When Are Power Shifts Dangerous?:
Military Strategy and Preventive War [*]

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This article explains why shifts in the balance of power lead to war in some cases, but not in others. I argue that the declining state's military strategy is the key determinant of whether power shifts will result in war or pass peacefully. If the decliner has a maneuver strategy, then war is likely; if it has an attrition strategy, the power shift will pass peacefully. I test the plausibility of my theory and three prominent alternatives by taking a sample of twelve power shifts among great powers over the period 1860-1945 and establishing correlations between the indicators used by all four theories and the incidence in each case of war or peace. This article finds that for the large majority of the examined cases, the decliner's military strategy correctly predicts the power shift's political outcome

Keywords: Power Shift, Preventive War, Military Strategy, Offense-Defense Balance, Military Power, Power Transition

1. INTRODUCTION

"What made war inevitable," observed Thucydides (1972: 49) in the fifth century B.C. about the Peloponnesian War, "was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." Many modern international relations scholars have agreed with Thucydides, arguing that marked changes in the balance of power between states are among the most common causes of war (Doran and Parsons 1980; Gilpin 1981; Modelski and Thompson 1989; Organski 1968; Van Evera 1999: chapter 4; Wayman 1996). While there is no question that shifts in power has sometimes caused great-power war in the past, these shifts have also passed quietly on other occasions (Kim and Morrow 1992). For example, power decline caused Imperial Germany to wage war against Russia in 1914, yet Russia had responded to economic decline vis-à-vis Germany in the the 1870s and 80s in a peaceful manner. My goal in this article is to explain why power shifts lead to war in some cases, but not in others.[1]

Finding a good answer to this question is presently important, since shifts in the balance of power and the attendant risks of war remain an enduring feature of international politics. For instance, China's economy has expanded at an annual rate of two to three times those of other major states since the 1980s. If this rapid pace of growth continues, the world's most populous nation may be able to catch up with the United States and challenge its military dominance. This prospect is causing security concerns in Washington. *The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States*, for instance, warns "in pursuing advanced military

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[1] "Power shifts" refer to significant changes in the balance of military or economic power. These shifts include both divergence and convergence of power positions. "Power transition" is a subset of power shifts in which the rising state surpasses the declining state in terms of aggregate power.

capabilities that can threaten its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, China is following an outdated path" (Bush 2002: 27). Foreign policy experts are also having a heated debate on whether China can rise peacefully.

This article argues that, when a power shift occurs, the declining state's military strategy is the key determinant of whether the shift will result in peace or war. In such situations, declining states can adopt one of two military strategies: maneuver or attrition. The possession of a maneuver strategy increases the prospect of war by enhancing the decliner's confidence in its military capability, accentuating its fear of losing a military opportunity, and reducing its chance of acquiring sufficient compensation from the rising state. If the decliner only has an attrition strategy available to it, however, war is less likely: The state has little confidence in its chance of victory and is more likely to reach a satisfactory settlement.

Power shifts provide decliners with a preventive motive for war (Gilpin 1981; Levy 1987; Vagts 1956). As their power position deteriorates, declining states fear that they will be compelled to fight a war under worse conditions or to bargain from a position of increased weakness in the future (Van Evera 1999: 76-9). Therefore, these states have powerful incentives to stop power shifts from undermining their military capability, and are inclined to seek compensation from rising competitors. Such compensation can include changes in the terms of trade, transfers of technology, or arms limitation agreements. Rising states may also be asked to help decliners compete against third parties. Unless compensation is forthcoming, however, decliners may be willing to fight an early war while they stand a good chance of winning. The opposite is true for rising states: Power shifts enable them to fight wars under relatively favorable conditions or to bargain from strength in the future (Powell 1999: 34). Therefore, they have incentives to delay conflict, and are willing to make concessions for that purpose.

Declining states are likely to fight preventive wars under three conditions. First, the power shift must significantly undermine their military capability.[2] If power decline has a major impact on their military capability, decliners will be inclined to fight an early war for fear that inaction will compromise their security interests in the long run. If declining states can maintain their military capability despite power decline, on the other hand, there will be little reason to consider the use of force. Second, declining states must have a good chance of winning a war with a rising state at an acceptable cost. In other words, it is essential that the declining state anticipate a quick and decisive victory. Third, diplomacy must fail to yield sufficient concessions from rising competitors. Talking generally costs less than fighting, and therefore decliners want to avoid war if diplomacy can mitigate power decline or its strategic consequences. War is likely when states in relative decline find it too difficult to acquire adequate compensation through negotiation.

A maneuver strategy makes these war-promoting conditions abundant, whereas an attrition strategy renders them scarce. Declining states with a maneuver strategy lose a large amount of military capability, since power decline destroys their superior strategy's chance of success. In contrast, decliners with an attrition strategy suffer no such loss, since their strategy is not vulnerable to decline. A maneuver strategy also presents a favorable opportunity to win a quick and decisive victory, whereas an attrition strategy often induces states to expect long costly wars. Finally, a deceptive maneuver strategy leads risers to

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[2] I define "power" in terms of material resources, including military forces and economic assets. "Military capability" refers to the ability to win a war at an acceptable cost. Power is an important but not the sole ingredient of military capability (Glaser 1994/95: 60-64; Mearsheimer 2001b: 57-60).

underestimate decliners' military capability and offer insufficient compensation. In contrast, an attrition strategy facilitates the rising power's accurate assessment of the declining power's military strength, thereby presenting a favorable opportunity to reach a bargain.

My argument challenges three prominent theories of power shifts and war. According to the first of these theories, *power transition theory*, the *rising* state finds that the status quo no longer reflects power realities closely and thus becomes dissatisfied (Organski 1968; Organski and Kugler 1980). Such "dissatisfaction with the status quo provides … the willingness to fight a war" (Lemke and Kugler 1996: 21). According to this theory, power shifts also make it easier for the rising state to resolve its dissatisfaction through force. Therefore, "the power transition in which the dissatisfied challenger surpasses the dominant state provides the opportunity to fight" (Lemke and Kugler 1996: 21).

Power transition theory is logically flawed. First, it is unclear why the rising state would initiate war, given that it has much to gain by waiting. Second, it is not clear that states compare *overall power* (for example, gross national product) when calculating the likelihood and cost of victory. Overall power is not critical in short wars, for example, where belligerents have little time to mobilize their populations and economies (Biddle 2004: 20-3; Maoz 1989).

The second theory, *dynamic differentials theory*, posits that preventive war occurs under two conditions (Copeland 2000). The first condition depends on the opportunities for war. For preventative war to occur in a multipolar system, according to this theory, the declining state must possess marked military superiority. Without such marked superiority, the declining state will have to fight long and costly wars, and will lose too much power vis-à-vis states sitting on the sidelines. In a bipolar world, preventive war is an appealing option even when the declining state is nearly equal in military power to its rising competitor, since there are no bystanders to exploit a long and costly fight. The second condition relates to the motive for war. In multipolarity, according to dynamic differentials theory, the declining state must anticipate that the rising state will likely obtain marked military superiority. Without such superiority, concerns about bystanders will deter the rising state and the declining state need not fear the future. In a bipolar system, however, the prospect of military parity can push the declining state toward preventive war, since the rising state will have no reason to fear bystanders.

Although dynamic differentials theory improves upon its predecessor by correctly pointing to the declining state as the potential initiator of war, it nevertheless has significant logical loopholes. Above all, this theory is predicated on the questionable premise that "[military] equality with its rivals will likely mean long and costly bilateral wars" (Copeland 2000: 16). In fact, states can often devise a clever strategy and defeat equal or even materially superior opponents decisively (Arreguin-Toft 2001; Mearsheimer 1983; Paul 1994; Reiter 1999: 366-87). The theory also fails to explain the success and failure of diplomacy. When the declining state has marked military superiority, the rising state is likely to be pessimistic and offer considerable concessions to avoid war (Blainey 1973). In other words, the theory does not explain why diplomacy tends to fail precisely when it holds a large promise for success between a declining state that seeks concessions and a rising state likely to offer them.

Finally, *offense-defense theory* posits that preventive war is likely when offense has the advantage over defense (Van Evera 1999). If offense is dominant, military decline can considerably diminish the declining state's ability to defend itself from the rising state's future attack. Therefore, the declining state will have powerful incentives to take quick

military action. Offense-dominance also presents the declining state with a favorable opportunity for preventive attack. Moreover, it is difficult to reach diplomatic agreements when offense is dominant (Van Evera 1999: 135-7). Since a small power edge can be converted into a large capability gain, the rising state will be less willing to make concessions. The declining state will also be more fearful of being cheated and thus less inclined to commit to a bargain. In contrast, these war-promoting conditions rarely exist if defense dominates offense.

While offense-defense theory provides a reasonable account of military and diplomatic opportunity, the offense-defense balance does not adequately explain motives. Offensive advantage refers to a situation where "it is easier to destroy the other's army and take its territory than it is to defend one's own" (Jervis 1978: 178). Given this definition, military decline may decrease a state's *defensive* capability considerably when offense is dominant. However, if the offense-defense balance is as powerful a determinant of military strategy as this theory argues it is, the declining state will surely adopt an offensive strategy in a later war. Therefore it is largely irrelevant that a power decline diminishes a state's *defensive* capability. The declining state must compare its current offensive capability with future *offensive* capability. In short, offensive dominance hardly makes power decline more threatening than does defensive dominance.

The foregoing discussion suggests that a convincing theory of power shifts and war must fulfill two minimum conditions. First, it must be built around the declining state's decision calculus. Second, it must account for three key conditions: military opportunity, diplomatic opportunity, and preventive motive. This article offers a theory that meets both these conditions and thereby possesses greater explanatory power than the previous three theories.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. Section two presents a strategic theory of preventive war. Section three probes the plausibility of my theory and the three competitors by surveying twelve cases of power shifts among great powers between 1860 and 1945. Section four discusses the sources of military strategy. In the final section, I summarize my findings and discuss implications of this study.

2. A STRATEGIC THEORY OF PREVENTIVE WAR

This section lays out my strategic theory of preventive war. I begin by classifying the military strategies available to states and then explain how these strategies affect military opportunity, diplomatic opportunity, preventive motive, and the overall likelihood of war.

2.1. Classification of Military Strategy

Declining states considering launching a preventive war can adopt one of two military strategies for defeating their enemies: maneuver and attrition.[3] An *attrition* strategy aims to

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[3] Here my discussion is limited to ground warfare for parsimony. I will classify naval and air strategies in the appendix. I only discuss offensive maneuver and attrition strategies, because decliners most often need to attack risers that lack political incentive to rush into an attack. I do not treat "limited aims" and "punishment" as distinct strategy types. The "limited aims strategy" relates not to operational methods but to the scope of war aims (Mearsheimer 1983: 53-58). A "punishment strategy" is simply a variant of an attrition strategy that wears down the morale of a population and

destroy the opposing army by applying brute force. The attacker fights a series of set-piece battles with the enemy's main force until cumulated casualties force it to collapse or capitulate in anticipation of inevitable annihilation (Mearsheimer1983: 33-5). This strategy usually relies on frontal assaults against the enemy's strong points.

A *maneuver* strategy aims to defeat the enemy forces decisively through strategic paralysis (Liddell Hart 1967: 324-5). Its essence is to exploit the "Achilles' heel" in the adversary's war plan, and entrap the opposing army in a hopeless strategic situation (Luttwak 1987: 94-6). Once the opponent falls into such a trap, both its psychological and material capacity for organized resistance will be seriously impaired. Consequently, the adversary will be forced to surrender or face certain destruction.

A modern army cannot coordinate its components effectively in pursuit of strategic aims once its networks of command, control, and communication (C3) are disrupted or cut off (Mearsheimer 1983: 36). Therefore, the maneuver strategy usually targets the C3 systems located in the enemy's rear area (Liddell Hart 1967: 326-29). Armies can reach the enemy rear quickly in one of two ways. One approach is to *outflank* the defense (U.S. Army 1986). While a diversionary attack distracts the opponent, the mobile forces turn its flank and advance deep into the enemy rear as rapidly as possible. The German Schlieffen Plan is one of the well-known cases of this method's application. The other way to reach the enemy rear is to *penetrate* the line of defense (U.S. Army 1986: 103-5). The attacker first rips holes in the frontline and then inserts mobile forces through the gaps. The German blitzkrieg in May 1940 employed this method with spectacular results.

The maneuver strategy depends on superior battlefield knowledge for success. The attacker needs to know what and where the adversary's weaknesses are in advance (Handel 2001: 231-3; Mearsheimer 1981/82:104-22). The attacker must also catch the defender off balance through strategic deception. Otherwise, the defender can check the opponent's flanking or penetration attempts.

2.2. Opportunity for War

States that possess maneuver strategies will calculate that they have a greater opportunity for war than those that possess attrition strategies. Simply put, while a successful maneuver strategy means a quick victory at low cost, an attrition strategy does not.

An attrition strategy offers a slim chance of swift victory. To the extent that the attacker successfully inflicts heavy losses on the opponent, the defender will break off engagements and retreat towards the interior. The attrition strategy relies mainly upon frontal attacks and thus cannot stop the routed enemy from fleeing the battlefield and reorganizing its defense. Consequently, the attacker may end up chasing the opponent for a lengthy period and push it back slowly rather than annihilate it (Mearsheimer 1983: 34).

An attrition strategy also tends to be quite costly for several reasons. First of all, it often entails considerable troop and materiel losses because the attacker strikes at the enemy strong points (Mearsheimer 1983: 34-5, 63-4). In addition, socioeconomic costs are considerable because an attrition strategy leads to a protracted war. As fighting continues, belligerents may be forced to mobilize civilian populations to meet increasing demands for manpower. Such mobilization often encourages the underprivileged groups to claim higher social status in exchange of their service, and thus leads to the displacement of prewar social orders (Stein

troops (Posen 1984: 14; Stam 1996).

1980: 23-4). In a long war, states also need to shift from peacetime to war production and reverse the transition at the end of war. Such industrial readjustments carry a variety of economic costs.

In contrast, a maneuver strategy promises a swift victory. Once the opponent falls into a strategic trap, it cannot retreat deep into the interior to reorganize because its paths for retreat are already blocked. A lengthy pursuit will therefore be unnecessary. A "sense of being trapped" can also bring "psychological dislocation" to the enemy commander's mind and lead to surrender (Liddell Hart 1967: 326-7). If so, the attacker can bring the war to a quick conclusion without fighting time-consuming battles. Even if the entrapped adversary continues to resist, the attacker will fight with a significantly weakened enemy under severe psychological and logistical constraints.

A maneuver strategy also promises a cheap victory for two reasons. First, fighting costs may not be substantial because battles will be largely limited to engagements directly involved in outflanking or penetrating the enemy defense. Strategic deception allows the attacker to choose the time and location of the critical battles and achieve marked local military superiority; casualties and material losses will therefore often be limited in these engagements. Second, since the strategy makes quick termination of the war possible, the attacker can avoid socioeconomic dislocation. It need not mobilize its population and industrial production and can therefore avoid domestic disruption.

In sum, possession of a maneuver strategy implies a favorable opportunity for war, while an attrition strategy does not. A maneuver strategy promises a quick victory by paralyzing the opponent's C3 systems, while an attrition strategy implies a long campaign. Moreover, states that adopt a maneuver strategy can expect to incur few battlefield and socioeconomic costs, while those that have attrition strategies are likely to suffer substantial losses both on the battlefield and on the home front.

2.3. Opportunity for Diplomacy

Declining states are unlikely to go to war with rising competitors if the latter can, at a minimum, compensate them for their loss of military capability (Fearon 1995: 386-90; Morrow 1985: 473-502). This minimum compensation is in turn a function of the declining state's present military capability. Consequently, adequate offers can only be made if the rising state can estimate the decliner's capability accurately (Fearon 1995: 391-5). Such estimation is crucially dependent on the military strategy adopted by the declining state. Therefore, military strategy exerts a powerful effect on the prospect that the declining state will receive adequate compensation through diplomacy and therefore settle rather than fight.

A declining state with an attrition strategy can attain sufficient compensation. Deception and surprise do little to help an attacker with an attrition strategy, because the strategy rarely enables an attacker to strike at a location where the defender is unprepared. The defender will concentrate its main forces along what it expects to be the main axis of enemy attack. Since the attrition strategy attacks enemy strong points, the attacker will likely end up striking at the anticipated locations. Consequently, the strategy's success depends mostly on material power, which is easy to measure compared with non-material factors such as surprise. Therefore, attrition strategies adopted by declining states allow rising states to estimate their opponent's military capabilities accurately and offer reasonable terms of compensation.

A declining state with a maneuver strategy, on the other hand, may be unable to persuade its adversary to make adequate concessions. A maneuver strategy depends heavily on strategic deception and surprise (Sun Tzu 1963: 102-6). Consequently, when a state has a maneuver strategy, its military capability depends in large part on hard-to-measure nonmaterial factors. In such circumstances, rising states will likely underestimate their opponents' military capabilities and thus fail to offer adequate compensation.

In sum, attrition strategies make measurement of an adversary's military capability a relatively simple matter and therefore allow states to strike a deal that can avoid war, while maneuver strategies do not afford these opportunities.

2.4. Preventive Motive

A declining state with a maneuver strategy stands to lose both its strategy and relative power over time and therefore has *compelling incentives* to launch a preventive war. On the other hand, decliners with attrition strategies only lose their power over the long haul and therefore have less of an incentive to go to war in the short term.

The declining state has a strong motive for preventive action to the extent that power decline will render it less capable compared with its current capability. Since war is often the gravest threat to a state's security, states care about their ability to win wars at an acceptable cost (Waltz 1979). Even if war does not break out, a state's capability determines its level of security. In short, the more a state's capability is reduced by power decline, the less secure it will be over the long term and the stronger its motive for preventive war.

Declining states lose military capability to a particularly great extent when they have maneuver strategies. Power shifts often render a maneuver strategy impossible by depriving the declining state of the ability to exploit the enemy's soft spots. Since power shifts make additional forces available, the rising state can fill the "gaps" in its defense. The declining state may also be forced to divert a portion of mobile forces and reinforce the defense opposite the enemy's growing main body, fearing that the entire defense may collapse even before mobile forces deliver a decisive blow. Consequently, power decline destroys a maneuver strategy's chance of success and forces the declining state to switch to an attrition strategy. Therefore decliners with a maneuver strategy have strong incentives to fight an early war while they can still rely on a superior strategy as well as favorable material conditions (Paul 1994: 24-30, 167-72).

A declining state with an attrition strategy loses material power but, unlike a decliner with a maneuver strategy, it is not forced to switch to an inferior strategy—it is simply left with the same strategy that it had all along. Since the attrition strategy depends heavily on material power for success, a decliner with such a strategy will lose military capability and experience a loss in security. However, it will not be forced to adopt an inferior strategy, since it has already adopted the worst possible strategy. Although the loss of material power will certainly render a future war more costly and risky than a present war of attrition, the discrepancy may not be as marked as it might be if the declining state had a maneuver strategy and expected to lose it over time.

Thus, states that have a maneuver strategy have a great deal to lose as their power declines since power decline threatens to deny them both their strategy and their power. In contrast, declining states with an attrition strategy already possess the worst of the two possible strategies and stand to lose only their power over time. Consequently, decliners with maneuver strategies have a stronger motive to fight a preventive war than those with attrition strategies.

In conclusion, my theory argues that declining states with maneuver strategies have good opportunities for war, poor diplomatic opportunities, and a powerful preventive motive, while decliners with attrition strategies have poor opportunities for war, better diplomatic opportunities, and less compelling preventive motives. Together these claims imply the following hypotheses:

H1: If a declining state has a maneuver strategy, then it will initiate war.
H2: If a decliner has an attrition strategy, then power shifts will pass peacefully.

3. A PLAUSIBILITY PROBE

This section probes the plausibility of my arguments and the competing theories. I first describe my method and data briefly, and then present the results of analysis. I find much empirical support for strategic theory. It explains a larger portion of the sample than its alternatives do. In contrast, the other theories explain less than one-half of the examined cases.

3.1. Data and Method

I analyze a sample of twelve dyads among great powers in which the weaker state went through no less than 20 percent change in gross domestic product (GDP) relative to its stronger rival for approximately a decade. I only select the most politically relevant cases where strategic planners of the decliner regarded the riser as the main foe in a give region. I sample long-term shifts in the balance of economic power because such shifts transform the balance of power in the most fundamental and far-reaching way. Since wealth underpins military power, shifts in economic power in the long run lead to parallel changes in military balance (Morgenthau 1948: 134-5; Kennedy 1987; Mearsheimer 2001b: 55-75). In contrast, military power shifts often do not cause economic shifts. I restrict my study to power shifts between great powers, since decisions for war of lesser powers are often considerably influenced by leading great powers' preferences apart from the dyadic factors.[4] I do not examine power shifts that occurred after the Second World War because the "nuclear revolution" may complicate application of my theory to such cases (Jervis 1989).[5] All the cases are listed in Table 1.

This rule of case selection is innovative in two respects. First, it does not rely on the dependent variable (war), so causal inferences are free of selection bias (Achen and Snidal 1989; Geddes 1990; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 137-41). As Robert Pape (2001) points out, such procedure is a significant improvement upon the qualitative literature, which commonly selects cases on the dependent variable (for examples, Gilpin 1981; Schweller 1992; Copeland 2000). Second, this study takes cases of power shifts rather than arbitrarily

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[4] The conventional wisdom views the following states as great powers during the investigated period 1860-1945: Russia (1860-1945), Britain (1860-1945), Germany (1860-1945), France (1860-1940), Austria-Hungary (1860-1918), Italy (1961-1943), the United States (1865-1945), and Japan (1894-1945). See Mearsheimer (2001: 404).

[5] The Cold War period witnessed two cases of power shifts: United States decline relative to the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1961, and Soviet decline vis-à-vis the United States between 1970 and 1985.

Table 1. Power Shifts among Great Powers, 1860-1945

Cases*	Decliner's Strategy	Did the Decliner Have Marked Military Superiority?	Side Favored by Offense-Defense Balance	Did Power Transition Occur? Or Did Power Parity Exist?	Did War Occur during the Period?	Which Side Initiated War?
France - Germany 1860-1870	Maneuver	Yes	Defense	Yes	Yes	Declining State
Japan - Russia 1880-1904	Maneuver	No	Defense	No	Yes	Declining State
Germany - Russia 1890-1914	Maneuver	Yes	Defense	Yes	Yes	Declining State
Germany - USSR 1925-1941	Maneuver	Yes	Offense	No	Yes	Declining State
Japan - USA 1933-1941	Maneuver	No	Defense	No	Yes	Declining State
Britain - USA 1860-1914	Attrition	No	Defense	Yes	No	-
Russia - Germany 1870-1890	Attrition	Yes	Defense	Yes	No	-
Austria - Russia 1890-1914	Attrition	No	Defense	No	Yes	Declining State
France - Germany 1880-1914	Attrition	No	Defense	No	Yes	Rising State
Britain - Germany 1890-1914	Attrition	No	Defense	Yes	Yes	Rising State
France - Germany 1929-1939	Attrition	No	Defense	No	Yes	Rising State
Britain - Germany 1925-1939	Attrition	No	Defense	Yes	Yes	Rising State

Note: * Declining states are listed first; rising states second.

chosen intervals as unit of analysis. Therefore, I overcome the shortcomings of quantitative research that includes irrelevant intervals during which no power shifts occurred and decomposes a single case of power shift into several shifts (Powell 1999: 146-7).

I explain coding procedures for variables and describe naval and air strategies in the appendix.[6] Suffice it to say here that my coding is unbiased: I follow the procedures used by the proponents of each theory whenever possible.

I have chosen to employ the "congruence" method, which examines bivariate correlations between the explanatory and dependent variables (Van Evera 1997: 58-63).

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[6] A detailed description of all the cases is available from the author upon request.

Each theory makes predictions about the occurrence of war and the identity of the war initiator. Only if a theory predicts both the occurrence and the war initiator correctly will I declare that it can explain the given case. I measure the performance of each theory by looking at the numbers of explained cases and confirmed hypotheses. The congruence procedure allows for a plausibility probe and is suitable for analysis of the small sample.

3.2. Results

The data clearly support one of the main hypotheses of strategic theory listed above, while disconfirming the other. Declining states initiated wars each time they had maneuver strategies, as shown in Table 1. Therefore, it seems to be the case that maneuver strategies induce declining states to launch preventive wars (H1). However, the data disconfirm the hypothesis that power shifts rarely lead to war when decliners have attrition strategies (H2). Power shifts passed peacefully in only two out of seven cases in which declining states had attrition strategies.

Strategic theory has greater explanatory power than any of its competitors.[7] As shown in Table 2, it outperforms the runner-up (dynamic differentials theory) by a margin of three cases. Offense-defense theory and power transition theory explain less than one-half of the cases that strategic theory accounts for. Power transition theory shows the worst performance. Dynamic differentials theory and offense-defense theory fare slightly better, because they correctly view decliners as potential aggressors.

Table 2. Performance of Theories

	Number of Explained Cases	Number of Confirmed Hypotheses
Strategic Theory	7	1
Dynamic Differentials Theory	4	1
Offense-Defense Theory	3	1
Power Transition Theory	2	0

Note: The total number of predictions is 12 for each theory. The total number of tested hypotheses is 2 for all theories tested.

Dynamic differentials theory correctly predicts the outcomes of four out of twelve power shifts. The data merely confirm one of its two tested hypotheses listed below:

H3: In multipolarity, if the decliner has marked military superiority, it will initiate war.
H4: In multipolarity, if the decliner lacks military superiority, power shifts will pass peacefully.

[7] I expect a useful theory to outperform random choice — for example, fair coin tosses — which would make approximately three correct predictions on average. Since no social-scientific theory can explain every case, the fact that strategic theory fails to explain five cases alone does not call its validity into question. Moreover, as Imre Lakatos (1970) argues, the performance of theory should be judged ultimately in relative terms.

Among the twelve cases of multipolarity, decliners had marked military superiority in four occasions; they initiated preventive wars in three out of these four cases. This finding confirms the claim that militarily superior decliners attack risers in a multipolar world (H3). Meanwhile, power shifts passed peacefully in only one out of eight occasions in which declining states did not possess military superiority. This finding disconfirms the hypothesis that power shifts will not lead to war in situations of multipolarity when decliners have no marked military superiority (H4).

Offense-defense theory makes correct predictions in three out of twelve cases; one of its two hypotheses listed below is supported.

H5: If the offense-defense balance favors the offense, the declining state will initiate war.
H6: If offense-defense balance favors the defense, power shifts will not lead to war.

In the only case of offense-dominance considered in this study, the declining state initiated war. This finding confirms the claim that offensive advantage encourages declining states to fight preventive wars (H5). However, the evidence does not support the claim that defense-dominance leads to peaceful power shifts (H6). Wars occurred on nine out of the eleven occasions when the offense-defense balance favored defenders.

Power transition theory makes correct predictions in just two out of twelve cases and is the worst performing theory. The data confirm none of the following hypotheses:

H7: If the rising state catches up with or surpasses the declining state, it will initiate war.
H8: If the riser has either preponderant or inferior power, power shifts will pass peacefully.

Under the condition of marked power imbalance, power shifts passed without war in none out of six cases. This fact disconfirms the hypothesis that power shifts will not lead to war when rising states are either markedly inferior or preponderant (H8). Risers started wars in only two out of the six cases in which they caught up with or surpassed their opponents. Therefore, the claim that rising states initiate wars when the power balance is in rough parity is not borne out (H7).

4. SOURCES OF MILITARY STRATEGY

Why do some states adopt maneuver strategies while others employ attrition strategies? The answer is that states which have good intelligence capability and strategic acumen are likely to possess maneuver strategies, while those lacking these qualities tend to adopt attrition strategies.

Good intelligence is an essential ingredient for maneuver strategies, because for their success the attacker must have accurate information on the opponents' war plans while hiding its own intention and capability to exploit their vulnerabilities. Simply put, a maneuver strategy requires a marked advantage in strategic knowledge, which in turn depends crucially on superior capacity in key areas of intelligence operations including data collection, analysis, evaluation, counterintelligence, and deception. Therefore, states with resourceful intelligence apparatus may have a better chance to adopt maneuver strategies.

Superior intelligence alone, however, cannot produce an effective maneuver strategy:

creation of this strategy needs superb strategic acumen as well. As Carl von Clausewitz (1976: 102) emphasized, a superior conduct of war calls for "an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth." Intelligence reports on the adversary's plans are frequently fragmentary and contradictory; only astute strategists can see through such uncertainty, discerning the opponent's strategic intention and understanding its weaknesses. Strategic acumen is also essential for devising ingenuous ways to exploit those vulnerabilities. While some military leaders (whom Clausewitz called military geniuses) are simply born with this extraordinary talent, many others acquire it through painstaking education and training as well as first-hand experience in war. Therefore, those states that provide high-quality military education and/or recruit the first-rate manpower into their officer corps are particularly likely to possess maneuver strategies. So are the states that conduct military operations and exercises frequently. Also, military organizations firmly committed to meritocracy and free exchanges of ideas may be better able to create these superior strategies, because such institutions can increase the chance that astute strategists get to influence operational planning.

If their military leadership is deficient in intelligence capability and strategic acumen, on the other hand, then states cannot but adopt an attrition strategy. A maneuver strategy is no riskier than an attrition strategy and is preferable in all other major aspects. Therefore, states will adopt a maneuver strategy whenever it offers a reasonable chance of success.[8] An attrition strategy is thus employed as a fallback option only when effective maneuver is impossible (Holmes 2001: 106, 542). Without superb intelligence and acumen, states have little chance to create a maneuver strategy and therefore cannot but settle with an inferior strategy of attrition.

My argument contradicts several accepted views concerning sources of strategy. Some scholars argue that powerful states prefer an attrition strategy because material strength is their comparative advantage. In contrast, materially weak states tend to adopt a maneuver strategy since they cannot expect to win a long war of attrition. Therefore, states have "definite national styles [of war], marked by a particular position on the attrition-maneuver spectrum" (Luttwak 1979: 97-99).

This argument is flawed since it is predicated on the false premise that strategies have their unique merits and faults and therefore are equivalent. Maneuver is in fact a superior form of warfare so states will employ it if they can, regardless of their "self-images of relative material strength or weakness" (Luttwak 1979: 98). To take an example, U.S. leaders preferred maneuver warfare to attrition in spite of the Allies' overwhelming material advantage during the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Comparing the initial air attrition campaign with the subsequent ground maneuver operation, General Norman Schwarzkopf commented: "Once we get through this [attritional phase] and we're moving, then it's a different war. Then we're fighting our kind of war. Before we get through that, we're fighting their kind of war, and that's what we didn't want to have to do" (Holmes 2001: 544).

There is another popular claim that the offense-defense balance — comprising technology, geography, and force density — determines military strategy. "When states act optimally," Glaser and Kaufmann (1998) argue, "doctrine and deployments merely reflect the balance." If states face rough terrain, dense force, and enhanced firepower, their argument runs, they are unable to penetrate the defense and thus forced to adopt attrition

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[8] Malkasian (2002: 219-221) reports, "generals usually sought to ensure that wars would be short and cheap; only when these ends were unattainable were indecisive strategies of attrition conceived."

strategies. In contrast, if there exist few geographical and technological barriers to movement and low density of force, states see a successful blitzkrieg likely and adopt maneuver strategies.

This argument is a gross overstatement for three reasons despite a modicum of truth in it. First, geographic barriers paradoxically can present opportunities for maneuver. There is no question that rugged terrain, buffer region, and especially a body of water hinder movement which is essential for any attack. This obvious fact, however, often gives defenders a sense of security thereby creating weak points for attackers to exploit. To take notable examples, the French were ill-prepared for a German offensive through Belgium in 1914, precisely because the buffer was thought to place an enormous burden on German logistics. France also left the Ardennes sector weakly guarded in 1940, since dense forests made it unsuitable for a major mechanized operation by the *Wehrmacht*.

Second, technological innovations in firepower and mobility hardly affect the outcome of *flanking*-maneuver. When an attacker outflanks the defense, a breakthrough battle is unnecessary and therefore the defender cannot take advantage of enhanced firepower. Also, the defender needs a rapid relocation to stop the flanking movement and thus can benefit as much from increased mobility as the attacker can. There are, however, logical reasons to believe that military technology affects the outcome of penetration-maneuver.

Third, a high level of overall force density does not mean the absence of exploitable weak points. Defenders rarely allocate their forces evenly across the border. They usually deploy a majority of forces along the anticipated route of attack to avoid a dangerous local inferiority. This uneven force distribution can present attackers with an opportunity for maneuver even when force density is sufficiently high on average. In May 1940, for example, the Allies had enough forces to defend their entire German borders in reasonable strength. However, they concentrated their field armies along the Belgian frontier — the expected axis of German attack — while deploying a token force in the Ardennes.

Another common argument on sources of strategy is that military strategy is a simple function of political will — preventive motive in our case. States that intend to fight war for some reasons, the argument runs, will usually manage to craft an effective strategy. According to this logic, "War is like love, it always finds a way," as Bertolt Brecht says (Betts 1999). Therefore, states will create a maneuver strategy when they need one.

This exaggerated claim overlooks the simple fact that states often cannot obtain what they want. If a maneuver strategy were available whenever needed, states would rarely have an attrition-oriented war plan. War is a constant possibility in international politics since there is no central political authority to prevent its occurrence. Consequently, states search for ways to increase their military capabilities and want to adopt a superior strategy whenever possible. Therefore, if political necessity always gave birth to an optimal strategy, few states would adopt an attrition strategy in peacetime; no belligerent would ever fight a war of attrition. However, the fact is that states do adopt attrition strategies and do so more frequently (Stam 1996; Reiter 1999). Attrition has been a common method of warfare throughout history (Malkasian 2002). Therefore, it is wrong to assert that strategy merely reflects political will.

The available data presented in Table 1 do not allow a rigorous test for my argument, but it is possible to assess the plausibility of the alternative arguments. There is no evidence that strategy merely reflects the offense-defense balance. The decliner had a maneuver strategy in the only case in which an offensive advantage existed. Among the eleven cases of defensive advantage, I found seven occasions in which an attrition strategy was adopted. This

prevalence may imply that the offense-defense balance has some systematic influence on military strategy. However, it is clear that strategy cannot be simply reduced to this balance, given that a majority of maneuver strategies are observed in the defense-dominant environment. Nor does military strategy merely reflect military balance. Declining states adopted attrition strategies in one out of four cases in which they enjoyed marked military superiority. Maneuver strategies were adopted in two out of eight cases in which such superiority was lacking. Thus, the evidence contradicts the claim that the strong adopt attrition strategies, while the weak employ maneuver strategies. Nor can military strategy be reduced to political will. If states that intend to fight preventive wars could always find a way to create maneuver strategies, then Austria-Hungary would not have gone to war with an offensive attrition strategy in 1914.[9] Thus, the data show that military strategy is not a simple function of material conditions and political will, but is indeed an independent variable.

5. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis suggests that my strategic theory of preventive war has substantial plausibility. My theory explains a large portion of the sample, whereas the theory's competitors only account for the outcomes in less than one-half of the cases. This confirms the superiority of my argument.

Although the analysis does not cover cases of power shifts since the advent of nuclear weapons, it seems that my theory can shed light on the political implications of many power shifts taking place currently or in the foreseeable future: an overwhelming majority of states have no reliable nuclear deterrent at the moment.[10] If neither the riser nor the decliner has its own nuclear arsenal or a reliable nuclear-armed patron, the declining state will make decisions as if it would have done prior to 1945. In a nuclear-free dyad, a conventional maneuver strategy alone suffices to trigger a preventive attack. Even if the rising state has the wherewithal to build a nuclear arsenal, the declining state will launch a preventive attack when a maneuver strategy is likely to work. Although such latent nuclear capability increases the potential cost of its failure, an attacker with a maneuver strategy can still believe that a quick decision is possible before the opponent builds an operational arsenal. The Persian Gulf Wars in 1991 and 2003 might be cases in point: the United States which possessed effective maneuver strategies fought with Iraq with alleged nuclear potential (Donnelly 2004; Gordon and Trainor 1995; Murray and Scales 2003; Press 1997; Woodward 2004). On the other hand, latent nuclear power will make the decliner even more reluctant to launch a preventive attack when an attrition strategy is the only option available. A protracted war can give the adversary enough time to develop nuclear weapons; the high costs of war will make their use more tempting. U.S. military policy against North Korea seems to confirm this proposition: Washington anticipating an attrition campaign has declined to launch a preventive attack against Pyongyang (Lee 2006).

The findings of this article imply that, when analyzing the political and military

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[9] The Austro-Hungarian case also refutes the common misconception that maneuver and offense are synonymous, since Vienna's offensive military strategy was attrition-oriented.

[10] According to Keir Lieber and Daryl Press (2006), even Russia is losing a survivable nuclear deterrent against the United States so the age of mutual assured destruction (MAD) is coming to an end; China also presently lacks a reliable second-strike capability.

ramifications of power shifts, researchers should investigate both material and nonmaterial factors. Shifts in power are indeed a powerful cause of war. War broke out in ten out of the twelve examined cases of power shifts. This is a clear testimony of strong incentives created by material conditions. On the other hand, material factors such as military power have a limited impact on the political outcome of the power shifts, while military strategy — a nonmaterial asset available to states — is a key determinant. The data also show that strategy cannot be reduced to material factors, implying that nonmaterial factors shape international politics in an independent and important way.

This article also suggests that the current debate on the rise of China has a misguided focus. Pessimists argue that the revisionist China will convert its newly found wealth into military power and challenge the status quo (Bernstein and Munro 1997; Mearsheimer 2001a). In the end, one analyst argues, "China would be tempted to establish a regional hegemony, possibly by force" (Roy 1994: 120). In contrast, optimists argue that China is a status quo power and will not act aggressively (Ross 1997; Johnston 2003; Kang 2003). Despite their divergent views, both sides of this heated debate agree that China holds the key to stability. My research stands this conventional wisdom on its head by finding that fearful decliners tended to be aggressors in the past instances of power shifts. My prediction is thus that the United States will likely adopt an aggressive posture in anticipation of its decline, while China will attempt to avoid confrontation by pursuing a cautious policy. Paradoxically, the future character of American military strategy will determine whether China can rise peacefully.

APPENDIX: CODING RULES

Military Strategy. In a case in which the declining state initiated war, I code only the war plan that was in effect when hostilities started. Since the older, replaced plans had little influence on the decision for war, there is no point describing them for a testing purpose. In cases of peaceful power shifts, I investigate whether the decliner ever adopted a maneuver strategy — the hypothesized condition for war — during the examined period. This procedure is also applied in coding other explanatory variables.

I focus on the primary dimension of the official war plan formally authorized by the political leadership. A nation's conventional military strategy can have three dimensions: ground, naval, and air. Ground warfare is usually the main pillar of military strategy, because the clash of armies most often decides the outcome of a conventional war (Mearsheimer 2001b: 110-4). Only if no significant ground element is involved are naval or air strategies regarded as the primary dimension.

A naval maneuver strategy contains the opposing navy within a narrow space such as a harbor and cuts off the opponent's lines of communications. A forceful offensive will then finish off the trapped enemy forces. A naval campaign of attrition wears down the opponent's economy and morale typically through naval blockade and coastal bombardment.

In air warfare the maneuver strategy kills enemy leaders or removes their means of communication with military forces (Warden 1992). The resultant disruption of C3 systems is expected to paralyze the enemy war machine. An attritional air campaign targets civilian population or economic assets, thereby weakening the opponent's morale and power (Pape 1996).

Military Balance. Military power is measured with a composite index of military

personnel and expenditure, indicators that Dale Copeland (2000: 247-54) himself uses to estimate military balance. The index is the average of a state's proportional shares of the two resources possessed by all great powers. I declare that marked military superiority exists when the decliner is no less than 10 percent stronger than the riser and the riser's most powerful (potential) ally, respectively. I measure the dyadic rather than the coalitional military balance, since dynamic differentials theory pays attention exclusively to the former. Figures on military personnel and expenditure are drawn from the *National Material Capabilities Data* (Singer and Small 1993).

Offense-Defense Balance. Referring to Charles Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann (1998), I measure the offense-defense balance in light of technology, geography, and force-to-space ratio. I first examine technologies available to both states, and code each technology as either "defense-enhancing" or "offense-enhancing" according to common practices among offense-defense theorists. I then aggregate technology-specific codings into a single technological balance. Geography is coded as defense-enhancing only if the main theater of operations contains rough terrain, a large body of water, buffer regions, or sparse roads. I code force-to-space ratio as favorable to the defense, if one division is responsible for defending no more than ten kilometers on average (Mearsheimer 1983: 44). Finally, I give each component equal weight and estimate the overall offense-defense balance.

Power Transition. I estimate power in terms of gross national product, since that measure remains the most popular indicator of power in the power transition literature. Following common practice, I declare that there is a preponderance of power if a weaker state has less than 80 percent of the stronger state's GNP. I draw GNP figures mainly from Jacek Kugler and A.F.K. Organski's data (1989: 181). When it is difficult to make valid inferences using the primary data alone, I turn to Paul Bairoch (1976) and Angus Maddison (1995: Appendix C).

War Initiators. Coding war initiators rests on "historians' consensus as to whose battalions made the first attack in strength on their opponents' armies and territories," a method adopted by Melvin Small and David Singer (1982: 194). I adopt the dataset's codings whenever it clearly identifies the initiator of a dyadic conflict. Otherwise, I refer to a consensus or a majority opinion in related historiography to determine which state launched a premeditated first attack in strength.

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