



PROJECT MUSE®

Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War

Stephen Van Evera

International Security, Volume 22, Number 4, Spring 1998, pp. 5-43 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446910/summary>

Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War

Stephen Van Evera

Is war more likely when conquest is easy? Could peace be strengthened by making conquest more difficult? What are the causes of offense dominance?¹ How can these causes be controlled? These are the questions this article addresses.

I argue that war is far more likely when conquest is easy, and that shifts in the offense-defense balance have a large effect on the risk of war. Ten war-causing effects (summarized in Figure 1) arise when the offense dominates. (1) Empires are easier to conquer. This invites opportunistic expansion even by temperate powers (explanation A). (2) Self-defense is more difficult; hence states are less secure. This drives them to pursue defensive expansion (explanation B). (3) Their greater insecurity also drives states to resist others' expansion more fiercely. Power gains by others raise larger threats to national security; hence expansionism prompts a more violent response (explanation C). (4) First-strike advantages are larger, raising dangers of preemptive war (explanation D). (5) Windows of opportunity and vulnerability are larger, raising dangers of preventive war (explanation E). (6) States more often adopt *fait accompli* diplomatic tactics, and such tactics more often trigger war (explanation F). (7) States negotiate less readily and cooperatively; hence negotiations fail more often, and disputes fester unresolved (explanation G). (8) States enshroud foreign and defense policy in tighter secrecy, raising the risk of

Stephen Van Evera teaches international relations in the Political Science Department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Thanks to Robert Art, Charles Glaser, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on this article. It is distilled from *Causes of War, Volume 1: The Structure of Power and the Roots of War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 1999).

1. In this article "offense dominant" means that conquest is fairly easy; "defense dominant" means that conquest is very difficult. It is almost never easier to conquer than to defend, so I use "offense dominant" broadly, to denote that offense is easier than usual, although perhaps not actually easier than defense. I use "offense-defense balance" to denote the relative ease of aggression and defense against aggression. As noted below, this balance is shaped by both military and diplomatic/political factors. Two measures of the overall offense-defense balance work well: (1) the probability that a determined aggressor could conquer and subjugate a target state with comparable resources; or (2) the resource advantage that an aggressor requires to gain a given chance of conquering a target state. I use "offense" to refer to strategic offensive action—the taking and holding of territory—as opposed to tactical offensive action, which involves the attack but not the seizure and holding of territory.

International Security, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 5–43
© 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

miscalculation and diplomatic blunder (explanation H). (9) Arms racing is faster and harder to control, raising the risk of preventive wars and wars of false optimism (explanation I). (10) Offense dominance is self-feeding. As conquest grows easier, states adopt policies (e.g., more offensive military doctrines) that make conquest still easier. This magnifies effects 1–9 (explanation J).

The perception of offense dominance raises these same ten dangers, even without the reality. If states think the offense is strong, they will act as if it were. Thus offense-defense theory has two parallel variants, real and perceptual. These variants are considered together here.

How does this theory perform in tests? Three single case-study tests are performed below. They corroborate offense-defense theory² and indicate that it has large theoretical importance: that is, shifts in the offense-defense balance—real or perceived—have a large effect on the risk of war. The actual offense-defense balance has marked effects; the effects of the perceived offense-defense balance are even larger.

What causes offense and defense dominance? Military technology and doctrine, geography, national social structure, and diplomatic arrangements (specifically, defensive alliances and balancing behavior by offshore powers) all matter. The net offense-defense balance is an aggregate of these military, geographic, social, and diplomatic factors.

How can offense dominance be controlled? Defensive military doctrines and defensive alliance-making offer good solutions, although there is some tension between them: offensive forces can be needed to defend allies. Offense dominance is more often imagined than real, however. Thus the more urgent question is: How can illusions of offense dominance be controlled? Answers are elusive because the roots of these illusions are obscure.

On balance, how does offense-defense theory measure up? It has the attributes of good theory. In addition to having theoretical importance, offense-defense theory has wide explanatory range and prescriptive richness. It explains an array of important war causes (opportunistic expansionism, defensive expansionism, fierce resistance to others' expansion, first-strike advantage,

2. I use "offense-defense theory" to label the hypothesis that war is more likely when conquest is easy, plus explanatory hypotheses that define how this causation operates. The classic work on the topic is Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214 at 169. An overview is Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Offense-Defense Theory and Its Critics," *Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995), pp. 660–691. The theory I frame here subsumes and elaborates on Jervis's theory.

windows of opportunity and vulnerability, faits accomplis, negotiation failure, secrecy, arms races, and offense dominance itself) that were once thought to be independent. In so doing, offense-defense theory explains the dangers that these war causes produce and the wars they cause. This simplifies the problem of power and war: a number of disparate dangers are fed by a single taproot. Moreover, both the reality and the perception of easy conquest can be shaped by human action; hence offense-defense theory offers prescriptions for controlling the dangers it frames.

The next section outlines offense-defense theory's ten explanations for war. The following section identifies causes of offense and defense dominance. The fourth section frames predictions that can be inferred from offense-defense theory, and offers three case studies as tests of the theory: Europe since 1789, ancient China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and the United States since 1789. The final section assesses the general quality of offense-defense theory.

Hypotheses on the Effects of Offense Dominance

A host of dangers arise when conquest is easy. Some are obvious and some more subtle, some are direct and some indirect. Together they make war very likely when the offense dominates.

A: OPPORTUNISTIC EXPANSIONISM

When conquest is hard, states are dissuaded from aggression by the fear that victory will prove costly or unattainable. When conquest is easy, aggression is more alluring: it costs less to attempt and succeeds more often.³ Aggressors can also move with less fear of reprisal because they win their wars more decisively, leaving their victims less able to retaliate later. Thus even aggressor states are deterred from attacking if the defense is strong, and even quite benign powers are tempted to attack if the offense is strong.

B AND C: DEFENSIVE EXPANSIONISM AND FIERCE RESISTANCE TO EXPANSION

When conquest is hard, states are blessed with secure borders; hence they are less aggressive and more willing to accept the status quo. They have less need

3. Suggesting this hypothesis are Ivan S. Bloch, *The Future of War*, trans. R.C. Long, pref. W.T. Stead (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1899), pp. xxx-xxxi, lxxix; also George H. Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977), p. 9. A corroborating test is John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

for wider borders because their current frontiers are already defensible. They have less urge to intervene in other states' internal affairs because hostile governments can do them less harm.

Conversely, when conquest is easy, states are more expansionist because their current borders are less defensible.⁴ They covet others' geographic strong points, strategic depth, and sources of critical raw materials. They worry more when hostile regimes arise nearby because such neighbors are harder to defend against. These motives drive states to become aggressors and foreign intervenors.⁵ States also resist others' expansion more fiercely when conquest is easy. Adversaries can parlay smaller gains into larger conquests; hence stronger steps to prevent gains by others are more appropriate. This attitude makes disputes more intractable.

The basic problem is that resources are more cumulative when conquest is easy. The ability to conquer others and to defend oneself is more elastic to one's control over strategic areas and resources. As a result, gains are more additive—states can parlay small conquests into larger ones—and losses are less reversible. Hence small losses can spell one's demise, and small gains can open the way to hegemonic dominance. States therefore compete harder to control any assets that confer power, seeking wider spheres for themselves while fiercely resisting others' efforts to expand.

This problem is compounded by its malignant effect on states' expectations about one another's conduct. When conquest is hard, states are blessed with neighbors made benign by their own security and by the high cost of attacking others. Hence states have less reason to expect attack. This leaves states even more secure and better able to pursue pacific policies. Conversely, when the offense dominates, states are cursed with neighbors made aggressive by both temptation and fear. These neighbors see easy gains from aggression and danger in standing pat. Plagued with such aggressive neighbors, all states face

4. As Robert Jervis notes, "when the offense has the advantage over the defense, attacking is the best route to protecting what you have...and it will be hard for any state to maintain its size and influence without trying to increase them." Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," p. 211; see also pp. 168–169, 173, 187–199.

5. It also seems possible that states should be more careful to avoid war when conquest is easy, because war then brings greater risk of total defeat. If so, offense dominance should cause more caution than belligerence among states, and should lower the risk of war. Advancing this argument is James Fearon, "The Offense-Defense Balance and War since 1648," paper prepared for the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, February 1995, pp. 18–24. Fearon's argument seems deductively sound, but history offers very few examples of policymakers who argued that offense dominance was a reason for caution. This is one of many cases where deduction and the historical record point in opposite directions.

greater risk of attack. This drives them to compete still harder to control resources and create conditions that provide security.

Thus states become aggressors because their neighbors are aggressors. This can proceed reciprocally until no state accepts the status quo.

D: MOVING FIRST IS MORE REWARDING

When conquest is easy, the incentive to strike first is larger because a successful surprise attack provides larger rewards and averts greater dangers. Smaller shifts in ratios of forces between states create greater shifts in their relative capacity to conquer and defend territory. (A reversal in the force ratio between two states from 2 to 1 to 1 to 2 means little if attackers need a 3 to 1 advantage to conquer; it means everything if an attacker needs only a 1.5 to 1 advantage.) Hence a surprise strike that shifts the force ratio in the attacker's favor pays it a greater reward. This expands the danger of preemptive war and makes crises more explosive. States grow more trigger-happy, launching first strikes to exploit the advantage of the initiative, and to deny it to an opponent.⁶

Conversely, if the defense dominates, the first-move dividend is small because little can be done with any material advantage gained by moving first. Most aggressors can be checked even if they gain the initiative, and defenders can succeed even if they lose the initiative. Hence preemptive war has less attraction.

E: WINDOWS ARE LARGER AND MORE DANGEROUS

When conquest is easy, arguments for preventive war carry more weight.⁷ Smaller shifts in force ratios have larger effects on relative capacity to conquer or defend territory; hence smaller prospective shifts in force ratios cause greater hope and alarm. Also, stemming decline by using force is more feasible because rising states can be overrun with greater ease. This bolsters arguments for shutting "windows of vulnerability" by war. As a result, all international change is more dangerous. Events that tip the balance of resources in any direction trigger thoughts of war among states that face relative decline.

Conversely, if the defense dominates, arguments for preventive war lose force because declining states can more successfully defend against aggressors even after their decline, making preventive war unnecessary. States are also

6. The classic discussion of these dangers is Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 221–259.

7. For a discussion of the dangers of preventive war, see Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107.

deterred from preventive war by the likelihood that their attack will fail, defeated by their enemy's strong defenses.

F: FAITS ACCOMPLIS ARE MORE COMMON AND MORE DANGEROUS

When conquest is easy, states adopt more dangerous diplomatic tactics—specifically, fait accompli tactics—and these tactics are more likely to cause war.

A fait accompli is a halfway step to war. It promises greater chance of political victory than quiet consultation, but it also raises greater risk of violence.⁸ The acting side moves without warning, facing others with an accomplished fact. It cannot retreat without losing face, a dilemma that it exploits to compel the others to concede. But if the others stand firm, a collision is hard to avoid. Faits accomplis also pose a second danger: because they are planned in secret, the planning circle is small, raising the risk that flawed policies will escape scrutiny because critics cannot quarrel with mistaken premises.

Faits accomplis are more common when the offense dominates because the rewards they promise are more valuable. When security is scarce, winning disputes grows more important than avoiding war. Leaders care more how spoils are divided than about avoiding violence, because failure to gain their share can spell their doom. This leads to gain-maximizing, war-risking diplomatic strategies—above all, to fait accompli tactics.

Faits accomplis are more dangerous when the offense dominates because a successful fait accompli has a greater effect on the distribution of international power. A sudden resource gain now gives an opponent more capacity to threaten its neighbors' safety. Hence faits accomplis are more alarming and evoke a stronger response from others. States faced with a fait accompli will shoot more quickly because their interests are more badly damaged by it.

G: STATES NEGOTIATE LESS AND REACH FEWER AGREEMENTS

When conquest is easy, states have less faith in agreements because others break them more often; states bargain harder and concede more grudgingly, causing more deadlocks; compliance with agreements is harder to verify; and

8. On fait accompli strategies, see Alexander L. George, "Strategies for Crisis Management," in Alexander L. George, *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991), pp. 377–394 at 382–383, also pp. 549–550, 553–554. Other discussions of faits accomplis include R.B. Mowat, *Diplomacy and Peace* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1935), chap. 10 (on "sudden diplomacy"); Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 57–97 (on "brinkmanship"); and Thomas C. Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 22–28 (on games of "chicken").

states insist on better verification and compliance. As a result, states negotiate less often and settle fewer disputes; hence more issues remain unsettled and misperceptions survive that dialogue might dispel.

States break agreements more quickly when the offense dominates because cheating pays larger rewards. Bad faith and betrayal become the norm. The secure can afford the luxury of dealing in good faith, but the insecure must worry more about short-term survival. This drives them toward back-alley behavior, including deceptions and sudden betrayals of all kinds—diplomatic faits accomplis, military surprise attacks, and breaking of other solemn agreements. Hence compliance with agreements is less expected.

When states do negotiate, they bargain harder and concede less when the offense dominates. Agreements must be more finely balanced to gain both sides' agreement, because a relative gain by either side poses greater risks to the other's safety.

Verification of compliance with agreements is both more necessary and more difficult when the offense dominates. States insist on better verification of the other's compliance because smaller violations can have larger security implications; for example, an opponent might convert a small advantage gained by cheating on an arms control agreement into a larger offensive threat. At the same time, verification of compliance is harder because states are more secretive when security is scarce (see explanation G). As a result, the range of issues that can be negotiated is narrowed to the few where near-certain verification is possible despite tight state secrecy.

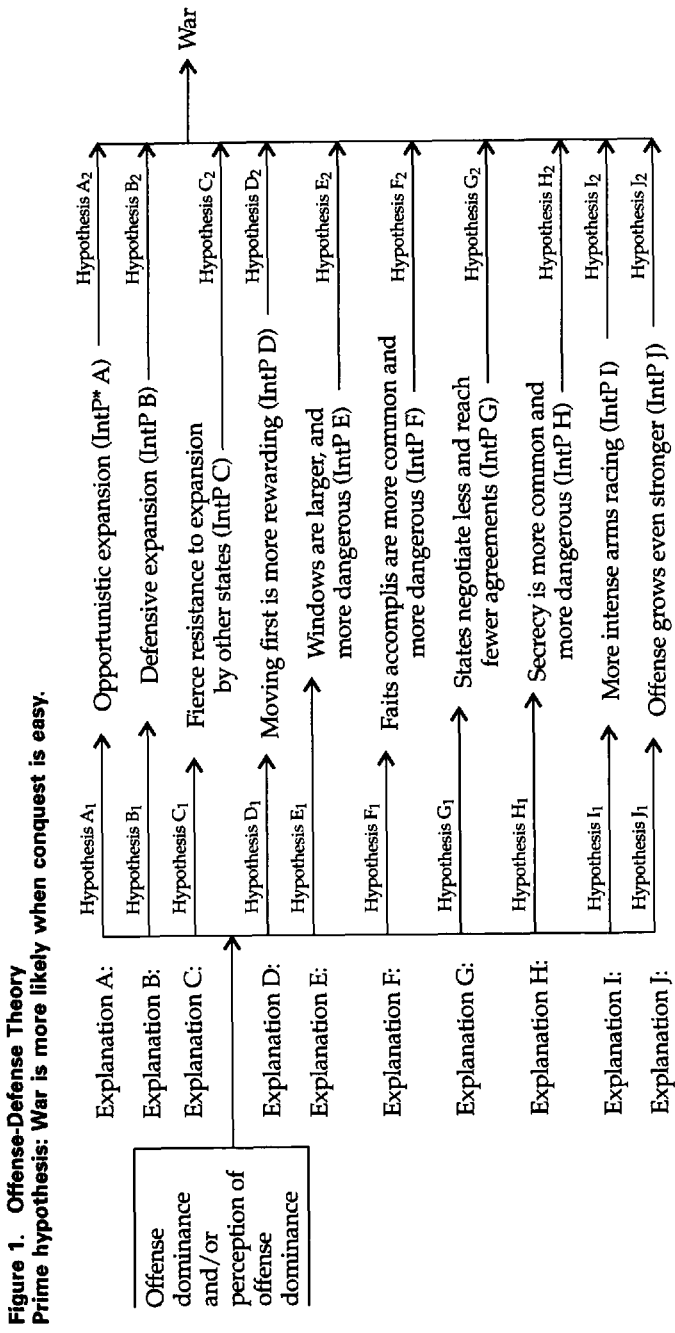
As a net result, states let more disputes fester when the offense dominates.

H: STATES ARE MORE SECRETIVE

Governments cloak their foreign and defense policies in greater secrecy when conquest is easy. An information advantage confers more rewards, and a disadvantage raises more dangers: lost secrets could risk a state's existence. Thus states compete for information advantage by concealing their foreign policy strategies and military plans and forces.

Secrecy in turn is a hydra-headed cause of war. It can lead opponents to underestimate one another's capabilities and blunder into a war of false optimism.⁹ It can ease surprise attack by concealing preparations from the victim. It opens windows of opportunity and vulnerability by delaying states' reac-

9. On wars of false optimism, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), pp. 35–56.



* IntP = Intervening phenomenon.

tions to others' military buildups, raising the risk of preventive war. It fosters policy blunders by narrowing the circle of experts consulted on policy, increasing the risk that flawed policies will survive unexamined. It prevents arms control agreements by making compliance harder to verify.

I: STATES ARMS RACE HARDER AND FASTER

Offense dominance intensifies arms racing, whereas defense dominance slows it down.¹⁰ Arms racing in turn raises other dangers. It opens windows of opportunity and vulnerability as one side or the other races into the lead. It also fosters false optimism by causing rapid military change that confuses policymakers' estimates of relative power. Thus offense dominance is a remote cause of the dangers that arms racing produces.

States have seven incentives to build larger forces when the offense is strong.

- Resources are more cumulative (see explanations B and C). Wartime gains and losses matter more: gains provide a greater increase in security, and losses are less reversible. Therefore the forces that provide these gains and protect against these losses are also worth more.
- Self-defense is more difficult because others' forces have more inherent offensive capability. Hence states require more forces to offset others' deployments.
- States are more expectant of war. Their neighbors are more aggressive (see explanation B), so they must be better prepared for attack or invasion.
- The early phase of war is more decisive. Lacking time to mobilize their economies and societies in the event of war, states maintain larger standing forces.¹¹ The possibility of quick victory puts a premium on forces-in-being.¹²
- States transfer military resources from defense to offense because offense is more effective (see explanation J). Others then counterbuild because their neighbors' capabilities are more dangerous and so require a larger response. States also infer aggressive intent from their neighbors' offensive buildups, leading them to fear attack and to build up in anticipation.
- States hold military secrets more tightly when the offense dominates (see explanation H). This causes rational overarming, as states gauge their defense efforts to worst-case estimates of enemy strength, on grounds that

10. See Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," pp. 172, 188–190.

11. See *ibid.*, pp. 172, 189.

12. General Joseph Joffre argued for a larger French standing force in 1913, because "the affair will already have been settled" by the time reservists were mobilized in three to four weeks. David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 193.

underspending is disastrous whereas overspending is merely wasteful. It also allows national militaries to monopolize defense information more tightly. Given that militaries are prone to inflate threats, states will overspend groundlessly when militaries have an information monopoly that lets them alone assess the threat. Thus “action-reaction” becomes “action-over-reaction-overreaction.”

- States reach fewer arms control agreements when the offense dominates, because agreements of all kinds are fewer (see explanation G). Hence states are less able to limit arms competition through agreement.

If the defense dominates, things are reversed. States build smaller offensive forces because offense is less effective, and because other states have less aggressive aims. States are safe without wider empires; hence offensive forces that could provide empires lose utility. The national military therefore grows defense-heavy. This causes other states to feel safer, which in turn makes them less aggressive, further lowering all states’ insecurity—hence their need for empire and for offense—up to a point.

States also reduce defensive forces when the defense dominates because defense is easier and attack seems more remote. Moreover, as their neighbors buy less offense, they need even less defense because their defense faces less challenge.

In short, states buy smaller forces in general, and less offense in particular, when the defense dominates. This leads to still smaller forces and still less offense. If information were perfect, arms racing would slow to a crawl if the defense strongly dominated.

J. CONQUEST GROWS STILL EASIER

Offense dominance is self-reinforcing¹³ for three main reasons. First, states buy relatively more offensive forces when the offense dominates. They prefer the more successful type of force, so they buy defensive forces when the defense is strong and offensive forces when the offense is strong.¹⁴ This reinforces the initial dominance of the defense or the offense.

13. Making this argument is Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” pp. 188, 199, 201.

14. Thus Clausewitz explained: “If attack were the stronger form [of war], there would be no case for using the defensive, since its purpose is only passive. No one would want to do anything but attack. Defense would be pointless.” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, intro. by Paret, Howard, and Bernard Brodie, commentary by Brodie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 359.

Second, alliances assume a more offensive character¹⁵ when the offense dominates because aggressors can more easily drag their allies into their wars of aggression.¹⁶ Insecure states can less afford to see allies destroyed, so they must support even bellicose allies who bring war on themselves. Knowing this, the allies feel freer to get into wars. As a net result, even de jure defensive alliances operate as defensive-and-offensive alliances. Alliances also assume a more offensive character if the allies adopt purely offensive military doctrines. This hamstring states that would demand that their allies confine themselves to defensive preparations in a crisis, given that all preparations are offensive.

Third, status quo states are less able to protect their allies from conquest when the offense dominates because attackers can overrun defenders before help can arrive.

Thus offense dominance raises the danger of greater offense dominance. Once entered, an offense-dominant world is hard to escape.

Military offense dominance has one self-limiting effect: it leads status quo powers to cooperate more closely against aggressors.¹⁷ They jump to aid an aggressor's victims because each knows that its neighbor's demise could lead more directly to its own undoing. Conversely, when states think that the defense dominates, they do less to save others from aggression because each expects it can defend itself alone even if others are overrun. As a result, aggressors can more often attack their victims seriatim, which is far easier than defeating a unified coalition. This countervailing effect, however, is more than offset by the several ways that offense dominance feeds itself.

These are the dangers raised by offense dominance. As noted above, these same ten dangers arise when the offense is weak but governments think it dominates. They then act as if it dominates, with comparable effects.

Are offensive capabilities always dangerous? The one-sided possession of offensive capabilities by status quo powers that face aggressors can lower rather than raise the risk of war under some conditions. Most important, status quo powers often need offensive capabilities to defend other states against

15. A defensive alliance is conditioned on defensive behavior by the ally; the alliance operates if the ally is attacked but not if it attacks. A defensive-and-offensive alliance operates in the event of war regardless of which side started it. The distinction began with Thucydides, who used "empimachy" to denote defensive alliance, "symmarchy" for defensive-and-offensive alliances. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 60, 72-73, 106-108, 184, 298-302, 328.

16. Developing this point are Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 137-168.

17. Making this argument is *ibid.*

aggressors (e.g., as France required some offensive capability to defend Czechoslovakia and Poland from Germany in 1938–39). Offensive capabilities in the hands of status quo powers also may provide more deterrence than provocation if the aggressor state knows that it provoked the status quo power's hostility, if the aggressor knows that the status quo power has no bedrock aggressive intentions, and if the aggressor cannot remove the status quo power's offensive threat by force. These conditions are not unknown but they are rare. Hence offensive capabilities usually create more dangers than they dampen.

Causes of Offense and Defense Dominance

The feasibility of conquest is shaped by military factors, geographic factors, domestic social and political factors, and the nature of diplomacy. Discussions of the offense-defense balance often focus on military technology, but technology is only one part of the picture.¹⁸

MILITARY FACTORS

Military technology, doctrine, and force posture and deployments all affect the military offense-defense balance.¹⁹ Military technology can favor the aggressor or the defender. In past centuries, strong fortification techniques bolstered the defense, and strong methods of siege warfare strengthened the offense. Technologies that favored mass infantry warfare (e.g., cheap iron, allowing mass production of infantry weapons) strengthened the offense because large mass armies could bypass fortifications more easily, and because mass armies fostered more egalitarian polities that could raise loyal popular armies that would not melt away when sent on imperial expeditions. Technologies that favored chariot or cavalry warfare (e.g., the stirrup) strengthened the defense, because cavalry warfare required smaller forces²⁰ that were more easily stopped by

18. For a discussion of the causes of offense and defense dominance, see Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," pp. 176, 194–199.

19. Several measures of the military offense-defense balance could be adopted, such as: (1) the probability that an offensive force can overcome a defensive force of equal cost; (2) the relative cost that attackers and defenders must pay for forces that offset incremental improvements by the other; or (3) the loss ratio when an offensive force attacks a defensive force of equal cost. All three measures (and more are possible) capture the concept of relative military difficulty of conquest and defense. For a list of possible measures, see Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is Offense-Defense Balance and How Can We Measure It?," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 44–82.

20. Cavalry warfare was capital intensive; hence it was usually waged by small forces of tax-supported specialists—knights in shining (and expensive) armor on expensive horses. Infantry warfare is more manpower intensive, and is usually waged by larger, less capitalized armies.

fortifications, and fostered hierarchic societies that could not raise armies that would remain loyal if sent on quests for empire.²¹ In modern times, technology that gave defenders more lethal firepower (e.g., the machine gun) or greater mobility (e.g., the railroad) strengthened the defense. When these technologies were neutralized by still newer technologies (motorized armor), the offense grew stronger.

Thus when fortresses and cavalry dominated in the late Middle Ages, the defense held the advantage. Cannons then made fortifications vulnerable and restored the strength of the offense. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries new fortification techniques strengthened the defense. The mercenary armies of the age also remained tightly tied to logistical tails that kept them close to home: one historian writes that an eighteenth-century army "was like a diver in the sea, its movements strictly limited and tied by the long, slender communicating tube which gave it life."²² Then revolutionary France's mass armies strengthened the offense because they had greater mobility. Their size let them sweep past border forts without leaving the bulk of their manpower behind for siege duty, and their more loyal troops could be trusted to forage without deserting, so they needed less logistical support. After the conservative restoration in France, Europe abandoned the mass army because it required, and fostered, popular government. This restored the power of the defense, which then waned somewhat as Europe democratized and large mass armies reappeared in the mid-nineteenth century.²³

The combined effects of lethal small arms (accurate fast-firing rifles and machine guns), barbed wire, entrenchments, and railroads gave the defense an enormous advantage during World War I. The first three—lethal small arms, barbed wire, and trenches—gave defenders a large advantage at any point of attack. The fourth—railroads—let defenders reinforce points of attack faster than invaders could, because invaders could not use the defenders' railroads (given that railroad gauges differed across states, and defenders destroyed rail lines as they retreated) while the defenders had full use of their own lines. During 1919–45 the power of the offense was restored by motorized armor and an offensive doctrine—blitzkrieg—for its employment; this overrode machine

21. On the effects of the stirrup on warfare and society in the Middle Ages, see Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 1–38. On the general effect of military technology on social stratification, see Stanislaw Andreski, *Military Organization and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 20–74.

22. Harold Temperley, quoted in Blainey, *Causes of War*, p. 188.

23. Large armies aid the offense only up to a point, however. Once armies grow so big that they can cover an entire frontier (as on the western front in World War I), their size aids the defense because offensive outflanking maneuvers against them become impossible.

guns, trenches, and barbed wire. Then after 1945 thermonuclear weapons restored the power of the defense—this time giving it an overwhelming advantage.²⁴

Technology and doctrine combined to define these tides of offense and defense. Sometimes technology overrode doctrine, as in 1914–18 and in 1945–91 (when the superpowers' militaries embraced offensive doctrines but could not find offensive counters to the nuclear revolution). Sometimes doctrine shaped technology, as in 1939–45, when blitzkrieg doctrine fashioned armor technology into an offensive instrument.

States shape the military offense-defense balance by their military posture and force deployments. Thus Stalin eased attack for both himself and Hitler during 1939–41 by moving most of the Red Army out of strong defensive positions on the Stalin Line and forward into newly seized territories in Poland, Bessarabia, Finland, and the Baltic states.²⁵ This left Soviet forces better positioned to attack Germany and far easier for Germany to attack, as the early success of Hitler's 1941 invasion revealed. The U.S. eased offense for both itself and Japan in 1941 when it deployed its fleet forward to Pearl Harbor and bombers forward to the Philippines.²⁶ Egypt eased Israel's assault by its chaotic forward deployment of troops into poorly prepared Sinai positions in the crisis before the 1967 war.²⁷

States also can change the offense-defense balance through their wartime military operations. Aggressive operations can corrode key enemy defenses, and reckless operations can expose one's own defenses. Thus the dangers of offense dominance can be conjured up by unthinking wartime policymakers. For example, General Douglas MacArthur's reckless rush to the Yalu River in 1950 created an offensive threat to China's core territory and, by exposing badly deployed U.S. forces to attack, eased a Chinese offensive.²⁸

24. Jack Levy provides synoptic history of the military offense-defense balance in "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology: A Theoretical and Historical Analysis," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (June 1984), pp. 219–238 at 230–234. Other discussions include Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System*; and Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, pp. 75–78. A detailed history is needed.

25. Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: The Story of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 168.

26. Jonathan G. Utey, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 84, 163.

27. Donald Neff, *Warriors for Jerusalem: The Six Days That Changed the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 141, 168.

28. Likewise, during the Cold War some worried that NATO might inadvertently threaten the Soviet Union's strategic nuclear deterrent in its effort to defend NATO's Atlantic sea-lanes during

GEOGRAPHY

Conquest is harder when geography insulates states from invasion or strangulation. Hence conquest is hindered when national borders coincide with oceans, lakes, mountains, wide rivers, dense jungles, trackless deserts, or other natural barriers that impede offensive movement or give defenders natural strong points. Human-made obstacles along borders, such as urban sprawl, can also serve as barriers to armored invasion. Conquest is hindered if foes are separated by wide buffer regions (third states or demilitarized zones) that neither side can enter in peacetime. Conquest is hindered when national territories are mountainous or heavily forested, and when populations live mainly in rural settings, easing guerrilla resistance to invaders. Conquest is hindered when states are large and their critical war resources or industries lie far in their interior, where they cannot be quickly overrun. Conquest is hindered when states are invulnerable to economic strangulation. Hence conquest is hindered when states are self-sufficient in supplies of water, energy, food, and critical raw materials, or when their trade routes cannot be severed by land or sea blockade.

The geography of Western Europe, with its mountain ranges and ocean moats, is less favorable to conquest than the exposed plains of Eastern Europe or the open terrain of the Middle East. Israel's geography is especially unfortunate: physically small, its frontiers have few obstacles and much of its industry and population lie on exposed frontiers. Israeli territory is not conducive to guerrilla resistance, and its economy is import dependent. Germany's borders are better but still relatively poor: its eastern frontier is open; its economy is import dependent; and its trade routes are vulnerable. Britain, France, and Italy have formidable frontier barriers that make them relatively defensible. The United States' vast size, ocean-moat frontiers, and independent economy bless it with very defensible geography.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORDER

Popular regimes are generally better at both conquest and self-defense than are unpopular regimes, but these effects do not cancel out. On net, conquest is probably harder among popular than unpopular regimes today, but in past centuries the reverse was likely true.

an East-West conventional war. Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 129–158. On a related danger, see *ibid.*, pp. 28–67.

Popular governments can better raise larger, more loyal armies that can bypass others' border forts and can operate far from home with less logistical support. This gives popular regimes greater offensive power. Popular regimes can better organize their citizens for guerrilla resistance, making them harder to conquer. Citizen-defense guerrilla strategies are viable for Switzerland or China, but not for Guatemala or ancient Sparta, because these unpopular governments cannot arm their people without risking revolution. The citizens of unpopular oligarchies may actively assist advancing invaders. This gives attackers more penetrating power and makes early losses less reversible. Thus Sparta feared an invading army might grow if it entered Spartan territory, because Spartan slaves and dissident tribes would desert to the enemy.²⁹

Unpopular regimes are more vulnerable to subversion or revolution inspired from abroad. Subversion is a form of offense, and it affects international relations in the same way as do offensive military capabilities. Frail regimes are more frightened of unfriendly neighbors, making them more determined to impose congenial regimes on neighboring states. The French revolutionary regime and the oligarchic Austrian regime worried that the other side might subvert them in 1792, causing both sides to become more aggressive.³⁰ After the Russian Revolution similar fears fueled Soviet-Western conflict, as each side feared subversion by the other.

On balance, is conquest easier in a world of popular or unpopular regimes? Popularity of regimes probably aided offense before roughly 1800 and has aided defense since then. The reversal stems from the appearance of cheap, mass-produced weapons useful for guerrilla war—assault rifles and machine guns, light mortars, and mines. The weapons of early times (sword and shield, pike and harquebus, heavy slow-firing muskets, etc.) were poorly adapted for guerrilla resistance. Guerrilla warfare has burgeoned since 1800 partly because the mass production of cheap small arms has tipped the balance toward guerrillas, allowing the hit-and-run harassment that characterizes guerrilla operations. The defensive power of popular regimes has risen in step with this increase in guerrilla warfare.

29. De Ste. Croix, *Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, pp. 89–94. Likewise, Hannibal hoped to defeat Rome by recruiting dissident tribes as he penetrated the Italian peninsula. See R.M. Errington, *Dawn of Empire: Rome's Rise to World Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), pp. 62–64.

30. Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 123–124; and T.C.W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London: Longman, 1986), pp. 76, 85–86, 99–101, 111.

DIPLOMATIC FACTORS

Three types of diplomatic arrangements strengthen the defense: collective security systems, defensive alliances, and balancing behavior by neutral states. All three impede conquest by adding allies to the defending side.

States in a collective security system (e.g., the League of Nations) promise mutual aid against aggression by any system member. Such aggressors will face large defending coalitions if the system operates.³¹

States in a defensive alliance promise mutual aid against outside aggressors, leaving such aggressors outnumbered by resisting opponents. Thus during 1879–87 Bismarck wove a network of defensive alliances that discouraged aggression and helped preserve peace throughout central and eastern Europe.

Collective security systems and defensive alliances differ only in the kind of aggressor they target (system members versus outside aggressors). Both kinds of aggressors could be targeted at once, and a hybrid system that did this would offer defenders the most protection.

Neutral states act as balancers when they join the weaker of two competing coalitions to restore balance between them. Aggression is self-limiting when neutrals balance because aggressors generate more opposition as they expand. Britain and the United States traditionally played balancers to Europe, providing a counterweight to potential continental hegemon.

Balancing behavior is more selective than defensive alliance. Balancers balance to avert regional hegemony; hence pure balancers oppose expansion only by potential regional hegemon. Smaller states are left free to aggress. But balancing does contain hegemon and leaves their potential victims more secure. Conversely, if states bandwagon—join the stronger coalition against the weaker one—conquest is easier because aggressors win more allies as they seize more resources.³²

Diplomatic arrangements have had a large influence on the offense-defense balance in modern Europe, and shifts in diplomatic arrangements have pro-

31. An introduction to collective security is Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organizations*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 411–433. A recent advocacy of collective security is Charles A. Kupchan and Clifford A. Kupchan, "Concerts, Collective Security, and the Future of Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1991), pp. 114–163.

32. On balancing, bandwagoning, and other theories of alliances, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987). Historians have often suggested that a "breakdown in the balance of power" caused war. They usually mean (and should recast their claim to say) that states failed to engage in balancing behavior, which made aggression easier, causing war. War occurs not when the balance of power breaks down, but when balancers fail to balance, leaving aggressors unchecked, as in the late 1930s.

duced large shifts in the overall offense-defense balance. Collective security was never effective, but defensive alliances came and went, erecting barriers to conquest when they appeared. Balancing behavior rose and fell as the power and activism of the two traditional offshore balancers, Britain and the United States, waxed and waned. When the United States and/or Britain were strong and willing to intervene against aspiring continental hegemon, conquest on the continent was difficult. To succeed, a hegemon had to defeat both its continental victims and the offshore power. But when Britain and the United States were weak or isolationist, continental powers could expand against less resistance, leaving all states less secure.

Tests of Offense-Defense Theory

What predictions can be inferred from offense-defense theory? How much history does offense-defense theory explain?

PREDICTIONS AND TESTS

Offense-defense theory's predictions can be grouped in two broad types, *prime* predictions and *explanatory* predictions. The theory's prime predictions derive from its prime hypothesis ("War is more likely when conquest is easy"; or, for the theory's perceptual variant, "War is more likely when states think conquest is easy"). Tests of these predictions shed light on whether offense dominance (or perceptions of offense dominance) causes war.

Offense-defense theory's explanatory predictions derive from the hypotheses that comprise its ten explanations. Tests of these predictions shed light on both *whether* and *how* offense dominance (or perceptions of offense dominance) causes war.

PRIME PREDICTIONS. Three prime predictions of offense-defense theory are tested here.

1. War will be more common in periods when conquest is easy or is believed easy, less common when conquest is difficult or is believed difficult.
2. States that have or believe they have large offensive opportunities or defensive vulnerabilities will initiate and fight more wars than other states.
3. A state will initiate and fight more wars in periods when it has, or thinks that it has, larger offensive opportunities and defensive capabilities.

These predictions are tested below in three case studies: Europe since 1789 (treated as a single regional case study), ancient China during the Spring and

Autumn and Warring States eras, and the United States since 1789. I selected these cases because the offense-defense balance (or perceptions of it) varies sharply across time in all three, creating a good setting for “multiple within-case comparisons” tests that contrast different periods in the same case; because the United States is very secure relative to other countries, creating a good setting for a “comparison to typical values” tests that contrasts U.S. conduct with the conduct of average states;³³ and because two of these cases are well recorded (Europe since 1789 and the United States since 1789).

The case of Europe since 1789 allows tests of prime predictions 1 and 2.³⁴ We can make crude indices of the offense-defense balances (actual and perceived) for Europe over the past two centuries, and match them with the incidence of war (see Table 1). Offense-defense theory predicts more war when conquest is easy or is believed easy. We can also estimate the offensive opportunities and defensive vulnerabilities of individual powers—for example, since 1789 Prussia/Germany has been more vulnerable and has had more offensive opportunity than Spain, Italy, Britain, or the United States—and can match these estimates with states’ rates of war involvement and war initiation. Offense-defense theory predicts that states with more defensive vulnerability and offensive opportunity will be more warlike.

The ancient China case allows a test of prime prediction 1. The offense-defense balance shifted markedly toward the offense as China’s Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods evolved. Offense-defense theory predicts a parallel rise in the incidence of warfare during these periods.

The U.S. case allows testing of prime predictions 2 and 3. The United States is less vulnerable to foreign military threats than are other states; hence offense-defense theory predicts that it should start fewer wars and be involved in fewer wars than other states. Americans have also felt more vulnerable to foreign military threats in some eras than in others. The U.S. propensity for war involvement and war initiation should co-vary with this sense of vulnerability.

EXPLANATORY PREDICTIONS. Offense-defense theory posits that offense dominance leads to war through the war-causing action of its ten intervening phenomena A–J: opportunistic expansionism, defensive expansionism, fierce

33. I say more about the logic of within-case comparisons and comparison to typical values tests in Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 58–63. On case selection criteria, see pp. 77–88.

34. In principle, prime prediction 3 could also be tested with this case. This, however, would require tracing and describing trends in each state’s sense of vulnerability over time—a large task that would fill many pages.

Table 1. The Offense-Defense Balance among Great Powers, 1700s-Present.

Era	Military realities favored	Military realities were thought to favor	Diplomatic realities favored	Diplomatic realities were thought to favor	In aggregate military and diplomatic realities favored	In aggregate military and diplomatic realities were thought to favor	Amount of warfare among great powers
Pre-1792	Def.	Def.	Med.	Med.	Med.	Med.	Medium
1792-1815	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Med.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.***	High
1816-56	Def.	Def.	Def.	Def.	Def.	Def.	Low
1856-71	Med.	Med.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.***	Medium
1871-90	Def.	Med.	Def.	Def.	Def.	Def.***	Low
1890-1918	Def.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Aggrs.	Def.	Aggrs.****	High
1919-45	Aggrs.	Mixed*	Aggrs.	Aggrs.**	Aggrs.	Aggrs.****	High
1945-1990s	Def.	Med.	Def.	Def.	Def.	Def.***	Low

Aggrs.: The factor favors aggressors.

Def.: The factor favors defenders.

Med.: A medium value: things are somewhere in between, cut both ways.

Mixed: Some national elites saw defense dominance, some saw offense dominance.

The perceptions entries are an average of the perceptions of the great power elites. In some cases, the perceptions of these elites varied sharply across states, for example, perceptions of military realities in the 1930s.

* Things varied across states. The German elite recognized the military power of the offensive in the late 1930s; the elites of other great powers thought the defense was dominant.

** Things varied across states. The German elite (above all Hitler) exaggerated the considerable actual diplomatic weakness of the defense; the elites of other great powers recognized this weakness but did not overstate it. These beliefs average to a perception of substantial diplomatic offense dominance.

*** Elites exaggerated the strength of the offense during 1792-1815, 1871-90, and 1945-1990s, but not by enough to give the realities and perceptions of the offense-defense balance different scores.

**** When we aggregate perceptions of the offense-defense balance, the errors of Germany and the other powers cancel each other out. Germany's exaggeration of the diplomatic power of the offense offsets other powers' exaggeration of the military power of the defense, leaving an aggregate perception fairly close to the offense-dominant reality.

resistance to others' expansion, first-strike advantages, windows of opportunity and vulnerability, *faits accomplis* and belligerent reactions to them, reluctance to solve conflicts through negotiation, policies of secrecy, intense arms racing, and policies that ease conquest, such as offensive force postures and offensive alliances. If offense-defense theory is valid, these intervening phenomena should correlate with the real and perceived offense-defense balance. Two explanatory predictions can be inferred.

1. Phenomena A-J will be more abundant in eras of real or perceived offense dominance: the ten phenomena should increase as offense strengthens and diminish as offense weakens.
2. States that have or believe they have large offensive opportunities or defensive vulnerabilities will more strongly embrace policies that embody phenomena A-J.³⁵

Two of the case studies presented here shed light on these explanatory predictions. The case of Europe allows a partial test of both. We can code only two of offense-defense theory's ten intervening phenomena (IntPs A and B, opportunistic and defensive expansionism) for the whole period. We have fragmentary data for values on the other eight intervening variables. Hence the case lets us test explanations A and B fairly completely and offers scattered evidence on explanations C-J. To test explanations A and B, we ask if expansionism correlates over time with periods of real or perceived offense dominance, and if states that were (or believed they were) less secure and more able to aggress were more expansionist.

The case of the United States since 1789 allows a more complete, if rather weak, test of explanatory prediction 2.

TEST 1: EUROPE 1789-1990s

A composite measure of the offense-defense balance in Europe since 1789 can be fashioned by blending the histories of Europe's military and diplomatic

35. Explanatory predictions 1 and 2 are inferred from the "left side" of offense-defense theory, that is, from hypotheses A_1-J_1 , which frame the claim that offense dominance causes intervening phenomena A-J (see Figure 1). Predictions could also be inferred from hypotheses A_2-J_2 , which comprise the "right side" of the theory, and frame the claim that intervening phenomena A-J cause war. For example, we could infer that (6) warfare will be more common in eras and regions where phenomena A-J are more prevalent, and (7) states that embrace policies that embody phenomena A-J will be involved in more wars and will initiate more wars than other states. I leave "right side" hypotheses untested here because the effects of phenomena A-J are less debated than their causes. Most agree that they cause trouble.

offense-defense balances, as outlined above.³⁶ In sum, the offense-defense balance went through six phases comprising three up-down oscillations after 1789. Conquest was never easy in an absolute sense during these two centuries. Conquest was, however, markedly easier during 1792–1815, 1856–71, and 1930s–1945 than it was during 1815–56, 1871–1920s, and 1945–1990s.

Elite perceptions of the offense-defense balance track these oscillations quite closely, but not exactly. Elites chronically exaggerated the power of the offense, but did so far more in some periods than in others. Most important, they greatly exaggerated the power of the offense during 1890–1918: elites then wrongly thought conquest was very easy when in fact it was very hard. Thus the pattern of reality and perception run roughly parallel, with the major exception of 1890–1918.

Tides of war and peace correlate loosely with the offense-defense balance during this period, and tightly with the perceived offense-defense balance. Expansionism and war were more common when conquest was easy than when it was difficult, and were far more common when conquest was believed easy than when it was believed difficult. Moreover, states that believed they faced large offensive opportunities and defensive vulnerabilities (especially Prussia/Germany) were the largest troublemakers. They were more expansionist, they were involved in more wars, and they started more wars than other states.

1792–1815. During 1792–1815 the offense was fairly strong militarily, as a result of France's adoption of the popular mass army (enabled by the popularity of the French revolutionary government).³⁷ Moreover, European elites widely exaggerated one another's vulnerability to conquest: at the outset of the War of 1792 all three belligerents (France, Austria, and Prussia) thought their

36. My composite index represents my own "author's estimates" based on sources provided throughout this article. I measured the actual and perceived Europe-wide offense-defense balances by asking: (1) Did military technology, force posture, and doctrine favor the offense or the defense? Did elites and publics believe these factors favored the offense or the defense? (2) Did geography and the domestic social and political order of states favor the offense or the defense? Did elites and publics believe they favored the offense or defense? (3) How numerous and powerful were balancer states, and how strongly did they balance? Did elites believe that other states would balance or bandwagon? (4) Did defensive alliances form, and did they operate effectively? Did elites believe that they operated effectively? I gave these factors the same rough relative weight they receive in standard historical accounts.

37. A discussion of the military offense-defense balance in this era is Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System*, pp. 66–72.

opponents were on the verge of collapse and could be quickly crushed.³⁸ Defense-enhancing diplomacy was sluggish: Britain, Europe's traditional balancer, stood by indifferently during the crisis that produced the War of 1792, issuing a formal declaration of neutrality.³⁹ Moreover, French leaders underestimated the power of defense-enhancing diplomacy because they widely believed that other states would bandwagon with threats instead of balancing against them.⁴⁰ In short, military factors helped the offense, and this help was further exaggerated; political factors did little to help bolster defenders, and this help was underestimated.

1815–56. After 1815 both arms and diplomacy favored defenders, as outlined above. Mass armies disappeared,⁴¹ British economic power grew, and Britain remained active on the continent as a balancer. Continental powers expected Britain to balance and believed British strength could not be overridden.

This defense-dominant arrangement lasted until midcentury. It began weakening before the Crimean War (1853–56). When war in Crimea broke out, military factors still favored defenders, but elites underestimated the power of the defense: Britain and France launched their 1854 Crimean offensive in false expectation of quick and easy victory.⁴² In general, diplomatic factors favored the defense (Britain still balanced actively), but during the prewar crisis in

38. Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, p. 116. Austrian and Prussian leaders were assured that revolutionary France could be quickly smashed. *Ibid.*, p. 114. One Prussian leader advised his officers: "Do not buy too many horses, the comedy will not last long. The army of lawyers will be annihilated in Belgium and we shall be home by autumn." *Ibid.*, p. 116. Meanwhile, French revolutionaries wrongly expected a pro-French revolutionary uprising of the oppressed peoples of feudal Europe. *Ibid.*, p. 136; R.R. Palmer, *World of the French Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 95; and George Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe, 1783–1815* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1964), p. 209.

39. Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, pp. 131–135.

40. As Steven Ross notes, French expansionists thought they could intimidate Europe into co-existing with an expanded French empire in the 1790s: "By inflicting rapid and decisive defeats upon one or more members of the coalition, the [French] directors hoped to rupture allied unity and force individual members to seek a separate peace." Steven T. Ross, *European Diplomatic History, 1789–1815* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1969), p. 186.

Later Napoleon thought he could compel Britain to make peace by establishing French continental dominion, proclaiming after the Peace of Amiens, "With Europe in its present state, England cannot reasonably make war on us unaided." Geoffrey Bruun, *Europe and the French Imperium, 1799–1814* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938), p. 118. See also Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, p. 109.

41. On the post-1815 restoration of pre-Napoleonic warfare, see Quester, *Offense and Defense in the International System*, pp. 73–74; and Michael Howard, *War in European History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 94–95.

42. Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 191.

1853, diplomacy favored the offense because Britain and France blundered by giving Turkey unconditional backing that amounted to an offensive alliance. This encouraged the Turkish aggressions that sparked the war.⁴³

1856–71. After the Crimean War the offense-defense balance shifted further toward the offense. Changes in the military realm cut both ways. Mass armies were appearing (bolstering the offense), but small arms were growing more lethal and railroads were expanding (bolstering the defense). In the diplomatic realm, however, the power of defenders fell dramatically because defense-enhancing diplomacy largely broke down. Most important, Britain entered an isolationist phase that lasted into the 1870s, and Russia lost interest in maintaining the balance among the western powers.⁴⁴ As a result, diplomatic obstacles to continental conquest largely disappeared, giving continental aggressors a fairly open field. This diplomatic change gave France and Sardinia, and then Prussia, a yawning offensive opportunity, which they exploited by launching a series of wars of opportunistic expansion—in 1859, 1864, 1866, and 1870. But defense-enhancing diplomacy had not disappeared completely, and it helped keep these wars short and limited.

In 1859 British and Russian neutrality gave France and Sardinia a free hand, which they used to seize Lombardy from Austria.⁴⁵ In 1864 British, Russian, and French neutrality gave Prussia and Austria a free hand, which they used to seize Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark.⁴⁶ In 1866 British, French, and Russian neutrality gave Prussia *carte blanche* against Austria, which Prussia used to smash Austria and consolidate its control of North Germany.⁴⁷ Even after war broke out, major fighting proceeded for weeks before any outside

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 179–181, 185; Richard Smoke, “The Crimean War,” in George, *Avoiding War*, pp. 36–61 at 48–49, 52. The motives of the powers also illustrate offense-defense dynamics. The main belligerents (Britain, France, Russia, and Turkey) were impelled in part by security concerns that would have been allayed had they believed the defense more dominant. Smoke, *War*, pp. 149, 155, 158–159, 162, 190.

44. The harsh Crimean War settlement Britain imposed on Russia turned it into a non-status quo power. Overthrowing that settlement became Russia’s chief aim in European diplomacy, superseding its interest in preserving order to the west. M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question, 1774–1923* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 144–146.

45. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 108, 110.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 146–154. Britain would have backed Denmark had it found a continental ally but none was available. *Ibid.*, pp. 146–148.

47. Smoke, *War*, pp. 85–92. Britain remained in a semi-isolationist mood in 1866, and Napoleon III thought France would profit from the long, mutually debilitating Austro-Prussian war he expected. Like the Soviets in 1939, Napoleon underestimated the danger of a quick, lopsided victory by either side. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–90.

state even threatened intervention.⁴⁸ As A.J.P. Taylor notes, Bismarck's 1866 diplomatic opportunity—a wide-open field for unopposed expansion—was “unique in recent history.”⁴⁹

In 1870 Bismarck ensured the neutrality of the other European powers by shifting responsibility for the war to France and convincing Europe that the war stemmed from French expansionism.⁵⁰ As a result, Prussia again had a free hand to pursue its expansionist aims. It used this to smash France, seize Alsace-Lorraine, and consolidate control over South Germany.⁵¹

1871–90. For some twenty years after the Franco-Prussian War, the defense dominated because of Bismarck's new diplomacy and Britain's renewed activism. In the military area the cult of the offensive had not yet taken hold. In diplomacy Bismarck wove a web of defensive alliances that deterred aggressors and calmed status quo powers after 1879.⁵² British power waned slightly, but this was offset by the recovery of Britain's will to play the balancer. The “war-in-sight” crisis of 1875 illustrates the change: Britain and Russia together deterred a renewed German attack on France by warning that they would not allow a repeat of 1870–71.⁵³

1890–1919. After 1890 military realities increasingly favored the defense, but elites mistakenly believed the opposite. Diplomatic realities swung toward the offense, and elites believed they favored the offense even more than they did.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

49. Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. 156. Moreover, Bismarck stopped the 1866 war partly because he feared French or Russian intervention if Prussia fought on too long or conquered too much. Smoke, *War*, pp. 101–102. Thus lack of defense-enhancing diplomacy helped cause the war while Prussian fear of such diplomacy shortened and limited the war.

50. William Carr, *The Origins of the Wars of German Unification* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 202; and Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870–1871* (New York: Granada, 1961), p. 57. Austria also stayed neutral because Hungarian Magyar influence was growing inside the Dual Monarchy, and the Magyars felt that the more Austria was pushed out of Germany, the stronger the position of the Magyars within it would be. R.R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 574.

51. On Prussia's free hand, see Smoke, *War*, pp. 133–136; Norman Rich, *The Age of Nationalism and Reform, 1850–1890*, 2d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 140; and W.E. Mosse, *European Powers and the German Question* (New York: Octagon, 1969), pp. 291, 295.

52. Bismarck formed defensive alliances with Austria, Italy, and Romania, and a more limited defensive accord with Russia—specifically, a reciprocal agreement not to join a war against the other unless the other attacked France (in the German case) or Austria (in the Russian case). Synopses include Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 249–250; and Robert E. Osgood and Robert W. Tucker, *Force, Order, and Justice* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), pp. 80–81. For a longer account, see Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, pp. 258–280, 316–319.

53. Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871–1914* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 28.

European militaries were seized by a “cult of the offensive.” All the European powers adopted offensive military doctrines, culminating with France’s adoption of the highly offensive Plan XVII in 1913 and with Russia’s adoption of the highly offensive Plan 20 in 1914. More important, militaries persuaded civilian leaders and publics that the offense dominated and conquest was easy. As a result, elites and publics widely believed the next war would be quickly won by a decisive offensive.

Bismarck’s defensive alliances withered or evolved into defensive-and-offensive alliances after he left office in 1890, largely because the cult of the offensive made defensive alliances hard to maintain. Pacts conditioned on defensive conduct became hard to frame because states defended by attacking, and status quo powers shrank from enforcing defensive conduct on allies they felt less able to lose. For example, Britain and France felt unable to enforce defensive conduct on a Russian ally that defended by attacking and that they could not afford to see defeated. Elites also thought that aggressors could overrun their victims before allies could intervene to save them, making defensive alliances less effective. Thus Britain seemed less able to save France before Germany overran it, leading Germany to discount British power. Lastly, German leaders subscribed to a bandwagon theory of diplomacy, which led them to underestimate others’ resistance to German expansion. Overall, the years before 1914 were the all-time high point of perceived offense dominance.

Nine of the ten intervening phenomena predicted by offense-defense theory (all except phenomenon G, nonnegotiation) flourished in this world of assumed offense dominance. Opportunistic and defensive expansionist ideas multiplied and spread, especially in Germany. Russia and France mobilized their armies preemptively in the 1914 July crisis. That crisis arose from a fait accompli that Germany and Austria instigated in part to shut a looming window of vulnerability. This window in turn had emerged from a land arms race that erupted during 1912–14. The powers enshrouded their military and political plans in secrecy—a secrecy that fostered crisis-management blunders during July 1914. These blunders in turn evoked rapid, violent reactions that helped drive the crisis out of control. Belief in the offense fueled offensive military doctrines throughout the continent and impeded efforts to restrain allies. Together these dangers formed a prime cause of the war: they bore the 1914 July crisis and helped make it uncontrollable.

1919–45. The interwar years were a mixed bag, but overall the offense gained the upper hand by 1939, and the German elite believed the offense even stronger than in fact it was.

Military doctrine and technology gave the defense the advantage until the late 1930s, when German blitzkrieg doctrine combined armor and infantry in an effective offensive combination. This offensive innovation was unrecognized outside Germany and doubted by many in Germany, but the man who counted most, Adolf Hitler, firmly believed in it. This reflected his faith in the offense as a general principle, imbibed from international social Darwinist propaganda in his youth.⁵⁴

More important, the workings of interwar diplomacy opened a yawning political opportunity for Nazi expansion. Britain fell into a deep isolationism that left it less willing to commit this declining power to curb continental aggressors.⁵⁵ The United States also withdrew into isolation, removing the counterweight that checked Germany in 1918.⁵⁶ The breakup of Austria-Hungary in that year created a new diplomatic constellation that further eased German expansion. Austria-Hungary would have balanced against German

54. Hitler often echoed international social Darwinist slogans on the short, precarious lives of states, for example, "Politics is in truth the execution of a nation's struggle for existence," and "Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany." Quoted in P.M.H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (London: Longman, 1986), p. 81; and in Anthony P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), p. 119.

Hitler's faith in the offensive differed from that of the pre-1914 cultists of the offensive in three ways. First, he saw offensive capabilities arising from a long search for offensive methods, not from permanent properties of war. In his mind offense could be created, but also had to be; Germany would discover offensive answers only after a long effort. In contrast, the pre-1914 cultists thought offense inherently easier than defense; deep thought need not be given to how to make it superior, because it already was. Second, Hitler's offensive optimism was based on racism and social prejudice, as well as on assessment of military factors. Specifically, his contempt for Slavs and Jews led him to expect that the Soviets would quickly collapse under German attack. Third, Hitler's concerns for German security focused on fear of conquest by economic strangulation, not conquest by French or Soviet blitzkrieg. He thought German security was precarious, but for reasons rooted more in the political economy of war than in the nature of doctrine or weaponry. These differences aside, the logical implications of Hitler's offensive cult were the same as those of the pre-1914 cult. He exaggerated both German insecurity and the feasibility of imperial solutions to redress it.

55. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Great Britain said in 1937 that he "did not believe we could, or ought . . . to enter a Continental war with the intention of fighting on the same lines as in the last," meaning that Britain would deploy no large ground force on the continent. Bell, *Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, p. 177. Britain had only two divisions available to send to the continent during the 1938 Munich crisis, and the four-division force it actually sent in 1939 was smaller and less well trained than its small expeditionary force of 1914. These four divisions were a drop in the bucket relative to the 84 French and 103 German divisions then deployed. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

56. The United States also proclaimed this isolationism in four neutrality laws passed during 1935-39, giving Hitler a clear if misleading signal of American indifference to his aggression. On these laws a synopsis is Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, 9th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), pp. 701-702, 715.

expansion, but its smaller successor states tended to bandwagon.⁵⁷ This let Hitler extend German influence into southeast Europe by intimidation and subversion.

The Soviet Union and the Western powers failed to cooperate against Hitler.⁵⁸ Ideological hostility divided them. Britain also feared that a defensive alliance against Hitler would arouse German fears of allied encirclement, spurring German aggressiveness. This chilled British enthusiasm for an Anglo-French-Soviet alliance.⁵⁹

Hitler exaggerated the already-large advantage that diplomacy gave the offense because he thought bandwagoning prevailed over balancing in international affairs. This false faith colored all his political forecasts and led him to vastly underestimate others states' resistance to his aggressions. Before the war he failed to foresee that Britain and France would balance German power by coming to Poland's rescue.⁶⁰ Once the war began he believed Germany could intimidate Britain into seeking alliance with Germany after Germany crushed France—or, he later held, after Germany smashed the Soviet Union.⁶¹ He thought the United States could be cowed into staying neutral by the 1940 German-Japanese alliance (the alliance had the opposite effect, spurring U.S. intervention).⁶² In short, Hitler's false theories of diplomacy made three of his most dangerous opponents shrink to insignificance in his mind.

These realities and beliefs left Hitler to face temptations like those facing Bismarck in 1866 and 1870. Hitler thought he could conquer his victims seriatim. He also thought his conquests would arouse little countervailing opposition from distant neutral powers.⁶³ As a result, he believed he faced a yawning opportunity for aggression.

57. Explaining why weaker states are more prone to bandwagon than are stronger states is Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, pp. 29–30.

58. Bell, *Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, pp. 172, 224, 260; and Adamthwaite, *Making of the Second World War*, pp. 60, 69. This failure greatly eased Hitler's aggressions, because geography made Britain's 1939 guarantees to Poland and Romania unenforceable without a Soviet alliance. *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 91.

59. Raymond J. Sontag, *A Broken World, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 361.

60. On August 22, 1939, Hitler assured his generals that "the West will not intervene" to defend Poland. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), vol. 2, p. 741.

61. See Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 94.

62. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism*, vol. 2, p. 797. Some German leaders also hoped that Germany could win decisively in Europe before the United States could bring its power to bear. Thus in September 1940 Hitler's naval commander in chief voiced the hope that Britain could be beaten "before the United States is able to intervene effectively." *Ibid.*, p. 794.

63. The fine-grained pattern of events during 1938–40—who attacked whom and when—also fits the predictions of offense-defense theory (specifically, prime prediction 3). The Western allies stood

Unlike 1914, the late 1930s were not a pure case of perceived offense dominance. Instead, the 1930s saw status quo powers' perceptions of defense dominance create real offensive opportunities for an aggressor state. Hitler thought the offense strong and even exaggerated its strength, but other powers (the Soviet Union, Britain, and France) underestimated its strength. Their perceptions of defense dominance relaxed their urge to jump the gun at early signs of threat (as Russia did in 1914); this made things safer. But this perception also relaxed their will to balance Germany, because they found German expansion less frightening. This weakened the coalition against Hitler, leaving him wider running room.⁶⁴

1945–1990s. After 1945 two changes swung the offense-defense balance back toward the defense. First, the end of American isolationism transformed European political affairs. The United States replaced Britain as continental balancer, bringing far more power to bear in Europe than Britain ever had. As a result, Europe in the years after 1945 was unusually defense dominant from a diplomatic standpoint.

Second, the nuclear revolution gave defenders a large military advantage—so large that conquest among great powers became virtually impossible. Conquest now required a nuclear first-strike capability (the capacity to launch a nuclear strike that leaves the defender unable to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation). Defenders could secure themselves merely by maintaining a second-strike capability (the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on the attacker's society after absorbing an all-out strike). The characteristics of nuclear weapons—their vast power, small size, light weight, and low cost—ensured that a first-strike capability would be very hard to attain, while a second-strike capability could be sustained at little cost. As a result, the great powers became essentially unconquerable, and even lesser powers could now stand against far stronger enemies. Overall, the nuclear revolution gave defenders an even more lopsided advantage than the machine gun–barbed wire–entrenchments–railroad complex that emerged before 1914.

without attacking Germany in 1938 and again in 1939–40 because they doubted they could win a decisive victory. Germany stood without attacking westward in the fall of 1939 for the same reason, and finally attacked in May 1940 after German military leaders developed a plausible plan for decisive attack. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, pp. 67–133.

64. Would the risk of war have fallen had all powers believed the offense was dominant in the late 1930s? This seems unlikely. The status quo powers would have balanced harder against Hitler, offering him more discouragement, but they also would have been jumpier, making early crises more dangerous. One of these crises—Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Spanish civil war, or the German seizure of Austria or Czechoslovakia—probably would have served as the "Sarajevo" for World War II, with the Allies moving first as Russia did in 1914.

American and Soviet policymakers grasped this cosmic military revolution only slowly, however. At first many feared nuclear weapons would be a boon to aggressors. When this fear proved false, the vast advantage they gave defenders was only dimly recognized, partly because scholars strangely failed to explain it. Thus the nuclear revolution changed realities far more than they did perceptions. As a result, state behavior changed only slowly, and both superpowers competed far harder—in both Central Europe and the third world—than objective conditions warranted. The Cold War was far more peaceful than the preceding forty years, but could have been still more peaceful had Soviet and U.S. elites understood that their security problems had vastly diminished and were now quite small.

In sum, the events of 1789–1990s clearly corroborate offense-defense theory predictions—specifically, prime predictions 1 and 2, as well as both explanatory predictions. These conclusions rest on rather sketchy data—especially regarding the explanatory predictions—but that data confirm offense-defense theory so clearly that other data would have to be very different to reverse the result.

- The incidence of war correlates loosely with the offense-defense balance and very tightly with perceptions of the offense-defense balance (for a summary see Table 1).
- Europe's less-secure and more offensively capable continental powers were perennial troublemakers, while more secure and less offensively capable offshore powers were perennial defenders of the status quo. Prussia/Germany was cursed with the least defensible borders and faced the most offensive temptations. It started the largest number of major wars (1864, 1866, 1914, 1939, and shared responsibility for 1870 with France). France and Russia, with more defensible borders and fewer temptations, started fewer major wars.⁶⁵ Britain and the United States, blessed with even more insulating borders, joined a number of European wars but started none.⁶⁶ Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland, also insulated from other powers by mountains or oceans, fought very little.

Thus the timing of war and the identities of the belligerents tightly fit prime predictions 1 and 2.

65. France can be assigned prime responsibility for 1792 and 1859, and shared responsibility for Crimea and 1870. Russia deserves prime responsibility for the Cold War and shared responsibility for Crimea and the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War.

66. Britain does share responsibility for the Crimean War with Russia, France, and Turkey.

- Sketchy evidence suggests that opportunistic and defensive expansionism were more prominent during the periods of perceived offense dominance (1792–1815, 1859–71, 1890–1914, 1930s–1945) than at other times. The years 1792–1815 saw a strong surge of French expansionism, nearly matched at the outset by parallel Prussian expansionism.⁶⁷ The mid-nineteenth century saw large opportunistic expansionism in Prussia and some French expansionism. The years 1890–1914 saw vast expansionist ambitions develop in Wilhelmine Germany,⁶⁸ matched by fierce resistance to this German expansionism in Russia and France, and by lesser French and Russian expansionism. Large German expansionism then reappeared under the Nazis in the 1930s. During other periods European expansionism was more muted: European powers had smaller ambitions and acted on them less often. This supports explanatory prediction 1.
- Opportunistic and defensive expansionism were prominent among those states that saw the clearest defensive vulnerability and offensive opportunity (especially Prussia/Germany, also revolutionary France), while being more muted among states with more secure borders and fewer offensive opportunities (Britain, the United States, the Scandinavian states, and Spain). This corroborates explanatory prediction 2.

How strong is this test? The strength of a passed test depends on the uniqueness of the predictions tested. Do other theories predict the outcome observed, or is the prediction unique to the tested theory? The predictions tested here seem quite unique. There is no obvious competing explanation for the periodic upsurges and downsurges in European expansionism and warfare outlined above. Offense-defense theory has the field to itself. Particular domestic explanations have been offered to explain the aggressiveness of specific states—for example, some argue that Wilhelmine Germany was aggressive because it was a late industrializer, that revolutionary France was aggressive because its regime came to power through mass revolution, and so forth⁶⁹—but no competing theory claims to explain the general cross-time and cross-state pattern of war involvement that we observe. Hence this test seems strong.

What importance does this evidence assign to offense-defense theory? That is, how potent is offense dominance as a cause of war? In Europe since 1789, the nature of international relations has gyrated sharply with shifts in the

67. On Prussia's expansionism, see Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, pp. 72–82; on French expansionism, see *ibid.*, *passim*.

68. A summary of Wilhelmine German aims and policies is Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*.

69. On Germany as late industrializer, see Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 66–111; and on France as a revolutionary state, see Walt, *Revolution and War*, pp. 46–128.

perceived offense-defense balance. War is far more common when elites believe that the offense dominates, and states are far more belligerent when they perceive large defensive vulnerabilities and offensive opportunities for themselves. This indicates that perceptions of the offense-defense balance have a large impact on international relations. Offense-defense theory is important as well as valid.

How much history does this evidence suggest that offense-defense theory can explain? Explanatory power is partly a function of the prevalence of the theory's cause: abundant causes explain more history than scarce causes. In Europe since 1789 the offense has seldom been really strong, but it was believed strong quite often—often enough to cause considerable trouble.

TEST 2: ANCIENT CHINA

The ancient Chinese multistate system witnessed a long-term shift from defense dominance to offense dominance across the years 722–221 BCE.⁷⁰ Offense-defense theory predicts that warfare should have increased as this transformation unfolded (see prime prediction 1). This prediction is fulfilled: diplomacy grew markedly more savage and international relations grew markedly more violent as the power of the offense increased.

Before roughly 550 BCE the defense held the upper hand among China's many feudal states. Four related changes then strengthened the offense: feudalism declined,⁷¹ mass infantry replaced chariots as the critical military force, conscription was introduced, and armies grew tremendously in size.⁷² The two largest Chinese states deployed enormous armies of more than a million men, and some smaller states had armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands.⁷³ As armies grew, border forts had less stopping power against infantry because invaders could sweep past, leaving a smaller portion of their force behind to besiege the forts. Forts also lost stopping power as improved siege-engines appeared—battering rams, catapults, and rolling towers—that further eased the conquest of fortified positions.⁷⁴ The decline of feudalism eased offensive operations by reducing social stratification, which increased troop loyalty to

70. Concurring is Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, p. 76.

71. Noting the decline of feudalism are Samuel B. Griffiths, "Introduction," in Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 33; and Dun J. Li, *The Ageless Chinese: A History*, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), p. 64.

72. On the growth of armies, the introduction of conscription, and the rise of infantry, see Li, *Ageless Chinese*, p. 56; Griffiths, "Introduction," pp. 28, 33; and Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 49.

73. Li, *Ageless Chinese*, p. 56.

74. Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, p. 76.

regimes; this meant troops could be trusted to conduct long-distance offensive operations without deserting.

The outcomes of battles and wars reveal the shift toward the offense that these technical and social changes produced. The number of independent Chinese states declined from two hundred in the eighth century BCE to seven in the late fifth century, to one in the late third century—a clear measure of the growing power of the offense.⁷⁵ Before 550 BCE defenders were often victorious. Thus the states of Tsin and Ch'i fought three great battles, in 632, 598, and 567 BCE, each won by the defender. Dun J. Li concludes, "If the three battles indicate anything, they meant that neither side was able to challenge successfully the other's leadership in its own sphere of influence."⁷⁶ In contrast, the state of Ch'in conquered all of China in a rapid campaign lasting only nine years at the end of the Warring States period (230–221 BCE).⁷⁷

This increase in the power of the offense coincides with a stark deterioration in international relations. During the Spring and Autumn period (722–453 BCE) interstate relations were fairly peaceful, and wars were limited by a code of conduct. The code confined warfare to certain seasons of the year and forbade killing enemy wounded. It was considered wrong to stoop to deceit, to take unfair advantage of adversaries, to "ambush armies," or to "massacre cities."⁷⁸ The subsequent Warring States period (453–221 BCE) was perhaps the bloodiest era in Chinese history. Warfare raged almost constantly,⁷⁹ becoming a "fundamental occupation" of states.⁸⁰ Restraints on warfare were abandoned. Casualties ran into hundreds of thousands, and prisoners of war were massacred en masse.⁸¹ Diplomatic conduct deteriorated; one historian writes that "diplomacy was based on bribery, fraud, and deceit."⁸²

In short, the shift toward offense dominance in China during 722–221 BCE correlates tightly with a dramatic breakdown of China's international order.

TEST 3: UNITED STATES 1789–1990S

Since 1815 the United States has been by far the most secure of the world's great powers, blessed with two vast ocean moats, no nearby great powers, and

75. Li, *Ageless Chinese*, pp. 50, 59.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

78. Griffiths, "Introduction," p. 30.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 24, quoting Shang Yang, Prime Minister of Ch'in, who conceived war and agriculture to be the two fundamental occupations.

81. Li, *Ageless Chinese*, pp. 56, 58–59.

82. Griffiths, "Introduction," p. 24.

(after 1890) the world's largest economy. In the nineteenth century the United States also had substantial offensive opportunities, embodied in chances for continental and then Pacific expansion against weak defenders. However, America's security endowments were quite extraordinary, while its offensive opportunities were more ordinary. Offense-defense theory predicts that such a state will exhibit perhaps average offensive opportunism but markedly less defensive belligerence than other states. Hence, on net, it will start fewer wars and be involved in fewer wars than others (see prime prediction 2).

This forecast is confirmed, although not dramatically, by the pattern of past U.S. foreign policy. The United States has fought other great powers only three times in its two hundred-year history—in 1812, 1917, and 1941—a low count for a great power.⁸³ The 1812 war stemmed mainly from U.S. belligerence, but the wars of 1917 and 1941 resulted mainly from others' belligerence. The United States did start some of its lesser wars (1846 and 1898), but it joined other wars more reactively (Korea and Vietnam).

Offense-defense theory also predicts that while the United States will pursue some opportunistic expansionism (intervening phenomenon A), it will embrace few policies that embody offense-defense theory's other intervening phenomena (B–J) (explanatory prediction 2). Where the record allows judgments, this forecast is borne out. Regarding expansionism, the United States has confined itself largely to opportunistic imperialism against frail opponents. Defensive expansionism has been muted, and overall, expansionist ideas have held less sway in the United States than in other powers. This is reflected in the relatively small size of the U.S. empire. The modern American empire has been limited to a few formal colonies seized from Spain in the 1890s and an informal empire in the Caribbean/Central American area, with only intermittent control exerted more widely—a zone far smaller than the vast empires of the European powers.

The U.S. impulse to engage in preemptive and preventive war has been small. In sharp contrast to Germany and Japan, the United States has launched a stealthy first strike on another major power just once (in 1812) and has jumped through only one window of opportunity (in 1812). Surprise first strikes and window-jumping were considered on other occasions (e.g., preventive war was discussed during 1949–54, and surprise attack on Cuba was considered during the Cuban missile crisis), but seldom seriously.

83. Britain, France, Russia, and Prussia/Germany fought other great powers an average of five times over the same two hundred years, by my count. None fought as few as three times.

American diplomacy has been strikingly free of *fait accompli* tactics. American foreign and security policy has generally been less secretive than those of the European continental powers, especially during the late Cold War, when the United States published military data that most powers would highly classify as state secrets. The U.S. arms raced with the Soviet Union energetically during the Cold War, but earlier maintained very small standing military forces—far smaller than those of other great powers. Overall, intervening phenomena B–J of offense-defense theory are strikingly absent in the U.S. case.

In sum, the United States has not been a shrinking violet, but it has been less bellicose than the average great power. Compare, for example, U.S. conduct with the far greater imperial aggressions of Athens, Rome, Carthage, Spain, Prussia/Germany, Japan, Russia, and France.

Offense-defense theory further predicts that levels of American bellicosity should vary inversely with shifts over time in America's sense of security and directly with the scope of perceived external threats (see prime prediction 3)—as in fact they have.

During 1789–1815 the United States saw large foreign threats on its borders and large opportunities to dispel them with force. It responded with a bellicose foreign policy that produced the 1812 war with Britain.

During 1815–1914 the United States was protected from the threat of a Eurasian continental hegemon by Britain's active continental balancing, and protected from extracontinental European expansion into the Western hemisphere by the British fleet, which was the *de facto* enforcer of the Monroe Doctrine. The United States responded by withdrawing from European affairs and maintaining very small standing military forces, although it did pursue continental expansion before 1898 and limited overseas imperial expansion after 1898.

During 1914–91 Britain could no longer maintain the European balance. This deprived the United States of its shield against continental European aggressors. Then followed the great era of American activism—fitful at first (1917–47), then steady and persistent (1947–91). This era ended when the Soviet threat suddenly vanished during 1989–91. After 1991 the United States maintained its security alliances, but reduced its troops stationed overseas and sharply reduced its defense effort.

WHAT THESE TESTS INDICATE

Offense-defense theory passed the tests these three cases pose. Are these tests positive proof for the theory or mere straws in the wind?

We learn more from strong tests than from weak ones. The strength of a passed test is a function of the uniqueness of the predictions that the test corroborated. The more numerous and plausible are contending explanations for the patterns that the test theory predicted and the test revealed, the weaker the test.

The three case study tests reported here range from fairly weak to quite strong. They each lack Herculean power but in combination they pose a strong test. The test posed by the ancient China case is weak because our knowledge of ancient Chinese society and politics is fairly thin. This leaves us unable to rule out competing explanations for the rise of warfare in the Warring States period that point to causes other than the rise of offense. The test posed by the U.S. case is a little stronger but still rather weak overall. Alternative explanations for the rise and fall of American global activism are hard to come up with, leaving the offense-defense theory's explanation without strong competitors, so this element of the test posed by the U.S. case is fairly strong. Plausible contending explanations for other aspects of the U.S. case can be found, however. For example, some would argue that America's more pacific conduct is better explained by its democratic domestic structure than by its surfeit of security. Others would contend that the United States has fewer-than-average conflicts of interest with other powers because it shares no borders with them, and it fights fewer wars for this reason. Hence this element of the test posed by the U.S. case is weak: U.S. lower-than-average bellicosity is only a straw in the wind.

As noted above, the case of Europe since 1789 offers a fairly strong test. Some competing explanations for Germany's greater bellicosity are offered—as noted above, the lateness of German industrialization is sometimes suggested as an alternative cause, as is German culture. However, there is no obvious plausible competing explanation for the main pattern we observe in the case—the rise of warfare during 1792–1815, 1856–71, and 1914–45, and the greater periods of peace in between. The fit of this pattern with prime prediction 1 of offense-defense theory lends it strong corroboration.

WHAT PRESCRIPTIONS FOLLOW?

If offense dominance is dangerous, policies that control it should be pursued. Governments should adopt defensive military force postures and seek arms control agreements to limit offensive forces. Governments should also maintain defensive alliances. American security guarantees in Europe and Asia have made conquest much harder since 1949 and have played a major role in

preserving peace. A U.S. withdrawal from either region would raise the risk of conflict.

Conclusion: Offense-Defense Theory in Perspective

Offense-defense theory has the attributes of a good theory. First, it has three elements that give a theory claim to large explanatory power. (1) Large importance, that is, its posited cause has large effects. Variance in the perceived offense-defense balance causes large variance in the incidence of warfare. Variance in the actual offense-defense balance has less impact because policymakers often misperceive it, but it has a potent effect when policymakers perceive it accurately. (2) Wide explanatory range. The theory explains results across many domains of behavior—in military policy, foreign policy, and crisis diplomacy.⁸⁴ It governs many intervening phenomena (e.g., expansionism, first-move advantage, windows, secrecy, negotiation failures, crisis management blunders, arms races, tight alliances) that have been seen as important war causes in their own right. Thus offense-defense theory achieves simplicity, binding a number of war causes under a single rubric. Many causes are reduced to one cause with many effects. (3) Wide real-world applicability. Real offense dominance is rare in modern times, but the perception of offense dominance is fairly widespread. Therefore, if perceived offense dominance causes war it causes lots of war, and offense-defense theory explains much of international history.

Second, offense-defense theory has large prescriptive utility, because the offense-defense balance is affected by national foreign and military policy; hence it is subject to political will. Perceptions of the offense-defense balance are even more malleable, being subject to correction through argument. Both are far more manipulable than the polarity of the international system, the strength of international institutions, the state of human nature, or other war causes that have drawn close attention.

Third, offense-defense theory is quite satisfying, although it leaves important questions unanswered. In uncovering the roots of its ten intervening phenom-

84. Moreover, offense-defense theory might be usefully adapted for application beyond the domain of war, for example, to explain international economic competition (or cooperation), or even intra-academic competition. Suggesting its application to economics is Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, who writes of the "prosperity dilemma"—a cousin of the security dilemma in which measures taken by one state to increase its economic well-being decrease another's economic well-being. See Jitsuo Tsuchiyama, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance after the Cold War: End of the Alliance?" unpublished manuscript, Olin Institute, Harvard University, 1994, p. 27.

ena, offense-defense theory offers a more satisfying (and simpler) explanation than do interpretations pointing directly to these phenomena. However, it also raises another mystery: Why is the strength of the offense so often exaggerated?

History suggests that offense dominance is at the same time dangerous, quite rare, and widely overstated. It further suggests that this exaggeration of insecurity, and the bellicose conduct it fosters, are prime causes of national insecurity and war. States are seldom as insecure as they think they are. Moreover, if they are insecure, this insecurity often grows from their own efforts to escape imagined insecurity.

The rarity of real insecurity is suggested by the low death rate of modern great powers. In ancient times great powers often disappeared, but in modern times (since 1789) no great powers have permanently lost sovereignty, and only twice (France in 1870–71 and in 1940) has any been even temporarily overrun by an unprovoked aggressor.⁸⁵ Both times France soon regained its sovereignty through the intervention of outside powers—illustrating the powerful defensive influence of great-power balancing behavior.

The prevalence of exaggerations of insecurity is revealed by the great wartime endurance of many states that enter wars for security reasons, and by the aftermath of the world's great security wars, which often reveal that the belligerents' security fears were illusory. Athens fought Sparta largely for security reasons, but held out for a full nine years (413–404 BCE) after suffering the crushing loss of its Sicilian expedition—an achievement that shows the falsehood of its original fears. Austria-Hungary held out for a full four years under allied battering during 1914–18, a display of toughness at odds with its own prewar self-image of imminent collapse. With twenty-twenty hindsight we can now see that modern Germany would have been secure had it only behaved itself. Wilhelmine Germany was Europe's dominant state, with Europe's largest and fastest-growing economy. It faced no plausible threats to its sovereignty except those it created by its own belligerence. Later, interwar Germany and Japan could have secured themselves simply by moderating their conduct. This would have assured them of allies, hence of the raw materials supplies they sought to seize by force. America's aggressive and often costly Cold War interventions in the third world now seem hypervigilant in light of the defensive benefits of the nuclear revolution, America's geographic

85. France helped trigger the 1870 war; hence one could argue for removing France in 1870 from the list of unprovoking victims of conquest, leaving only France in 1940.

invulnerability, and the strength of third world nationalism, which precluded the Soviet third world imperialism that U.S. interventions sought to prevent.

Paradoxically, a chief source of insecurity in Europe since medieval times has been this false belief that security was scarce. This belief was a self-fulfilling prophecy, fostering bellicose policies that left all states less secure. Modern great powers have been overrun by unprovoked aggressors only twice, but they have been overrun by provoked aggressors six times—usually by aggressors provoked by the victim's fantasy-driven defensive bellicosity. Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, Napoleonic France, and Austria-Hungary were all destroyed by dangers that they created by their efforts to escape from exaggerated or imaginary threats to their safety.⁸⁶

If so, the prime threat to the security of modern great powers is . . . themselves. Their greatest menace lies in their own tendency to exaggerate the dangers they face, and to respond with counterproductive belligerence. The causes of this syndrome pose a large question for students of international relations.

86. Mussolini also provoked his own destruction, but his belligerence was not security driven.