.
 - > Germany's borders are not defensible; Germany is aggressive.
 - > The Soviet Union recklessly caused the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 because it learned in late 1961 that the U.S. had nuclear superiority. Soviet leaders feared the U.S. might use this nuclear superiority to subjugate the USSR.
 - > European leaders thought conquest was unusually easy in 1914, and were uncommonly belligerent.
 - > China's leaders launched a very dangerous war against the U.S. in 1950 to avert a feared U.S. invasion of Manchuria.
 3. Deduction from psychology. Fear is an especially hot button for humans. It makes people violent.
- E. How much history can offense-defense theory (ODT) explain? Wars stemming from the search for security are abundant. If so, ODT explains a lot.
- F. Causes of offensive and defensive advantage:
1. Military factors:
 - i. Arms.
 - ii. Geography: mountains and bodies of water are barriers to offense.
 - iii. Nationalism.
 - iv. Urban vs. Rural setting.
 2. Diplomatic factors:
 - i. Are alliances defensive or defensive/offensive?
 - ii. Do "balancer" states exist and do they balance?
 - iii. Can "collective security" be made to work?
 3. The conflict between arms and diplomacy: can defending your allies require offensive forces?
- G. Are offensive military strategies always bad? Despite the dangers listed under "A", is offense sometimes the best strategy anyway?
1. For "extended deterrence" (i.e., protecting allies)?
 2. For scaring aggressor-states into better behavior?

Example: US policy toward Stalin, 1950-53? Recent U.S. policies toward North Korea and Iran?

3. For scaring small or weak states into better behavior?
 4. For limiting one's own damage in wars, and for ending wars?
 5. For reforming otherwise-unreformable aggressor states?
Examples: Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, Saddam's Iraq.
 6. When the offense already dominates?
- H. How easy is conquest in the real world? Do states exaggerate the ease of conquest? Does the nuclear revolution make conquest easier or harder?

VII. EASY DESTRUCTION: "The more the power to destroy spreads to non-deterrable actors, the more war."

- A. The survival dilemma, a concept parallel to the security dilemma. "States conquer or destroy others when they fear being physically destroyed, even if they need not fear conquest." U.S. counterproliferation policy is driven not by fears that terrorists might conquer the U.S., but by fears they might destroy some of it.
- B. A hypotheses deduced from the survival dilemma: "The spread of destructive power to many hands (as forecast by Martin Rees) will magnify the survival dilemma. This will causes violence by psychopaths and terrorists, and wars by states trying to keep WMD out of the hands of terrorists and psychopaths."

VIII. ARMS RACING AND WAR

- A. Causes of Arms Racing:
 1. Secrecy.
 2. Offense-dominance, offensive doctrines and force postures.
 - a. Offensive forces spur more counter-building by the other side.
 - b. Indirect effects: secrecy, less arms control.
- B. Does Arms Racing Cause War? Is it more a cause or a symptom of international conflict?
 1. States infer malign intentions from other states' military buildups. "If they are buying arms they must intend to use them--on us! (Hence we might be wise to launch preemptive or preventive war!)"
 2. Arms racing causes windows.
 3. Arms racing causes false optimism.
 4. Why the importance of arms racing is exaggerated: war and arms racing are correlated, but is the correlation spurious? (Does mutual hostility cause them both, creating an illusion of causation?)

IX. WHAT ABOUT DISARMAMENT? IS IT POSSIBLE? WOULD IT CAUSE OR PREVENT WAR?

- A. Is total disarmament possible/desirable?
 1. Is total disarmament possible?
 - > Could the human race ever really be disarmed? Consider the slaughter of ancient wars waged with swords and

shields. For example, when Roman and Carthaginian forces fought at Cannae in 216 BCE some 76,000 of the 126,000 participants perished in an afternoon. And more recently (1994) Hutu extremists in Rwanda slaughtered 800,000 of their Tutsi and moderate Hutu compatriots in a few weeks with machetes.

- > What quality of verification would be required before states would disarm? What arrangements to equalize both side's possible rate of "breakout" from the arms control regime would be required?
- 2. Is it desirable? The problem of preventive war.
- 3. If it's possible, is it necessary? If states already get along so well that they can agree to disarm, why is it needed?
- B. Is quantitative disarmament possible/desirable? (Clearly it's possible: see strategic arms agreements of 1972-present--SALT, START, etc. This saves money. Some say it also dampens mutual fear.)
- D. Is qualitative disarmament--i.e., limiting some types of arms--possible/desirable? Specifically: Limits on offensive arms? Limits on indiscriminate arms (nukes, bioweapons, chem weapons, mines)? Limits on first-move advantages by requiring transparency?

Hypotheses I-VIII comprise the universe of major hypotheses on arms and war. If you can think of more you've found something new.

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