

James D. Fearon, "The Offense-Defense Balance and War Since 1648," (unpublished)  
Review by Solomon Major, Friday, March 12, 2000

Quick Summary: In this paper Fearon avoids the problematic argument of just what constitutes the Offense-Defense Balance (likely a wise move), takes as given that it "state[s] what users of the concept seem to have in mind by it (p. 4), and introduces an interesting and counter-intuitive hypothesis. First Fearon notes that increases of relative power (dyadic offense dominance) and uncertainty (variance in the outcome), simply lower the reserve point above which states are likely to attack. Because war under these "offense dominance" war is more likely to be total (elimination of the regime of the looser), and also outcomes are also more uncertain, states are less likely to wage war. That is to say that, because wars offense dominance wars put regimes in risk while defense dominance wars are of only marginal threat to the looser, states are more willing to engage in war when defense dominates. Fearon backs up this assumption by correlating instances of supposed defense dominance and high instances of war since 1648.

### **What is the central puzzle?**

Offense-Defense Theory(s) propose that, when offense is dominant, war is more likely (Snyder, 1984, Van Evera, 1998). Why is it then that Fearon's large-*N* studies show a correlation between offense dominance and war *avoidance*?

### **I. What is the central answer(s)?**

- a. Fearon begins with the assumption that states' leaders primary objective is to stay in office. It thus seems reasonable that leaders will opt to undertake aggressive strategies when they are most likely to keep them at the helm of their respective countries—or, more to the point, they are unlikely to undertake aggressive strategies when there is a significant danger that war could result in their being removed from power.
- b. Because offense dominance 1) increases uncertainty and 2) increases the likelihood that victors can and will seek "final" resolutions to conflicts, wars under offense dominance directly threaten countries' leaders.
- c. On the other hand, defense dominance means that wars should be long and inconclusive—and lack of uncertainty lead everyone to this same expectation. Under these circumstances wars may be started under the assumption that, even losing, is unlikely to mean total defeat and removal from power of the leadership of the looser.

### **II. The Evidence (Data compiled from Table One)**

Fearon finds evidence for his hypothesis that war is more likely by doing large-*N* analysis on two time periods—defense dominance: 1648 until the French Revolution (no leaders unseated by war), and offense dominance: the Post Napoleonic era until 1913. He finds the following correlations

- a. **Wars involving at least one Great Power:** Defense Dominance 1648-1789 = average of .22 wars per year/ Offense Dominance 1815-1913 = average of only .18 wars per year.
- b. **Great Power wars:** Defense Dominance 1648-1789 = average of .14 wars per year/ Offense Dominance 1815-1913 = average of only .04 wars per year.

Fearon ends by noting that under periods of *extreme* defense dominance (e.g. the 51 years of the nuclear era) have been *positively* correlated with reductions in the instance of war. However, such an extreme case is, he believes, quite a historical outlier.