

Week 10 - Violent Interstate Conflict

Ted Hopf, "Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War," *American Political Science Review* 85:2 (1991): 475-493.

Hopf purports to test Waltz's bipolarity-stability argument against the theory of offense-defense balance, and finds that the offense-balance better explains the constant level of instability in periods of multipolarity and bipolarity in Europe from 1495 to 1559.

International instability, the dependent variable, is measured by frequency (how often war breaks out), magnitude (the number of poles involved in war), duration (length of wars), and severity (battle deaths per war-year in proportion to the actor populations) of war. Waltz's argument relies on the relative importance of allies in bipolar and multipolar systems. Whereas under bipolarity alliances have no effect on stability, under multipolarity there are too many poles such for alliances to effectively maintain the balance of power, leading to the tendency to "pass the buck," which in turn allows challengers to win. The offense-defense balance approach, on the other hand, consists of (a) the technical military balance (comprised of tactical offensive advantage (i.e., seizing territory at lesser cost than the enemy) and strategic offensive advantage (i.e., seizing and/or occupying territory as is necessary to destroy the enemy's military potential at a lesser cost than the enemy) (see Table 1 on p. 477 for predictions of dependent variable according to independent variables along two by two dimensions of tactical / strategic advantage and offense / defense), (b) the cumulativeness of power resources (the availability and extractability of power resources), and (c) offensive strategic beliefs of the ruling elite.

Hopf operationalizes polarity and military capabilities according to size of population, soldiers, ships, and revenue of states, and finds that Europe from 1495 to 1521 was multipolar (Austria, England, France, Spain, Ottoman Empire, Venice) ("multipolar Europe"), whereas Europe from 1521 to 1559 shifted to bipolarity (Habsburg Empire and Ottoman Empire) ("bipolar Europe"). Comparing bipolar Europe to post-WWII bipolarity, Hopf finds that in all measures (except for weaponry) bipolarity in Europe appears to be deeper.

Hopf finds that in terms of the offense-defense balance approach in multipolar Europe (a) the system was tactically offensive but strategically defensive, (b) power resources were available, but extraction was difficult, and (c) strategic beliefs pushed the system towards offense-dominance. Accordingly, multipolar Europe should be characterized by frequent, short wars, with relatively low casualties and relatively few inter-polar conflicts, exacerbated by strategic beliefs. In short, offense-defense predicts less systemic instability than the polarity approach. In terms of the offense-defense balance approach, in bipolar Europe (a) the technical military balance shifted towards greater defensive advantage as tactical gains became more difficult and strategic positions solidified, (b) power resources remained available but became easier to extract, and (c) strategic beliefs of fear of bandwagoning and falling dominoes remained pervasive. Accordingly, bipolar Europe should be characterized by little change from the previous period. Waltz's polarity approach, however, predicts significant increase in stability.

Hopf then turns to quantitative empirical evidence, finding that Europe became only marginally more stable with the shift from multipolarity to bipolarity. This contradicts Waltz's polarity argument, and bolsters the offense-defense balance approach (though the cumulativeness of power resources are inconsistent with the findings). Moreover, Hopf argues that European powers neither "passed the buck," nor created "chain gangs." Quite to the contrary of Waltz's theory, they balanced quite efficiently against threatening states.

Lastly, Hopf sketches out some implications for the post-Cold War world, arguing that the defensive advantage of nuclear weapons rather than bipolarity accounts for the postwar stability. In addition, the low cumulativeness of power resources in the postwar system (which is led in part by international trade) decreases the chance of instability. In short, multipolarity is not to be feared.