

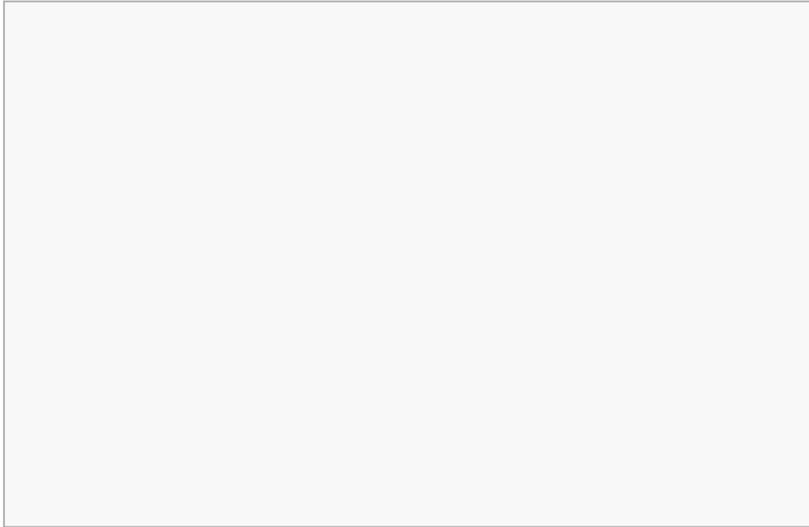
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**Committing Suicide for Fear  
of Death: Power Shifts and  
Preventive War**

*Dong Sun Lee*



East-West Center  
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# Committing Suicide for Fear of Death

## Power Shifts and Preventive War

This article explains why marked 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 in two ways. First, I take a sample of fourteen power shifts among great powers over the past two centuries and establish correlations between the indicators used by all four theories and the incidence in each case of war or peace. Second, I conduct in-depth comparative historical analyses on two crucial cases: with Thucydides, arguing that marked changes in the balance of power the First World War and the Russo-German rapprochement during the Bismarckian era. For the large majority of the sample cases and for both the in-depth analyses, the decliner's military strategy correctly predicts the power shift's political outcome.

"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 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 have sometimes caused great-power war in the past, these shifts have also passed quietly on other occasions. For example, power decline caused Imperial Germany to wage war against Russia in 1914, yet the Soviet Union responded to economic decline vis-à-vis the United States in the 1980s 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 that “in pursuing advanced military 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: 76–79). 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 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 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, the *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: 20–23; 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: 135-37). 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. The first section presents a strategic theory of preventive war. Section two probes the plausibility of my theory and the three competitors by surveying fourteen cases of power shifts among great powers since 1860. Sections three and four together offer a comparative historical analysis of two crucial cases in order to confirm that my theory's causal mechanism works as stipulated. In the final section, I summarize my findings and discuss implications of this study.

## **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.

### **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.<sup>3</sup> An *attrition* strategy aims to 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 (Mearsheimer 1983: 33–35). 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: 324–25). 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: 94–96). 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: 103–05). 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: 231–33; Mearsheimer 1981/82:104–122). The attacker must also catch the defender off balance through strategic deception. Otherwise, the defender can check the opponent's flanking or penetration attempts.

#### **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: 34–35, 63–64). 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 1980: 23–24). 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: 326–27). 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.

## 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: 391–95). 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 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: 102–06). 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.

There are, of course, situations in which a rising state will know the details of a decliner's maneuver strategy. However, even in cases for which rising states can accurately measure their opponents' military capabilities, they are unlikely to make the required concessions. The reason for such reluctance is that knowledge of the decliner's plans allows the riser to

devise counter measures, which in turn reduce its incentives to make concessions. Knowing the decliner's plans, the defender can deliberately allow the attacker to penetrate or outflank the frontline and then cut off its lines of communication. A revealed maneuver strategy can even present the opponent with an opportunity to break through the "soft" spots or turn the attacker's flank. And since such counter-maneuver strategies can boost military capability significantly, the rising state has little reason to meet the declining state's demands.

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. Moreover, even if a riser knows the contents of a maneuver strategy and therefore the opposing state's military capability, deals are still unlikely to be available.

#### **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, 167–172).

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.*

## **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 I 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. Also, strategy cannot be simply reduced to material factors. In contrast, the other theories explain less than one-half of the examined cases.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

I analyze a sample of fourteen dyads among first-rate 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: 134–35; 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 chosen intervals as unit of analysis. Therefore, I overcome the shortcomings of quantitative

**Table 1. Power Shifts Among Great Powers Since 1860**

Cases*	Decliner's Strategy	Side Favored by Offense-Defense Balance	Did the Decliner Have Marked Military Superiority?	Did Power Transition Occur? Or Did Power Parity Exist?	Did War Occur during the Period?	Which Side Initiated War?
France – Germany 1840-1870	Maneuver	Defense	Yes	Yes	Yes	Declining State
Japan – Russia 1880-1904	Maneuver	Defense	No	No	Yes	Declining State
Germany – Russia 1890-1914	Maneuver	Defense	Yes	Yes	Yes	Declining State
Germany – USSR 1925-1941	Maneuver	Offense	Yes	No	Yes	Declining State
Japan – USA 1933-1941	Maneuver	Defense	No	No	Yes	Declining State
Britain – USA 1860-1914	Attrition	Defense	No	Yes	No	-
Russia – Germany 1870-1890	Attrition	Defense	Yes	Yes	No	-
Austria – Russia 1890-1914	Attrition	Defense	No	No	Yes	Declining State
France – Germany 1880-1914	Attrition	Defense	No	No	Yes	Rising State
Britain – Germany 1890-1914	Attrition	Defense	No	Yes	Yes	Rising State
France – Germany 1929-1939	Attrition	Defense	No	No	Yes	Rising State
Britain – Germany 1925-1939	Attrition	Defense	No	Yes	Yes	Rising State
USA – USSR 1946-1961	Attrition	Defense	Yes	No	No	-
USSR – USA 1970-1985	Attrition	Defense	Yes	No	No	-

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

research that includes irrelevant intervals during which no power shifts occurred and decomposes a single case of power shift into several shifts (Powell 1999: 146–47).

I explain coding procedures for variables and describe naval, air, and nuclear strategies in the appendix.<sup>5</sup> 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). 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.

## RESULTS

The data clearly support one of the main hypotheses of strategic theory listed above, while weakly 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 disconfirms (albeit weakly) the hypothesis that power shifts rarely lead to war when decliners have attrition strategies (H2). Power shifts passed peacefully in four out of nine cases in which declining states had attrition strategies.

Strategic theory has greater explanatory power than any of its competitors. As shown in the following table, it outperforms the runner-up (offense-defense theory) by a margin of four cases. Dynamic differentials theory and power transition theory explain less than one-half of the cases that strategic theory accounts for.

**Table 2. Performance of Theories**

	Number of Explained Cases	Number of Confirmed Hypotheses
Strategic Theory	9	1
Offense-Defense Theory	5	1
Dynamic Differentials Theory	4	1
Power Transition Theory	4	0

*Note:* The total number of predictions is 14 for each theory. The total number of tested hypotheses is 3 for dynamic differentials theory and 2 for all other theories tested.

The data also show that military strategy is not a simple function of material conditions but is indeed an independent variable. 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 thirteen cases of defensive advantage, I found nine 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 three out of six cases in which they enjoyed marked military superiority. Attrition strategies were adopted in six out of eight cases in which such superiority was lacking. Thus, it is difficult to argue that strategy is a mere reflection of power. 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.<sup>6</sup>

The data offer weaker support for the three alternative theories. Power transition theory shows the worst performance. Offense-defense theory and dynamic differentials theory fare slightly better, presumably because they correctly view decliners as potential aggressors.

Offense-defense theory makes correct predictions in five out of fourteen cases; one of its two hypotheses listed below is supported:

*H3: If the offense-defense balance favors the offense, the declining state will initiate war.*

*H4: If offense-defense balance favors 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 weakly confirms the claim that offensive advantage encourages declining states to fight preventive wars (H3). However, the evidence does not support the claim that defense-dominance leads to peaceful power shifts (H4). Wars occurred on nine out of the thirteen occasions when the offense-defense balance favored defenders.

Dynamic differentials theory correctly predicts the outcomes of only three out of fourteen power shifts. The data merely confirms one of its three tested hypotheses listed below:

*H5: In multipolarity, if the decliner has marked military superiority, it will initiate war.*

*H6: In multipolarity, if the decliner lacks military superiority, power shifts will pass peacefully.*

*H7: In bipolarity, if the decliner has roughly equal or greater military power, it will initiate war.*

The sample contains only two cases of power shifts occurring in a bipolar world (U.S. decline vis-à-vis the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1961, and the Soviet Union's decline relative to the United States between 1970 and 1985). In these cases of bipolarity, the declining states had superior military power but did not initiate war. This fact disconfirms the hypothesis that declining states with equal or greater power will fight preventive wars in a bipolar world (H7). 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 weakly confirms the claim that militarily superior decliners attack risers in a multipolar world (H5). 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 (H6).

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

*H8: If the rising state catches up with or surpasses the declining state, it will initiate war.*

*H9: 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 only two out of eight cases. This fact disconfirms the hypothesis that power shifts will not lead to war when rising states are either markedly inferior or preponderant (H9). 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 (H8).

In conclusion, 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. I now examine the impacts of military strategy on decliners' motive and opportunities in two case studies: Germany's decline and decision to launch a

preventive war in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Russia's decline and accommodation with Germany in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Table 1 shows, the decliners adopted different strategies but faced similar material conditions in these cases. Therefore, it is possible to attribute any divergent political outcomes across the cases to different military strategies.

### **GERMANY'S DECLINE AND THE COMING OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

The case of German decline and the outbreak of World War I offer powerful evidence for my theory. Germany's leaders feared losing the opportunity to carry out the maneuver-oriented Schlieffen Plan and therefore had a strong preventive motive. Moreover, diplomacy failed, as my theory would predict, because French and Russian understandings of the Schlieffen Plan imbued them with a false sense of military superiority and prevented them from making concessions to alleviate German decline. Finally, possession of the Schlieffen Plan convinced German leaders that they could win a quick and decisive victory, thereby increasing their perception of their opportunity for war. In short, the Schlieffen Plan (and specifically, its focus on maneuver) reinforced Germany's preventive motive, reduced its chances of receiving adequate compensation, and increased its confidence in military victory, three factors that thereby made World War I all but inevitable. The rest of this section fleshes out these claims.

#### **THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN: A MANEUVER STRATEGY**

Germany had a maneuver strategy from 1906 until the outbreak of World War I (Rothenberg 1986: 316–17). The German General Staff calculated that the Franco-Russian Alliance made a two-front war inevitable; thus, the Germans devised an integrated war plan for both eastern and western contingencies. Regardless of who its chief political antagonist was, Germany planned to defeat "the nearest and most dangerous [French] enemy" first before turning eastward against Russia (Fischer 1975: 399).

The German war plan involved a typical flanking maneuver. At the onset of war, the weak German left wing would guard the French frontier and, if possible, launch a

diversionary attack toward the city of Nancy (Ritter 1958: 146). A small army would also check Russian thrusts into East Prussia east of the Vistula River. In the meantime, the strong right wing would sweep through Belgium and plunge into the Mezieres-Maubeuge-Lille-Dunkirk sector, which was “only fortified in parts and at the moment almost unoccupied” (Ritter 1958: 146). The German mobile forces would then advance toward and envelop Paris, the fortified center of France’s C3 networks. The German army would thus entrap the French army between its national capital and the Franco-German frontier. Once caught in the trap, the French forces would surrender rather than face certain annihilation. Germany would then transfer its troops to the eastern front and defeat Russia.

#### **GERMAN DECLINE RELATIVE TO RUSSIA, 1890–1914**

Russia industrialized rapidly and closed the economic gap with Germany considerably between 1890 and 1913. Russia’s gross national product increased by about 150 percent over the two decades, while Germany added to its GNP by some 90 percent (Bairoch 1976). Whereas Russia had 80 percent of Germany’s GNP in 1890, the GNPs of the two countries were roughly comparable by 1913.

As Russia’s economy expanded, the Russian government spent more on defense and launched a series of armament programs (Fuller 1992: 438; Neilson 1995: 102). While its defense budget was 24 percent smaller than Germany’s in 1890, by 1913 Russia was spending almost as much as its neighbor on defense. The military buildup culminated with the Duma’s passage of the “Great Program” in June 1914, which authorized a 40 percent expansion of the Russian standing army by 1917 (Geiss 1967: 60). Armaments would also improve significantly: Each corps would now receive an average of 132 field guns rather than 108 (Herrmann 1996: 205).

There were improvements in Russian military infrastructure as well. Strategic rail networks were to be expanded in Poland and western Russia. In January 1914, France agreed to loan the Russians 2,500 million francs to build over 5,000 kilometers of strategic railways by 1918 (Stevenson 1996: 15, 70). As a result, the Russian army would be able to complete mobilization in just three days more than Germany in 1917 (Stone 1975: 41–42).

## PREVENTIVE MOTIVE

Key German leaders all feared the strategic consequences of power shifts and seriously considered a preventive war in the prewar years. In May 1914, Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow wrote (Mombauer 2001: 182):

Russia will have completed her armaments in 2 to 3 years. The military superiority of our enemies would be so great then that [the Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke] did not know how we might cope with them. Now we would still be more or less a match for them. In his view there was no alternative to waging a preventive war in order to defeat the enemy as long as we could still more or less pass the test.

Civilian leaders shared the military's preventive motive on the eve of war. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg commented that "the future belongs to Russia, which grows and weighs upon us as an increasingly terrifying nightmare" (Jarausch 1973: 158).

Germany's preventive motive was particularly strong in 1914 because power shifts were expected to render the Schlieffen Plan obsolete in a few years. German leaders anticipated that "[b]y 1917 the extremely favourable conditions of the time when Schlieffen Plan had been conceived—the military vacuum east of Germany—would no longer exist" (Geiss 1976: 149). The weak East Prussian Army alone would not be able to check a Russian onslaught if the offensive came the first three weeks of war (Stone 1975: 43). By 1914, the Russian General Staff planned to invade East Prussia with superior forces as early as 15 days after the order for mobilization (Tuchman 1962: 58). The expansion of the standing army and strategic railways would further expedite mobilization and concentration and thus help Russia launch the offensive at an earlier date with greater strength.

The German General Staff had expected that a strong Austrian offensive could tie down five out of seven Russian armies and relieve the German East Prussian army (Fischer 1975: 392). However, it appeared increasingly doubtful that Austria-Hungary would be able to mount a powerful offensive at an early date. Russian railways had superior troop-carrying

capacity to Austro-Hungarian railroads in 1914. The Russians had the capacity to transport 260 trains per day to the border, while Austrian daily capacity amounted to only 153 trains (Tunstall 1993: 106). This gap would widen over the coming years as the result of Russia's railway-expansion program. Consequently, the Austrian army would likely lose both the will and capability to launch a powerful, early offensive against Russia (Turner 1970: 74).

Power decline also posed a serious strategic problem in the west. The French army could deploy a larger and more efficient force against Germany as reformative measures began to take effect (Herwig 1984: 70). Therefore, the German General Staff came to fear that the French army might break through the weakly defended Lorraine front before the envelopment of French forces was complete (Goerlitz 1953: 147; Ritter 1958: 54). As a result, German military planners felt pressed to strengthen the army's left wing at the expense of the right-wing maneuver forces. Alfred von Schlieffen had originally proposed to deploy 59 divisions north of Metz, and nine to the south in 1905 (Turner 1979b: 212). In contrast, Moltke actually deployed 55 divisions on the right wing and 23 divisions on the left in 1914. The expectation was that France would be able to deploy stronger forces against Germany in the near future as the three-year service law took full effect. Consequently, the German army would face stronger pressure on the Lorraine frontier and might be forced to further reinforce its left wing at the expense of its right wing.

Loss of the maneuver strategy would leave Germany with only an attrition strategy for the foreseeable future. German leaders regarded this alternative as highly unattractive for understandable reasons. As did many fellow Europeans, they subscribed to the common belief that a long war would ruin their highly developed industrial economy (Ritter 1958: 47). For example, Schlieffen did not believe that it was "possible to carry on a strategy of attrition when the maintenance of millions of men involves billions in expenditure" (Schlieffen 1994: 816–817).

German decision-makers also dreaded potential social disruptions caused by national mobilization for an attrition war (Herwig 1984: 91; Rothenberg 1986: 305–10). Such a war would require the mobilization of untapped manpower, which in turn would mean more middle-class officers in the officer corps and more working-class men in the ranks. German

leaders wanted to avoid this undesirable outcome, fearing that such a change might reduce the army's loyalty and weaken the social fabric of Imperial Germany.

#### **OPPORTUNITY FOR DIPLOMACY**

Germany's possession of a maneuver strategy precluded adequate compensation from Russia. Simply put, it increased both Russian and French confidence that they would quickly be able to defeat Germany in war and therefore reduced their desire to make concessions in the short term.

Germany sought to exploit the Sarajevo incident of June 28, 1914, as the pretext for extorting compensation from Russia. Its goal was the elimination of "Serbia, the focus of Pan-Slavist agitation." (Jarausch 1973: 156). In the event that Germany had successfully coerced Russia to acquiesce to the destruction of Serbia, its declining military position could have been sufficiently reinforced. The elimination of the Serbian military threat would free Austrian forces earmarked for the Balkan front and enable the Austrian army to launch a more powerful offensive against Russia. Consequently, the East Prussian army would face a weaker and delayed Russian offensive, and would thus be more likely to hold the eastern front until reinforcements came from the west. German leaders also calculated that, "[I]f the [European] war does not come, if the Czar does not want it, or France, thoroughly bewildered, counsels peace, then we still have prospects of breaking up the Entente through this action" (Stern 1971: 91–92).

German leaders anticipated that the Entente Powers would recognize their inferior military capability and acquiesce to the destruction of Serbia (Albertini 1952, 160). Consequently, they predicted that the Austro-Serbian conflict would not escalate into a continental or world war. Jagow anticipated on July 18 that, "There is certain to be some blustering in St. Petersburg, but at bottom Russia is not now ready to strike. Nor will France and England be anxious for war at the present time" (Keiger 1983: 149). The Kaiser likewise thought that a Russian intervention was improbable, "because Russia is, at present moment, militarily and financially totally unprepared for war" (Berghahn 1973: 189).

To Berlin's surprise, Russia rejected the German request. Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov warned the German Ambassador that "Russia will go to war with Austria" if the latter attempted to "swallow" Serbia (Lebow 1981: 128). When it became clear that Germany had no intention of compromising, St. Petersburg calmly accepted the seemingly unavoidable war. By July 28, the Russians had decided that since "we cannot fulfill Germany's desires, it remains only to speed up our armament and count on the true inevitability of war" (Fuller 1992: 447).

The Russians rejected the Central Powers' request, calculating that their military strength entitled them to a better bargain. In contrast to the Germans, Russian leaders believed that the Russian army was ready for war. Even in early 1914, Russian War Minister V. A. Sukhomlinov believed that "Russia was perfectly prepared for a duel with Germany" (Turner 1979a: 258). And by the time war was imminent, other Russian authorities saw no military reason to back down (Neilson 1995: 111–12). Given such expressions of military confidence, Sazonov did not hesitate to stand firmly behind the Serbs even at the risk of war with the Central Powers (Spring 1988: 70–71).

Crucially, Russia's military confidence was an unintended consequence of the German maneuver strategy. This optimism originated in large part from Russia's knowledge of the German war plan. As early as 1910, Russian military leaders knew that Germany planned to deploy most of its forces against France and leave only minimal troops in East Prussia in the early weeks of a European war (Turner 1979a: 257). Consequently, the Russian military calculated that it was possible to achieve marked military superiority in initial battles even before the completion of mobilization. Moreover, Russian military planners expected to defeat the Germany army quickly by employing a counter-maneuver strategy. Russia planned to invade East Prussia as early as 13 days after mobilization with two armies: The First Army was to launch a diversionary attack north of the Masurian Lakes, while the Second Army would come around the Lakes from the south and attack the German forces from the rear (Tuchman 1962: 65–66; Fuller 1992: 439). If all went as planned, the German Eighth Army would be entrapped and annihilated east of the Vistula River.

Russia could consciously take the risk of war with Germany because it anticipated French support (Spring 1988: 71). Indeed, Russia would only have an opportunity to carry out a counter-maneuver strategy if France came to its aid and forced the German army to concentrate in the west. Russia's anticipation of French support in the event of war held firm throughout the July crisis. President Raymond Poincare and Prime Minister Rene Viviani reportedly promised France's full support, and Maurice Paleologue, the French Ambassador in St. Petersburg, repeatedly assured Sazonov that Russia could count on the "complete readiness of France to fulfill her obligations as an ally" (Turner 1979a: 260-64; Keiger 1983: 153-60).

French leaders could issue such risky pledges because of their confidence in their country's military capability. In late July 1914, the Russian embassy in Paris reported that "the mood of military circles and the High Command is very elated," and that there was even "unconcealed joy at exploiting the...favorable strategic situation" (Andrew 1984: 145).

And French military confidence was another consequence of Germany's maneuver strategy. The French Plan XVII assumed that Germany's main forces would concentrate in Lorraine and envisioned a headlong offensive against the German mass. Had Germany adopted an attrition strategy and thus pitted its strength against French strength, France could have expected at best a costly stalemate along the Lorraine frontier, given its material inferiority. Instead, the Germans employed a maneuver strategy, the deceptive nature of which misled France to underestimate its opponent's military capability. The French General Staff mistakenly believed that the German flanking maneuver through Belgium would be only of secondary magnitude and would stay below the Meuse River (Williamson 1979: 144). Consequently, France failed to foresee that its Plan XVII would allow the German right wing a chance to envelop the entire French army. This ignorance of German strategic intention led France to overlook an important strategic risk and put unwarranted confidence in its plan.

Moreover, what the French knew about the German strategy further reinforced their false military optimism. The French calculated that Germany's efforts at maneuver in Belgium would allow Plan XVII to bring about a swift victory in the critical battle of Lorraine (Tuchman 1962: 29). Chief of the French General Staff Joseph Joffre anticipated that this

maneuver would force the German army to weaken its 'main force' in Lorraine (Farrar 1973: 11). He intended to fully exploit this critical 'strategic blunder' and win a decisive battle at the Metz-Thionville sector.

### **OPPORTUNITY FOR WAR**

The Schlieffen Plan's emphasis on maneuver convinced German leaders, both military and civilian, that they would be able to win a quick and decisive victory in the event of war. Put somewhat differently, it heightened German estimates of their opportunity for war.

German attempts to extort concessions turned out to be a failure when Russia ordered a partial mobilization on July 28, 1914, to protect Serbia. This unexpected diplomatic setback pushed the German elite toward a preventive war. In an evening meeting of July 30, Moltke and Erich von Falkenhayn, the German war minister, convinced Bethmann that Germany should not shy away from a great power war. Bethmann was persuaded for two reasons (Geiss 1966: 82). First, he recognized that a compromise would not sufficiently compensate Germany for its loss of military capability. Second, and more importantly, Bethmann's generals assured him that Germany would win a quick and decisive victory.

German leaders were highly confident in their military capabilities during the prewar years. On July 31, the Bavarian envoy in Berlin noted that, "[The German General Staff] looked forward to war against France with great confidence [and] reckoned that it would be able to defeat France in four weeks" (Mombauer 2001: 209). Such confidence was not limited to military circles (Stevenson 1996: 375). On July 8, Bethmann calculated that, if the war "comes from the east" and Austria-Hungary thus fought on the German side, "then we shall have prospects for winning it" (Stern 1971: 91).

German military confidence resulted in large part from its maneuver strategy. According to Fritz Fischer (1975: 389), "the German General Staff, indeed the whole German officer corps (with negligible exceptions) regarded this plan as the infallible recipe for victory." In January 1913, Moltke concluded that if Germany abandoned its flanking-maneuver through Belgium, "we would abandon our *only* chance of the quick and resounding success we need so badly" (Ritter 1958: 68–69; Mombauer 2001: 221). Schlieffen shared this judgment when he

wrote in 1900 that, “To win a decisive, destructive success, it is necessary to make a simultaneous attack on two or three points at once—that is, on the front and against one or both flanks” (Schlieffen 1994: 816–17). He believed that, without a maneuver, “the war drags on with growing disadvantages and debilitation of forces” (Rothenberg 1986: 312). These memoranda clearly show that the German army regarded a maneuver strategy to be a *precondition* for a quick and decisive victory.

### **RUSSIAN DECLINE AND THE RUSSO-GERMAN RAPPROCHEMENT, 1870-1890**

In stark contrast to the World War I case, a declining Russia was adequately compensated between 1870 and 1890 and therefore did not launch a preventive war. Russia’s possession of an attrition strategy during these years explains these events. The strategy’s effects were to dampen Russia’s preventive motive, allow for adequate compensation, and persuade the Russians that they did not have a good opportunity for war. The rest of this section describes Russia’s attrition strategy and decline relative to Germany, and then addresses the issues of preventive motive, military opportunity, and opportunity for diplomacy.

### **RUSSIAN MILITARY PLANNING: AN ATTRITION STRATEGY**

Russia had an attrition-based war plan between 1870 and 1890. The plan compensated for the Russian army’s slow mobilization rate and inability to concentrate forces quickly by calling for spoiling cavalry raids early in an eventual conflict (Fuller 1992: 299). Cavalry units would cross the borders and attack railway bridges, troops trains, and military depots in enemy territory, thereby delaying Austro-German attempts to mobilize and concentrate their forces (Fuller 1992: 305). Behind this cavalry screen, Russia was to man its fortresses and citadels along the borders and check enemy thrusts until it managed to complete its mobilization (Rich 1998: 165). The entire Russian army would then fight a series of set-piece battles and destroy the opposing armies. In its entirety, the plan envisaged a protracted war in excess of six months if the Russians were to have any chance of success.

### **RUSSIAN DECLINE RELATIVE TO GERMANY, 1870-1890**

Within two decades after its establishment in 1871, the German Empire had industrialized rapidly and surpassed Russia in all major economic categories. During this period, Russia's economy stagnated and showed few signs of coming around (Geyer 1987: 102). The facts are staggering: Germany's GNP increased by approximately 58 percent, while Russia's fell by some 8 percent over the period; while Germany had 73 percent of Russia's GNP in 1870, it had a 25 percent larger economy 20 years later.

Russia's relative economic decline was mirrored in the military realm (Pinter 1986: 365). Stagnant industry and commerce led to fiscal crises, which induced the Russian government to keep a tight rein on military expenditure (Geyer 1987: 112). While Russia spent 85 percent more on defense than Germany did in 1872, it was spending 24 percent less by 1890. These financial constraints had powerful military effects: The Russians simply could not keep pace with their neighbor's technological advances in either small arms or artillery (Menning 1992: 104-6). Worse still, the ever-widening gap in railroad capacity between the two countries meant that Russia lagged behind in the critical area of mobilization (Rich 1998: 161).

### **PREVENTIVE MOTIVE**

Despite the marked deterioration in Russia's strategic position, there is little evidence of a powerful preventive motive among its leadership. The reason, as predicted by my theory, is that Russia only had an attrition strategy between 1870 and 1890, and therefore power decline did not markedly reduce its military capability. Put somewhat differently, Russian prospects in a later war were not likely to be much worse than their prospects in an earlier war.

The Russian officer corps feared the strategic consequences of power shifts and made great efforts to boost military strength quickly. As early as 1872, key military leaders pointed to Germany and Austria-Hungary as Russia's principal enemies and devised an attrition strategy to cope with them (Rich 1998: 95). N. N. Obruchev, the Chief of the General Staff, believed that success depended on three basic reforms (Rich 1998: 99). First, Russia needed a Prussian-style army with a small cadre force and large trained reserve. Second, Russia must

be able to mobilize and concentrate the army quickly. Since an efficient rail system was essential to this task, Obruchev called for large-scale railroad construction. Third, a strong fortress system was needed to guard the frontier until the completion of mobilization. This reform in turn implied renewed efforts to construct and modernize fortresses and citadels in the border regions. Failure to carry out these reforms, Obruchev warned in 1872, meant that Russia could be “wiped off the earth by history” (Fuller 1992: 301–2).

The army’s pleas for a military buildup fell on deaf ears. Both Tsar Alexander and the civilian leadership were in favor of Obruchev’s call for a Prussian-style mass army, since these measures were likely to reduce the size of the standing army and fiscal burden (Miller 1968; Keep 1985; Van Dyke 1990; MacKenzie 1994: 57). The other expensive components of Obruchev’s plan, however, met with strong opposition. Finance Minister M. K. Reutern strongly opposed the proposed crash programs for railway and fortress construction and managed to persuade Alexander to impose a cap on the defense budget (Rich 1998: 100). The consequence was that the Russian army’s share of total state expenditures amounted to only one-half that of their German counterparts for the next two decades (Fuller 1985: 49–51).

Military officials failed to convince the Tsar and the civilian leadership of the urgent need for emergency rearmament, in part because their military strategy was attrition-oriented. The best that an attrition strategy could offer was a costly and uncertain victory (Fuller 1992: 296–307). Therefore, although power decline would make victory more difficult and costly to achieve at a later date, a war of attrition in the future would not be markedly worse than a similar war in the present. Simply put, given that Russia already suffered from poor capabilities, a negative power shift would do little to worsen the situation. The Russian leadership certainly thought in these terms. Reutern, for example, recalled that the Russians had been able to defeat Napoleon by retreating deep into the interior and employing a scorched earth attrition strategy. Given that the military could not offer a clearly superior alternative, Reutern’s argument carried the day (Fuller 1992: 300–2).

## **OPPORTUNITY FOR WAR**

Contrary to the German case discussed above, Russian possession of an attrition strategy meant that its leadership—military and civilian—never seriously considered the option of preventive war despite the country's power decline. This stance was true even for professional officers who tended to overemphasize pure military logic (Garthoff 1962: 244).

The Russians did not plan for a preventive war against Germany because they lacked confidence in their military capability. Such pessimism affected both military and civilian leaders between 1870 and 1890. In 1873, for example, Obruchev estimated that "the armed forces of Russia in their present condition [were] insufficient for the defense of her security" (Fuller 1992: 296). According to one historian, War Minister D. A. Miliutin "considered it to be in Russia's interest that the danger of a European war be reduced, for no one knew better than he how unprepared the Empire was for military conflict" (Geyer 1987: 104).

Such pessimism derived, to a substantial degree, from Russia's attrition strategy. A General Staff memorandum of 1883 concluded that "there is no plan of action that could promise us true and reliable success at all" (Fuller 1992: 350). William Fuller (1992: 307) has noted that "the interim plan [of attrition war] was, naturally enough, a source of great strategic anxiety and pessimism." David Rich (1998: 158) concurs with this view and reports that "the Main Staff's anxiety typically strengthened St. Petersburg's circumspection, rather than driving it to follow risky and aggressive policies."

## **OPPORTUNITY FOR DIPLOMACY**

Russia's possession of an attrition strategy enhanced the prospects for peace in two ways. First, it imbued the Russian leadership with military pessimism, which in turn bred caution and accommodation. Second, it allowed Germany to measure Russian capability accurately and therefore offer adequate compensation for the latter's relative decline.

Russia was adequately compensated for its decline by Germany within the framework of the Three Emperors' League in June 1881. Germany offered three types of compensation that satisfied the Russians. First, Germany promised to remain neutral and localize conflict if Russia fought with another great power other than Austria-Hungary. Given the Eastern

Question and other colonial disputes, this commitment was clearly directed at Britain. Second, Germany would help close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits to foreign warships. This would prevent a British naval attack on the vulnerable Black Sea shores and thus relieve Russia of a considerable defense burden. Third, Germany recognized that Bulgaria was part of Russia's sphere of influence and approved of Bulgaria's eventual unification. This would allow Russia the opportunity to strengthen its influence over the Balkans and the Straits. In return, Russia promised Germany benevolent neutrality in case of a French attack. On balance, however, it was clear that these agreements represented German compensation to Russia.

Bismarck made these concessions in order to avoid a premature confrontation with Russia. Russo-German relations were quite strained during this period. When Bismarck issued an indirect threat of war against France in 1875, for example, Gorchakov threatened to intervene on the French side (Fuller 1992: 294–95; Saunders 1992: 301). Three years later, St. Petersburg blamed Bismarck's 'betrayal' for its disastrous setback at the Congress of Berlin (Jelavich 1964: 185; Seton-Watson 1967: 458; Snyder 1997: 85). For his part, Bismarck felt threatened both by Russia's decision to concentrate forces in Poland and Miliutin's rearmament program (Sumner 1937: 558; Langer 1962: 175). War loomed as a real possibility, especially in the context of a Franco-German war. And such a war threatened to derail Germany's economic boom. Therefore, Bismarck offered compensations "to prevent war entirely, and if that is not possible at least to postpone it" (Gall 1986: 156).

A diplomatic settlement was possible for two reasons. The first reason, as discussed above, is that key Russian statesmen had little military confidence and were therefore quite accommodating towards Germany. Thus St. Petersburg was careful not to infringe upon German power and interests, but instead sought to be compensated at Britain's expense (Seton-Watson 1967: 499). Had the Russians insisted on German arms reduction or the sacrifice of Austrian security interests, for example, negotiations would likely have broken down. This accommodating attitude originated largely from Russian military pessimism (Durman 1988: 460).

Another reason for successful diplomacy was that Germany assessed Russia's military capability accurately and thus offered adequate compensation. German and Russian estimates of military capability converged to a remarkable extent. The Russian General Staff anticipated a protracted war of attrition, in which the army would be defeated and forced to retreat in the interior. The Germans also understood that, even if they defeated the Russian army early on, Russia would continue to resist, relying on its large population and vast territory (Holborn 1962: 393). This would render even a victorious war a "great calamity," and the Germans therefore attempted to accommodate the Russians and maintain peace (Langer 1962: 192; Pflanze 1990: 268). Had Bismarck underestimated Russian military capability and consequently had high military confidence, Germany may well have failed to offer adequate compensation.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing cases suggest that my strategic theory of preventive war has substantial plausibility. German possession of a maneuver strategy—the Schlieffen Plan—made war virtually inevitable in 1914, given that it precluded both French and Russian attempts to compensate Germany for its decline and enhanced both Germany's preventive motive and perceived opportunity for war. In contrast, Russia's possession of an attrition strategy between 1870 and 1890 made a peaceful power shift possible by dampening Russia's preventive motive and military confidence while creating conditions under which it could be adequately compensated for its decline by a rising Germany.

This finding implies that, when analyzing the political and military 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 fourteen examined cases of power shifts. This is a clear testimony of strong incentives created by material conditions. On the other hand, material factors 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.

Having investigated the consequences of strategy, future research should further explore its sources. In so doing, we must look beyond material factors, which are shown to have limited effects. Although political scientists pay exclusive attention to readily measurable factors such as power, terrain, and political regime (for example, Reiter and Meek 1999), classical military theorists (Sun Tzu 1963; Clausewitz 1976) for centuries emphasized the crucial roles that military leadership plays in strategic planning. The study of military strategy may benefit greatly from heeding their insights and understanding the impact of strategic acumen on planning.



## APPENDIX: CODING RULES

Military Strategy. In order to ensure the comparability of their performance, I assume that all the theories hypothesize about a *necessary and sufficient condition* for war. Under this assumption, testing a theory only requires confirming the presence of the specified war-promoting condition. 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 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 military strategy can have four dimensions: nuclear, ground, naval, and air. The vast destructive power of nuclear weapons makes nuclear strategy the primary dimension in cases where at least one opponent has a sizable nuclear arsenal. Otherwise, ground warfare becomes the main pillar of military strategy, because the clash of armies most often decides the outcome of a conventional war (Mearsheimer 2001b: 110–14). Only if no significant nuclear or ground elements are involved are naval or air strategies regarded as the primary dimension.

A nuclear maneuver strategy dubbed "nuclear decapitation" aims to neutralize the enemy's retaliatory capability with a deceptive limited attack (Steinbruner 1981/82). The attacker delivers a small number of nuclear warheads against the opponent's "political and military command centers and organizational headquarters" (Gray 1979: 54–87; Luttwak 1980/81: 66). The selective strikes are designed to undermine control of military forces, thereby making organized resistance impossible. In contrast, the nuclear attrition strategy destroys the enemy's arsenal directly through an all-out "splendid first strike."

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).

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.

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 either the riser or 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).

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), since *War Ledger Data* (Organski and Kugler 1986)

contains no post-1970 figures. 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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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> Here my discussion is limited to ground warfare for parsimony. I will classify nuclear, 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 troops (Posen 1984: 14; Stam, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> The conventional wisdom views the following states as great powers during the investigated period 1860-1985: Russia (1860-1985), Britain (1860-1945), Germany (1860-1945), France (1860-1940), Austria-Hungary (1860-1918), Italy (1961-1943), the United States (1865-1985), and Japan (1894-1945). See (Mearsheimer 2001b: 404).

<sup>5</sup> A detailed description of all the cases is available from the author upon request.

<sup>6</sup> If states that intend to fight wars could always find a way to create maneuver strategies, then no belligerent at war would have ever adopted an attrition strategy. In reality, attrition has been a common method of warfare (Malkasian 2002).

The Austro-Hungarian case also refutes the common misconception that maneuver and offense are synonymous; since Vienna’s offensive military strategy was attrition-oriented.

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