

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.
 - A. When does it pay / not pay / to move (mobilize or strike) first?
 1. The problem is two-sided. Their first-move advantage is also yours.
 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 ("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. US 1950, Egypt vs. Israel 1973, Prussia vs. Austria 1740.
 - b. States conceal their capabilities, leaving others under-deterred: China vs. US 1950, Egypt vs. Israel 1973.
 - c. States conceal their misperceptions, leaving others unable to correct these misperceptions: China 1950.
 - d. States conceal their military and diplomatic miscalculations: Britain and France 1956, Prussia 1740, North Korea 1950, Japan 1941.
 - C. Types of war caused by FMA: first mobilization vs. first strike; preemption of opponents vs. 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? (Very rare.) How often have they been perceived? (Often!) Actual first-move advantages, being scarce, cause little trouble. The illusion of first-move advantage, being common, causes lots of trouble.
- F. How could the first-move advantage hypothesis be tested?
- II. "WINDOWS" OF OPPORTUNITY & 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. Internally-caused windows: Germany 1914 vs. Russia, Hitler vs. Britain & France 1940, Germany & Japan vs. USA 1941, Israel vs. Egypt 1956, Sparta vs. Athens 440 BCE, US vs. Iraq 1991 CE.
 2. Externally (diplomatically)-caused windows: Germany 1914, Japan 1941, USA 1812, indeed all wide wars...
 3. Tactical vs. Strategic windows.
- B. Dangers raised by Windows:
1. Attack pays for the declining state ("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 ("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. ("They will break promises made in weakness after they gain strength, so agreements with them are worthless!") Arabs & 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), US vs. China 1950, 1914.
 - b. No time to warn ---> one side underestimates another's will. Examples: Germany misread Britain, 1914; Finland misread the USSR, 1939; Egypt misread American intentions, 1967.
- C. How common are windows? (Common in perception, rare in reality. As German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck 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?
- 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.)
- A. Three types of false optimism:
1. Optimism about relative power: Hitler 1941, Arabs 1948 & 1967, Israel 1973, France 1870, Saddam Hussein 1990-1991.
 2. Optimism about relative will: Japan 1941, Confederacy 1861, USA 1965.
 3. Optimism about relative access to allies: Germany 1939, North Korea 1950, Germany 1914.
- B. Causes of false optimism: First-strike advantages? Arms races? Multipolarity?

- IV. CUMULATIVE RESOURCES: "The greater the cumulativity of resources (i.e. 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."
 -- Convertible resources, e.g., industry
 -- Credibility
 (How does the nuclear revolution change things?)
- 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." See Hugh Gibson 1932, Robert Jervis 1978; and see 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; cf. 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 want to expand to make their borders more defensible; and they want to cut their neighbors down to size.
 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, 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 decline.
 6. *Fait Accompli* tactics:
 - a. 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. Have more dangerous effects if adopted.
 7. Alliances are tighter, hence wars have a greater propensity to spread (e.g., 1914). ("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 miscalculation and misperception are more common; and errors flowing therefrom have more catastrophic and less reversible consequences. ("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 & where security was believed scarce.
- E. Causes of Offensive and Defensive Advantage:
1. Military factors:
 - i. Arms.
 - ii. Geography.
 - iii. Nationalism.
 - iv. Urban vs. Rural setting.
 2. Diplomatic factors:
 - i. Are alliances defensive or defensive/offensive?
 - ii. Do "balancers" 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. When the offense already dominates?
 2. For "extended deterrence" (i.e. protecting allies)?
 3. For scaring aggressor-states into better behavior?
 4. For scaring small or weak states into better behavior?
 5. For limiting one's own damage in wars, & ending wars?
 6. For reforming otherwise-unreformable aggressor states?
- G. How Easy Is Conquest in the Real World? Does the Nuclear Revolution Make Conquest Easier or Harder?

VII. ARMS RACING AND WAR

- A. Causes of Arms Racing:
1. Secrecy.
 2. Offense-dominance, offensive doctrines and force postures.
 - a. Direct effects (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. It causes windows.
 2. It causes false optimism.
 3. 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 it possible?

-- Could the human race ever really be disarmed? (Consider the slaughter of ancient wars, waged with swords & shields; e.g., 76,000 of the 126,000 participants in the battle of Cannae [216 BCE] perished in an afternoon.)

-- 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?)

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