Stephen van Evera (??) *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.

Chapter 6: Offense, defense, and the security dilemma

This chapter is based around the fifth hypothesis of van Evera's book – 'War is more likely when conquest is easy'. Van Evera builds on previous hypotheses in offense-defense theory (such as those of Jervis) and adds some of his own. He argues that offense-defense theory is useful because it has broad applicability, wider explanatory range and prescriptive richness.

Some definitions:
Offense: strategic offensive action; taking and holding of territory.
Offense (defense) dominant: conquest is fairly easy/easier than usual (very difficult).
Offense-defense balance: the relative ease of aggression and defense against aggression. Balance shaped by military and diplomatic-politics factors. Two measures are: (i) probability that a determined aggressor could conquer and subjugate a target state with comparable resources; (ii) resource advantage that an aggressor requires to gain a given chance of conquering a target state.

Eleven war-causing effects arise when conquest is easy (or when there is false perception that conquest is easy):

(i) States more often pursue opportunistic expansion, because expansion attempts are more often successful and pay greater rewards.

(ii) States more often pursue defensive expansion, because they feel less secure and so want to expand their borders to defensible lines, gain control of resources in these areas and destroy neighbours' power. This leads them to become aggressors.

(iii) Greater insecurity drives states to resist other states' expansion more fiercely. This, and (ii) stem from the problem that, when conquest is easy, resources become more cumulative, meaning that 'gains are more additive…and losses are less reversible' (p.125). Similarly, states defend their allies more fiercely, because they are afraid that the ally's loss would also mean their own loss.

(iv) Greater first-move advantage, creating the risk of a pre-emptive war. Reasons for this are that the material gain of moving first enables more territory to be overrun or defended; a quick invasion can disrupt the mobilization of the other state; surprise attacks are made easier, because of the increased secrecy resulting from offense dominance; insecure states may adopt a 'hair-trigger' first strike policy.

(v) Windows of opportunity and vulnerability are larger and declining states are more tempted to shut them forcefully, creating the risk of preventive war. Windows are opened wider in three ways: a shift in the relative size of national forces causes a larger shift in relative national power; using force is more effective than peaceful build-up in trying to halt a state's decline; because of secrecy, states tend to misjudge the level of an opponent's build-up.

(vi) Because they promise better rewards, states will more often present other states with fait accompli. As this doesn't allow states to retreat without losing face, either opponents are either forced to concede or, if they do not concede, war results more often.

(vii) States negotiate less readily and co-operatively, so negotiations fail more often and disputes remain unresolved. States break agreements more quickly because the rewards of cheating are greater. It becomes more necessary, yet harder to verify compliance with agreements.

(viii) States make foreign and defense policy more secretive, which raises the risk of military miscalculations and political blunders. As an information advantage gives a state more rewards, states try and achieve this partly by making their foreign policy strategies secret.

(ix) States react faster and more belligerently to others' blunders. This makes blunders harder to control and more dangerous.

(x) Arms racing is faster and harder to control, raising the risk of preventive wars and wars of false optimism. It produces other dangers, such as windows of opportunity and vulnerability, false optimism, and militarism. If the offense is dominant, states have incentives to build larger forces: resources are cumulative; self-defense is more difficult; states expect war more,

so need to be better prepared for it; as the early stages of war are decisive, states need to have larger standing forces; as other states appear to be building up offensive forces, states do so themselves; increased secrecy causes states to rationally over-arm; fewer arms-control agreements are reached, as states negotiate less in general.

(xi) Offense dominance is self-feeding, magnifying first ten effects.

Offense and Peace

Under certain conditions, a status quo state facing an aggressive state can lower the risk of war by possessing offensive capabilities. This constitutes a qualification to offense-defense theory, by arguing that in some hands offensive capabilities promote peace. The necessary conditions are: offense can defend allies that cannot be defended by other means; the aggressor knows it has provoked the hostility of others; the aggressor knows that the status quo power is benign the offensive force can only attack an attacker; the aggressor cannot remove the threat by force ('cut the noose'); the aggressor cannot be deterred by lesser punishment; conquest can either reform an aggressor state or leave it too weak to be aggressive; and offense can end or limit war.

Van Evera then discusses the factors that influence whether offense or defense is dominant. These are summarised as military factors (technology, doctrine, force posture and deployment), geography, social and political order (popular regimes today aid defense), and diplomatic factors (collective security systems, defensive alliances, and balancing behaviour by neutral states all serve to strengthen the defense).

Stemming from the initial hypothesis that war is more likely when conquest is easy are three prime predictions:

(i) War will be more common in periods when conquest is easy, or is believed easy, than in other periods.

(ii) States that have, or believe they have, large offensive opportunities or defensive vulnerabilities will initiate and fight more wars than other states.

(iii) A given state will initiate and fight more wars in periods when it has, or believes it has, larger offensive opportunities and defensive vulnerabilities.

Similarly, from the eleven war-causing effects are drawn three explanatory predictions:

(i) Intervening phenomena, such as opportunistic expansion, defensive expansion and more arms racing, will be more common in periods of real or perceived offense dominance than in other periods.

(ii) States that have, or believe they have, large offensive vulnerabilities will more often adopt policies that embody the kinds of intervening phenomena listed above.

(iii) Where elites adopted these kinds of policies, they should have done so because they believed the offense dominated.

His case studies of Europe 1789-1990s, Ancient China, and the US 1789-1990s confirm the offense-defense theory and indicate that shifts in the offense-defense balance (or, more accurately, perceived offense-defense balance) have large effects on the risk of war. The large role that the search for security has played in sparking wars illustrates the role of offense-defense theory.

He concludes by noting that offense-defense theory has the hallmarks of a good theory:

1. It has large importance (shifts in the offense-defense balance cause large shifts in the occurrence of war); it has wide explanatory range (explains results across several domains – military and foreign policy, crisis diplomacy); it has wide real-world applicability.
2. The theory has wide prescriptive utility; i.e. offense-defense balance and perceptions of it are more manipulable than most other causes of war that have been studied.
3. Its approach (seeing the offense-defense balance as the root of the eleven intervening phenomena) is preferable to theories that see these phenomena as the direct causes of war.