

Steven Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* (Spring, 1998), pp. 5-43  
Review by Solomon Major, Friday, March 11, 2000

Quick Summary: Van Evera "argue[s] that war is more likely when conquest is relatively easy, and that shifts in the offense-defense balance have a large effect on the risk of war" (p. 5). Several things influence the O/D balance including: technology, geography, social and diplomatic factors, etc. When the O/D balance favors the offensive we expect to observe particular patterns of policy/behavior in states. Greater levels of threat lead to "faster" and "harder" arms races, incentives to preempt, secrecy, larger windows of opportunity, and more *faits accomplis*. Because spoils can be quickly turned into the ability to project force further, we should expect to see offense balance to be self-reinforcing (victory at  $t_0$  makes victory at  $t_0+n$  more likely). "The tides of war and peace correlate loosely with the O/D balance... and tightly with the perceived O/D balance" (p. 26).

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

In this article, Van Evera attempts to determine what structural characteristics (rate of technological progress, geography, etc.) lead to offense or defense dominance. He then proposes that war is more likely during times of offense dominance; peace more likely when defense prevails.

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

1. War will be more common in periods when conquest is easy or believed to be easy
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 it has larger offensive opportunities or defensive vulnerabilities

Van Evera argues that we should expect to see certain policies adopted by states when offense dominates, these are (in his order):

#### **1. Opportunistic Expansion**

When conquest is hard, states are dissuaded from aggression... when expansion is easy, aggression is more alluring. (p. 7)

#### **2.&3 Defensive Expansion/ Resistance to Aggression by Others**

When conquest is easy, states are less threatened and more comfortable with the status quo. When conquest is hard (and resources cumulative) states are more likely to be aggressive because their neighbors are aggressive. (p. 7-8)

#### **4. Moving First is More Rewarding**

There are advantages to first strike strategies because of states' ability to knock an opponent out early. (p. 9)

#### **5. Windows are Large and More Dangerous**

Windows of opportunity are more evident for pretty much the same reason as in #4. (p. 9)

#### **6. *Faits Accomplis* are More Complete and More Dangerous**

There are incentives to attempt to enforce unilateral outcomes through the use of *faits accomplis*. (p. 10)

#### **7. States Negotiate Less and Reach Fewer Agreements**

When conquest is easy, states have less faith in agreements, and more incentives to win unilateral victories at the bargaining table. (p. 10-1)

#### **8. States are More Secretive**

An information advantage confers more rewards when offense is dominant. Again this reduces the likelihood of negotiation, agreements, and confidence building. (p. 11)

#### **9. States Arms Race harder and Faster**

Because: resources are cumulative; self-defense is more difficult; states are more expectant of war; the first phase of the war is decisive; states transfer resources from defense to offense; states hold military secrets more tightly; states reach fewer arms control agreements. (p. 13-4)

#### **10. Conquest Grows Still Easier**

Gains are perceived to be cumulative; chain ganging is more likely. (p. 14)

Van Evera next argues that there are several causes of the O/D balance, he defines them thus:

**1. Military Factors**

Reduces largely to technological advances in favor of either the offense or the defense. However “sometimes technology overrode doctrine.... Sometimes doctrine shaped technology” (p. 18). So, holding technology as his *Independent* variable, Van Evera predicts...? (p. 17-8)

**2. Geography**

Sometimes geography (e.g. flat open planes) favors the offense. Sometimes geography (e.g. narrow mountain passes and defiles) favors the defense. (p. 19)

**3. Social and Political Order**

“[C]onquest is probably harder among popular than unpopular regimes today, but in past centuries the reverse was probably true. (p. 19)

**4. Diplomatic Factors**

Collective security systems, defensive alliances, and balancing behavior by neutral states all help the defensive. The lack of these factors favors the offensive. (p. 21)

Posen closes by noting that

1. Offense Defense balance has “all the attributes of a good theory.
2. History suggests that offense dominance is at the same time dangerous, and quite rare, and widely overstated.

This is a terrible article. It proposes that O/D balance is a systemic attribute (true everywhere), but all his cases are *dyads* where one side held an offensive balance because it was *qualitatively* far more powerful, or there was defense dominance when there were few opportunities for war or states were *qualitatively* evenly matched. The majority of his empirical findings are far better and more parsimoniously explained by simply looking at relative power relations. The rest of his findings are so intuitive, one would be easily persuaded to call them quite “trivial.” For a more well reasoned approach to this topic (and a critique of Van Evera), see James W. David, Jr., Bernard I. Finel, and Stacie E. Goddard, “Taking Offense at Offense-Defense Theory,” *International Security* (Winter 1998-1999)