

# Offense-Defense Balance and Power Transition Theory

POSC 3610 – International Conflict

Steven V. Miller

Department of Political Science



## Goal for Today

*Discuss offense-defense balance and power transition theory.*

# Offense-Defense Balance

Offense-defense balance is another component of structural perspectives of IR. Main points:

- Weapons are either offensive or defensive in nature.
- We can observe an imbalance between offense and defense in the international system.
- These variations affect patterns of international politics.

**Central conclusion:** systemic war is more likely when there's an imbalance toward offense and/or leaders can't tell the difference.

# Rationales for War Under Offense Dominance

- Offense dominance leads to opportunistic expansionism.
- First strike advantages are observable.
- Cost-benefit calculus favors offense over defense.
- Even defensively oriented states are compelled to offense.
  - Think: security dilemma

# Offense-Defense Balance and the Security Dilemma

The interaction (i.e. offense/defense indistinguishability) is an important part of the theory.

	<b>Offense Dominance</b>	<b>Defense Dominance</b>
<b>Indistinguishable</b>	Doubly dangerous	Security dilemma
<b>Distinguishable</b>	Aggression possible	Doubly stable

# Determinants of Offense-Defense Balance

- Military factors (really: military technology)
- Geography
- Social and political order
- Diplomacy

# Some Problems with Offense-Defense Hypotheses

- How are any weapons distinguishable? Consider:
  - Tanks, the classic offensive weapon, have important defensive utility
  - Nuclear weapons, most destructive offensive weapon, have defensive logic.
- Diplomacy does not hang well with the other explanations.
- Ultimately non-falsifiable (anything can be tailored to fit the theory).
- Conceptually indistinguishable from balance of power or military skill.
  - Van Evera: “war is far more likely when conquest is easy, and that shifts in the offense-defense balance have a large effect on the risk of war.” See the problem?
- Never explicit about what constitutes offense or defense dominance.
  - Categorization is ad hoc.

# Power Transition Theory

Power transition theory (PTT) has a curious origin.

- Grand theories and research paradigms are typically introduced in articles or scholarly books.
- PTT was introduced in a 1958 introductory textbook by AFK Organski, titled *World Politics*.



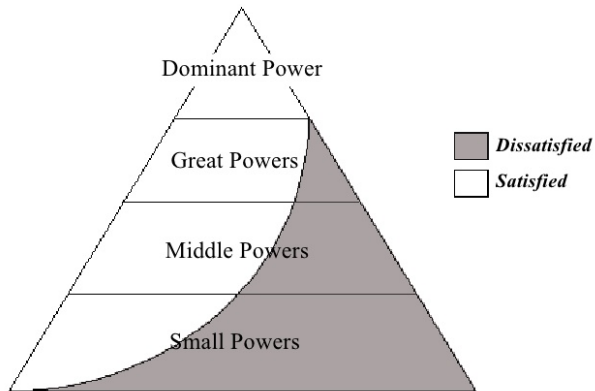
# Anarchy and Hierarchy

The basic premise of PTT is that the international system is *hierarchical*.

- Anarchy is an unexceptional observation according to Organski.

A power pyramid is a better understanding of the international system.

- Hegemon
- Great powers
- Middle powers
- Minor powers



**Figure 1.3. Hierarchy and Distribution of Satisfaction**

Figure 1: A hypothetical power pyramid

# Status Quo and Revisionist States

States are either status quo states or revisionist states.

- Status quo states are those that are satisfied with the current conduct of international politics.
  - The hegemon is by definition a status quo state.
- Revisionist states are dissatisfied with the current order.

This leads to an important divergence with neorealism.

- States in PTT are policy-motivated, not strictly survival-oriented.

# A Critique of Power Transition Theory

We should raise several critical questions about this approach.

1. How do we know status quo/revisionist ex ante?
2. Why didn't the U.S. and Soviet Union fight?
3. What predicts power transition wars?
4. Why would any state want to fight a power transition war?

# Status Quo and Revisionist States

PTT's hypothesis is an implied boolean proposition.

- Revisionist AND great power AND power transition → war.
- PTT distinguishes itself from neorealism with this assumption of policy motivations.

So how do we know a state is “revisionist?”

- We typically think of Imperial/Nazi Germany as the classic case of this.

Notice the inferential problem?

# The Measurement Problem

We need an ex ante indicator of revisionist state. Attempts include:

- National size and development (Houweling and Siccama, 1988)
- Gross national income (Organski and Kugler, 1980)
- Demographics/birth rates (e.g. Kugler, 2006)
- UN roll call votes (Reed et al. 2008; Sample, 2017)
- Territorial claims/disputes (Sample, 2017)

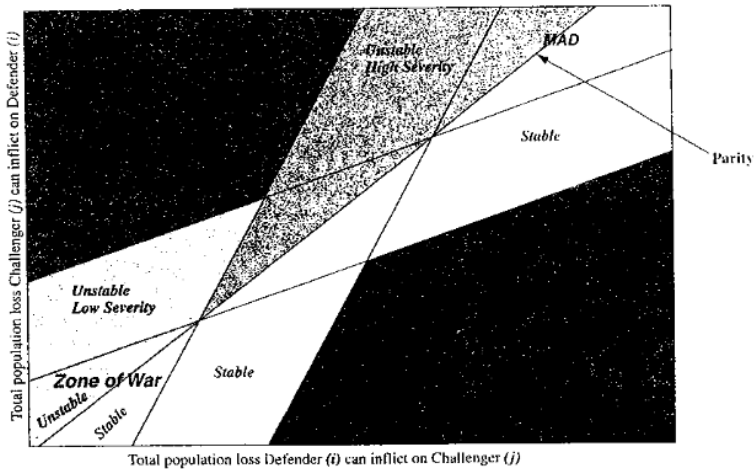
# The Measurement Problem

Each of these proposals have significant problems.

- GNI and size proxy “power” and not revisionism.
  - i.e. they measure why bargaining breaks down and not the contested policy benefit.
- Similar statement can be made for demographics/birth rates, but those predict poorly.
- UN votes impose global measure when most conflict is dyadic/local.

Territorial claims better get at this, but it's not clear it's helping PTT's case.

- Disputed territory is a different problem altogether.

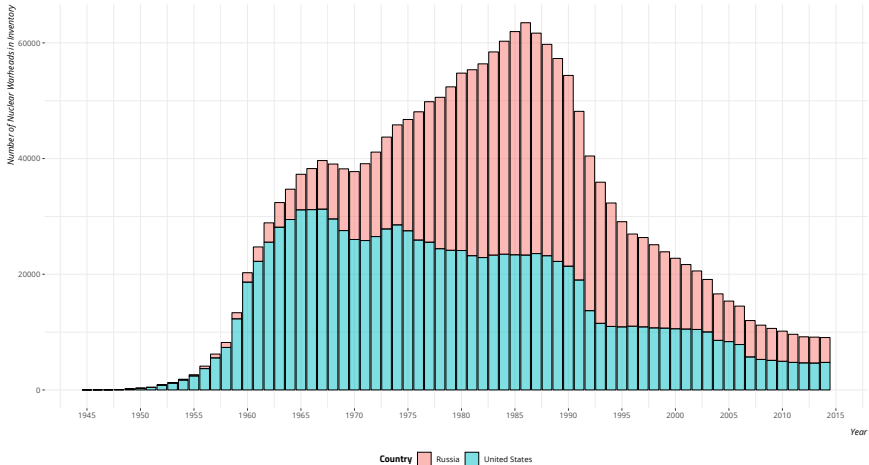


**FIGURE 2.** Power transition perspective



## Number of Nuclear Warheads in Inventory of the U.S. and Russia/USSR, 1945-2014

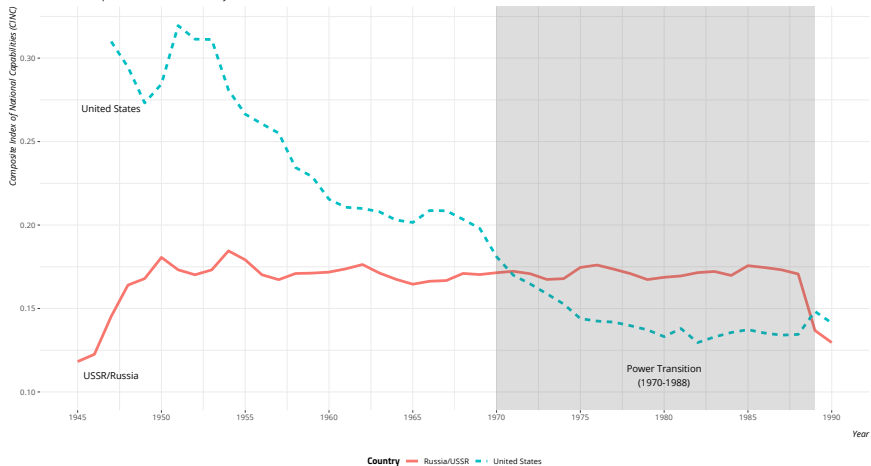
The Soviet Union surpassed the U.S. in nuclear stockpiles in 1956. The difference became quite lopsided in the 1970s and 1980s.



Data: Federation of American Scientists

## Why Didn't the Cold War Get Hot?

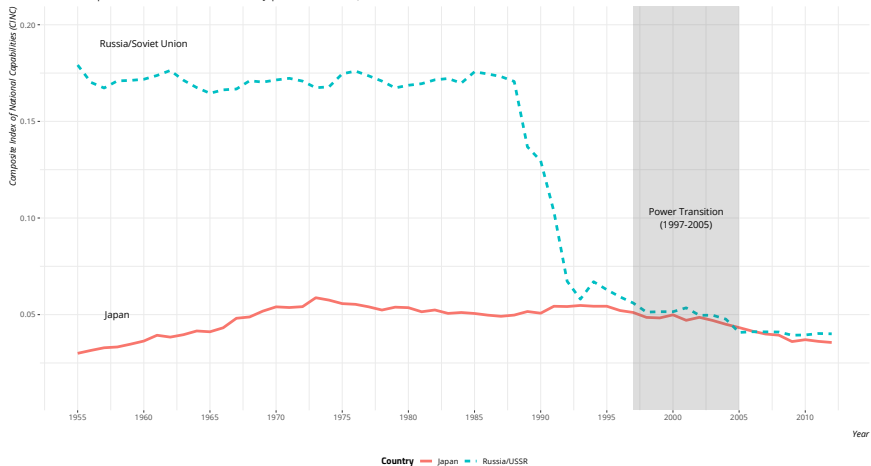
We observe a power transition incidentally around the time of a détente between both Cold War rivals.



Data: Correlates of War National Military Capabilities Data (v. 5.0)

## What About Russia and Japan?

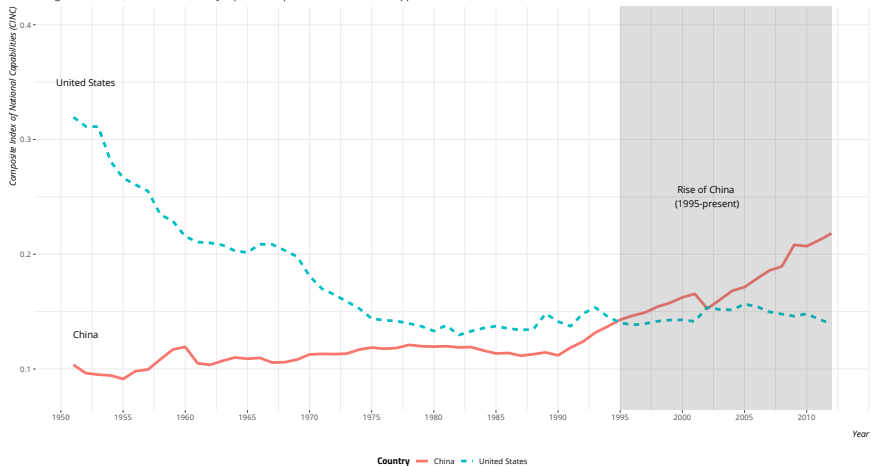
We observe a power transition between Russia and Japan in our lifetimes, but no serious conflict.



Data: Correlates of War National Military Capabilities Data (v. 5.0)

## Has China Already Risen?

Using available data, we should've already expected the power transition war to happen.



Data: Correlates of War National Military Capabilities Data (v. 5.0)

# Why Fight a Power Transition War?

It's not yet evident why the power transition war is fought.

- For declining hegemon: *act now*.
- For rising great power: wait.

Put in other words, the power transition war happens when it makes the least sense to fight it.

# Conclusion

Offense-defense balance/PTT offers different structural perspectives for systemic insecurity/war.

- PTT: states are motivated by policy too; anarchy is unexceptional.
- O/D: weapon balance and distinguishability matter.

All told, these structural theories point to systemic aspects of the international system that promote inter-state conflict.

- None are coherent arguments.

# Table of Contents

Introduction

Offense-Defense Balance

Power Transition Theory

A Critique of Power Transition Theory

Conclusion