

MIT / 17.42 / Causes and Prevention of War
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MILITARY POLICY 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. When does it pay / not pay / to move (mobilize or strike) first?
1. The problem is two-sided. If you have a first-move advantage, it pays your opponent to move first just to deny you the first-move advantage.
 2. First-**strike** vs. first-**mobilization** advantages. Both are dangerous.
- B. 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!") Not a profound point but many analysts don't get beyond it.
 2. Preemptive war. "We fear they will strike, so we must strike."
 Examples: Israel's 1967 attack on Egypt; Russia's 1914 mobilization.
 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 them.
 3. The Dangers of Candor--the most serious of these 3 risks. 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 under-deterred: 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.
- C. Types of war caused by FMA: first mobilization and first strike; preemption of opponents and preemption of neutral states.
- D. How can a first move advantage be prevented? The ingredients and antidotes to an FMA.
1. Is a secret military move possible? This is a function of two factors: (a) the concealment of the attack; (b) the speed of the attack. If so, peace is bolstered by transparency and slow-traveling weapons.
 2. Can a successful secret move change force ratios in the attacker's favor?
 3. Is the offense powerful relative to the defensive in warfare? If the offense is very weak there is little first-move advantage even if states can change force ratios by stealthy first moves.
- E. How common are first-move advantages? Answer: very rare. How often have they been perceived? Answer: often! Actual first-move advantages are scarce but the illusion of first-move advantage is common and causes lots of trouble.
- F. 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. Events internal to states can cause shifts in their relative power: Germany vs. Russia 1914, Germany vs. Britain and France 1940, Germany and Japan vs. USA 1941, Israel vs. Egypt 1956, Sparta vs. Athens 440 BCE, USA vs. Iraq 1991 and 2003 CE.
 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. Dangers raised by Windows:
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. The rising state has less credibility, hence others won't settle disputes with it. (Others think: "After they gain strength they will break any promises they made while weak 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. 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 illusory windows so often imagined?
- D. Applications to today: would nuclear disarmament create dangerous windows? Would nuclear proliferation? Also: in 2002 the Bush Administration embraced a doctrine of preventive war against rogue states that move to gain weapons of mass destruction. Is this good policy or "suicide from fear of death"?
- 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!").
 2. Optimism about relative will: Japan vs. USA 1941, 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 decisionmaking 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."
- Buffer Room: "we need to control our lifelines/backyard etc."
 - Resources that can be converted into military power, e.g., industry.
 - Credibility.
- How does the nuclear revolution change things on this score?
- V. CHEAP WAR: "War is least common when its costs are greatest."
- VI. EASY CONQUEST/OFFENSE-DOMINANCE: "The easier conquest becomes, the greater

the risk of war." Offering this idea: Hugh Gibson 1932, Robert Jervis 1978. Summing it up is the assigned reading by SVE, "Primed for Peace." 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 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? How much history can they explain? 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. E.g., Germany's borders are not defensible; Germany is aggressive.
 3. The 1914 case: its details fit the predictions of offense-defense theory.
- E. 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?
 - F. 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?
 - G. How easy is conquest in the real world? Does the nuclear revolution make conquest easier or harder?
 - H. A related hypothesis: the survival dilemma. "States conquer or destroy others when they fear being physically destroyed, even if they need not fear conquest." The new aggressive U.S. counterproliferation policy is driven not by fears that terrorists might conquer the U.S., but that they might destroy some of it. A scenario to consider: the spread of WMD to many hands will create a survival dilemma. Much war will stem from the efforts of states to keep WMD out of the hands of crazed non-state actors.
- VII. 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 others 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?)
- VIII. WHAT ABOUT DISARMAMENT? IS IT POSSIBLE? WOULD IT CAUSE OR PREVENT WAR?
- A. Is 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?
 - B. Is it desirable? The problem of preventive war.
 - C. If it's possible, is it necessary? If states already get along so well that they can agree to disarm, why is it needed?

These eight hypotheses represent the universe of major hypotheses on arms and war. If you can think of more you've found something new.

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