Perceptions and alliances in Europe, 1865–1940

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While some structural realists and their liberal and institutionalist critics continue to fight a high-profile battle about the fundamental nature of international politics, a quieter discussion is progressing about how to integrate various aspects of realist thinking into a more coherent approach to security politics.[1] The goal of this discussion is to marry the two major strands of contemporary realist thought: balance-of-power theory and security dilemma theory. Recent works advocate combining structural variables, such as the number of great actors in the system and the distribution of capabilities among them, with security dilemma variables, such as the comparative efficacy of offensive versus defensive doctrines given available weaponry and military training.[2]

These writings are persuasive when reminding us that it is not enough to know how many great powers there are or how materially strong they are in comparison to one another. Even if we accept realist notions about international anarchy and its implications, we must also know how military power can be used in order to know if any given distribution of capabilities will prove destabilizing. Leaders will judge these two factors together when analyzing their security environment and designing appropriate responses to it.

Though sympathetic to these recent efforts, I argue that in order to shed light on the alliance policies of the great powers in the multipolar systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at a minimum we must include in our analysis the perceptions and misperceptions of both the realist variables: the balance of power

For helpful comments I thank Richard Betts, James Davis, Charles Glaser, James Goldgeier, Robert Jervis, Peter Katzenstein, Elizabeth Kier, Jonathan Kirshner, Sean Lynn-Jones, Edward Mansfield, Mikael McCowan, John Mearsheimer, Jonathan Mercer, Randall Schweller, Jack Snyder, Shibley Telhami, Stephen Van Evera, Xu Xin, the members of the Faculty International Relations Seminar at the Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University, and three anonymous reviewers. For friendly assistance I am also grateful to the staff at the Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, U.K.

1. See Mearsheimer 1994–95 and 1995; Keohane and Martin 1995; Kupchan and Kupchan 1995; Ruggie 1995; and Wendt 1995.
2. See Glaser 1994–95; and Lynn-Jones 1995. For a related argument, see Powell 1994.

International Organization 51, 1, Winter 1997, pp. 65–97
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https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and the relative efficacy of offense and defense. Even if leaders think in terms consistent with realist assumptions, in complex multipolar environments they will often misread either the distribution of capabilities in the system and/or the efficacy of military offensives and defensives. This will lead to policies that may be driven by concerns about power and security but that may still seem at odds with the predictions of both balance-of-power and security dilemma theories. Specifically, when leaders perceive the frontline state in a potential alliance to be more powerful than its immediate rivals, they will tend to avoid a prewar alliance. If leaders believe that the frontline potential ally is weaker than immediate rivals but that defense has the military advantage, they will tend to form only a weak prewar alliance. If, however, they perceive their frontline potential ally as relatively weak and believe that offensives are feasible, they will tend to form a tight prewar alliance.

Below I will analyze how perceptions and misperceptions of the balance-of-power and security dilemma variables combined to affect the alliance politics of the great powers before the cold war. I build on my previous work with Jack Snyder, which focused on how perceptions of security dilemma variables—the efficacy of offensive and defensive doctrines—affected the alliance behavior of the great powers before the two world wars. I argue that by adding the variable of the perception of the balance of power, we can more fully explain cases from the nineteenth century while shedding additional light on the twentieth-century cases we had originally addressed.[3] In the empirical sections of the article, I compare my approach to alternative explanations for these states' security policies, including explanations that emphasize the roles of domestic politics, ideology, and the objective strategic environment.

The first empirical section addresses the security strategies of the great powers before the wars of German unification (the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870). In this section, I argue that the approach advocated here explains the cases in question better than either our original thesis or James Morrow's alternative approach, which emphasizes the alleged domestic political trade-offs that leaders face when choosing between arms and alliances.[4] The following section briefly addresses great power relations before World War I. It integrates William Wohlforth's findings on perceptions of the balance of power with arguments that emphasize the importance of European leaders' false belief in offensive military advantage.[5] I then offer a more extensive critical discussion of recent work by Randall Schweller and others on British, French, and Soviet strategy before World War II.[6] I argue that, for British and Soviet leaders, analyses of the power balance and the offense-defense balance in land warfare were integrally connected and strongly affected their policies toward France in 1939–40. The article concludes by briefly discussing the potential implications of the approach here for the post–cold war world.

3. Christensen and Snyder 1990. For a more recent work on psychology and alliances, see Reiter 1994.
4. Morrow 1993.
5. Wohlforth 1987.
6. See Schweller 1993; Kaufman 1992; and Walt 1992a.

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Perceptions and the tightness of alliances

Critiquing the indeterminacy of structural realism in explaining the foreign policies of states in a multipolar world, Snyder and I noted that in this century very different, if not opposite, paths led from structural multipolarity to systemwide war. Before World War I, great powers tied themselves tightly to allies so that a small conflict quickly spread, involving all of the major powers. In contrast, before World War II the wartime allies passed the cost of opposing Adolf Hitler early onto one another, leaving him a free hand in Central Europe, time to build a more dangerous military machine, and the opportunity to deliver a knockout blow to France. Though structure mattered in both cases, a structural approach alone cannot explain such differing outcomes. In the spirit of Robert Jervis's work on the security dilemma, we grafted a nonstructural variable—leaders' perceptions about the relative efficacy of offensive or defensive doctrines—onto Kenneth Waltz's structural theory. By doing so we sought to predict when multipolar balancing coalitions would tend to overreact or underreact in the face of security challenges.[7] Our central argument was that under multipolar conditions, if leaders believe offensive military doctrines to be efficacious, the likelihood of tight alliances ("chain gangs") and quick escalation is high, while if they believe that defenses are hardy, they will try to pass the costs of opposing challengers early onto other actors.[8]

In multipolar worlds, what connects perceived offensive efficacy with the formation of tight alliances is the fear that initial enemy offensives will be successful and that initial successes will snowball. In other words, since they believe victory will be decided early, leaders in frontline states without immediate allies believe they run a high risk of being eliminated quickly in the first round of fighting; hence, they look for close allies. They are able to find close allies when leaders in second-line states share their strategic assessments and therefore fear that, if their allies are destroyed in the first round, they will be isolated and could be more easily eliminated in the second round by an aggressor nourished by first-round spoils. So, in 1914, when Austria mobilized for war, so did Germany. When Russia mobilized for war, so did France.

What connects defensive hardiness with buck-passing is a belief in relative security abundance: long attritional wars mean that, while opposing the attacker first may be very costly, it will likely be even more costly to the attacker. Even if a more powerful attacking country can eventually win a one-on-one confrontation by outlasting its weaker victim, it cannot do so quickly. So to the degree that they enter into alliances at all, leaders in second-line states believe that they should hold off giving assistance until it is absolutely necessary. By doing so, they believe that in the second round of fighting they will face a weaker foe, ground down by the earlier sacrifices of their frontline ally. Frontline states, of course, will always benefit from tight alliances and early assistance from second-line allies, regardless of the perceptions about offensive or defensive efficacy. When defenses are perceived to be

7. See Waltz 1979; and Jervis 1978.
8. For the original buck-passing arguments, see Waltz 1979, chap. 8; and Posen 1984.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hardy, leaders in frontline states will ask for prompt outside assistance in countering threats, but with little effect. In fact, this strategy will appear to leaders in second-line states as an attempt to pass the early cost of arming and fighting onto them. While encouraging the frontline state to develop hardy defenses, leaders in second-line states will do as little as possible to assist in that process, believing generally that the more assistance they lend, the less the frontline state might do for itself.

A more easily testable thesis about alliance behavior might include only the actual distribution of capabilities and the actual relative efficacy of offensive versus defensive military strategies. However, before the two world wars, leaders were almost entirely wrong in their predictions about the early course of military conflict. Thus, when examining the offense/defense variable, Snyder and I incorporated a perceptual element. This article takes that logic one step further and also adds a perceptual element to the balance-of-power variable. Misperceptions of either of the bedrock realist factors—the distribution of capabilities or the relative efficacy of offensive or defensive doctrines—should lead to behavior radically different from what we would expect from actors with more accurate perceptions.

If leaders misperceive the distribution of capabilities, they may stand aside at crucial junctures in a conflict, overreact to insignificant threats, or even assist the wrong side in a war. If leaders mistake stronger states for weaker ones, they may even join the side of the mighty, thereby behaving more like bandwagoners than balancers.[9] However, when observing any given bilateral conflict, leaders in second-line states may prefer victory for the frontline state perceived to be the stronger of the two. In multipolar worlds, such a preference might exist when the second-line state shares with that apparently stronger state a rivalry with an uninvolved fourth power. Even in these instances, though, the perceptions of the balance of power should dissuade the second-line state from committing to assist the apparently stronger actor early in the bilateral conflict in question.

In Figure 1, the variable on the left side is the apparent power of a frontline potential ally in comparison with its immediate rivals as perceived by leaders of the frontline state and of its second-line potential allies. If leaders in frontline states believe their own nation is powerful enough to win the early battles of a war alone, then those leaders are unlikely to pay the necessary costs and take the necessary risks to convince second-line states to join with them in tight prewar alliances. Since second-line states will almost certainly demand reciprocal benefits, confident leaders in frontline states are likely to view tight alliances as a pleasant but unnecessary luxury and settle for an independent security policy, regardless of their perceptions of the relative efficacy of offensive and defensive doctrines. If they view offensives as effective, they will try to overrun their enemies. If they view the defense as robust they will simply try to grind attackers down against their defensive positions.

If leaders in second-line states believe their potential frontline ally to be more powerful than its immediate enemy or enemies, they will be more confident that the frontline ally will survive the early stages of war alone. They will therefore find it

9. For the distinction between balancing and bandwagoning, see Waltz 1979, 126.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

		Perceived efficacy of offensive versus defensive military doctrines	
		Offensives effective: wars decided quickly	*Defenses robust: attritional wars*
Perceived power of frontline potential ally in comparison with immediate rivals	*Inferior/equal capabilities*	Tight prewar alliances (chain ganging)	Weak prewar alliance (buck-passing)
	Superior capabilities	Avoidance of prewar alliance commitments	Avoidance of prewar alliance commitments

FIGURE 1. *Perceptions of security and alliance strategy in multipolar worlds*

unnecessary to tie themselves tightly to that potential ally. If leaders in second-line states perceive offensive doctrines to be efficacious given current technologies, they may believe that their frontline potential ally will be able to destroy its enemies by taking the offensive alone. They may, however, fear that weaker enemies may be able to mobilize faster than the potential frontline ally and reduce the initial power gaps by launching damaging early offensives. If so, second-line state leaders may decide to lend support early, so prewar alliances are not out of the question. However, even under such circumstances, leaders in second-line states may believe that the greater overall capabilities of the frontline state will offset the value for the weaker enemies of striking first. For these reasons, second-line states are less likely to make significant prewar commitments to frontline states perceived as superior, even in worlds where offensives seem feasible. In worlds where leaders perceive defenses to be quite hardy and frontline potential allies to be stronger than immediate rivals, prewar alliances are even less likely. Not only will leaders in second-line states expect war to be attritional and slow, with the result that their potential ally will survive the early rounds of fighting alone, but also they will expect the stronger state to emerge victorious from any attritional war in both the short and the long term.

If leaders in second-line states view their potential ally as weaker than its immediate frontline adversary, then the perceptions of the offense-defense balance that Snyder and I discussed become very important. In such instances, if offensives are considered efficacious by leaders in the second-line state, those leaders are likely to ally early and tightly with their apparently vulnerable frontline ally in order to prevent enemy offensives from destroying the ally in the short term. This alliance pattern may not hold, however, when the apparently weaker state is perceived to have some special advantage in mobilizing offensives against the apparently stronger one. For example, if leaders in second-line states believe that the materially weaker ally can mobilize larger offensive forces more quickly than the stronger state, even though the latter has more equipment and troops overall, those leaders might predict that the weaker state's offensive may serve to diminish the overall power differences

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between the two frontline states. In such instances, by planning to intervene, but only after the first round of fighting, the second-line state can minimize costs to itself while ensuring that its frontline ally does not suffer reversals when its stronger but slower enemy is able to mobilize counteroffensives.

If leaders in second-line states view their potential frontline ally as relatively weak but also view defensive advantage as quite hardy, then they may believe that attacks on the frontline potential ally, even by stronger states, will be unsuccessful and will serve only to weaken the stronger attacker by attrition. In such cases, the temptation will be to pass the early costs of war to the weaker frontline ally and to prepare to assist it later if it requires such assistance to survive the drawn-out attritional war.

Perceptions of the power balance and the offense-defense balance can often be interrelated. Leaders may condition their beliefs regarding offensive and defensive efficacy on the ratio of capabilities across combatants. For example, they may believe that a minimum ratio of power must be met before a nation can carry out an effective attritional defense against a stronger attacker. Therefore, the balance of power estimation may directly affect calculation of the strategic importance of offensive or defensive advantage. Leaders are also more likely to prefer offensive doctrines if they believe that their distant allies are too weak to fight a stronger enemy alone.[10]

In many cases, distinguishing whether strategic assessments are based on beliefs about the distribution of capabilities, offensive or defensive advantage, or both is difficult. For example, if offensives are efficacious only when states have highly trained armies with skillful and innovative officers, how does one separate the military's skill level (a national capability) from the more general technical and material conditions that favor mobility and attack?[11] Because I am interested here most in perceptions and not objective conditions and because I will consider perceptions of both power and security dilemma variables, this problem is not nearly as knotty as it would be if I were arguing that objective conditions were driving policies or that perceptions of one security factor and not the other was all-important in any case. For the purposes of this article, I wish to demonstrate only that some combination of perceptions about power and security dilemma variables led to the alliance decisions in question.

The sources of alliance strategy in the nineteenth century: security perceptions or domestic political trade-offs?

The Austro-Prussian war

In a 1993 article, Morrow criticized my earlier article with Snyder by analyzing events on the Continent from 1866 to 1870.[12] In the first of his two cases from the period, Morrow focuses on events leading to the 1866 Austro-Prussian war, in which

10. Sagan 1986; Van Evera 1987; and Mueller 1995, 52.
11. Addressing this problem by introducing to realism the concept of "missions capability" and "military-capabilities theory" is Glaser 1994–95.
12. Morrow 1993.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Prussian army quickly crushed Austrian and other German confederation forces at Königgrätz (Sadowa). In the process, Prussia took a giant leap toward unifying Germany under Berlin's leadership.

As Morrow points out, Napoleon III of France did not want any single power to dominate within the German confederation. Of course, the Hapsburg monarchy did not want to see Germany unified under Prussian leadership either. Adopting our own theoretical viewpoint, Morrow first asks why, given their common interest in preventing Prussian dominance of Germany, Austria and France failed to ally at all, especially when the offensive advantages provided by new rifles and railroads should have led to a tight Franco-Austrian alliance.[13]

Morrow's alternative approach argues that leaders do not consider only the international environment when choosing grand strategies. When facing challenges abroad, they must also calculate domestic resistance to arms increases or additional alliance commitments. As his title suggests, Morrow views arming and alliances as contending alternatives for security policy (internal or external balancing in neorealist terminology). Morrow argues that, given a certain level of threat, we can predict a state's preferred mix of arms and alliance commitments by comparing the relative marginal political cost of each option in the domestic arena. Though he argues that one must weigh the costs of each strategy against the security benefits gained, Morrow generally concentrates on the domestic cost, not the international benefits, side of the equation. In his nineteenth-century cases, Morrow argues that, for both Austria and France, the domestic costs of an alliance overrode any consideration of security benefits to be gained by forging such an alliance. What prevented an otherwise logical alliance against the ascendant Prussia in 1866 was the Franco-Austrian dispute over Italian issues and, in particular, Venetia, which Austria held and France wanted Austria to cede to Italy.

Morrow's analysis of the Austro-Prussian war suffers from three shortcomings. First, when applying our original model to the alliance policies of the great powers before the war, he fails to consider leadership perception of offensive or defensive efficacy, focusing instead on weapons and logistics. Second, in a related fashion, he fails to offer evidence that, even before the battle at Königgrätz, leaders outside of Berlin believed offensives had the advantage and the attacker could win quickly. Finally, Morrow fails to recognize that while Napoleon III saw German unification as a threat, like most European leaders (including the Austrians) he believed that the intra-German balance of power strongly favored Austria over Prussia.

Napoleon's belief in Austrian superiority. Napoleon III misperceived the strategic environment in 1866, but he was not blinded by lust for Venetia or by Bismarck's clever promise to compel Austria to cede Venetia to Italy if France remained neutral in the war. More than anything, he was fooled by the apparent strength of the Austrian military. Like most strategic analysts in Europe at the time, Napoleon's error centered on a poor estimation of the intra-German balance of

13. Morrow 1993, 206–23 and especially 211.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

power. Addressing the myth of Napoleon as Bismarck's dupe, Alfred Cobban writes, "Louis Napoleon, of course, was not foolish enough to count on Bismarck's gratitude for the reward of his neutrality. *He believed that Austria was the stronger of the two Germanic powers,* and with his old pro-Italian and anti-Austrian obsession, *gladly saw Italy join in on the side of Prussia to redress the balance* and wrench Venetia from the Austrian empire."[14] Napoleon did not fail to assist Austria because of the domestic politics of the Italian issue. He failed to do so because he believed that Austria was the stronger of the two German powers.[15] After speaking with Napoleon, the British ambassador in Paris reported in June 1866: "The conversation continued for some time as to the chances of Austria's success, the Emperor, I think, inclining to the opinion that she would lick the Prussians."[16] Even after Italy joined on the Prussian side, Napoleon's military analysts advised him that Austria would likely prevail in the war.[17] Though Napoleon III apparently recognized the superiority of Prussian needle guns before the outbreak of fighting, he believed that these were at best factors that would mitigate the continuing overall military superiority of Austria. In a conversation with the British ambassador just before the battle at Königgrätz, he judged "the Austrian army the better of the two—the Prussian the better appointed."[18]

The Austro-Prussian war was waged between a previously dominant power in the German confederation, Austria, and a rising challenger, Prussia.[19] During such power shifts, determining which side has the upper hand is very difficult. Napoleon III was mistaken in estimating the balance of power in Europe, but in his defense, he was hardly alone. The Austrian defeat at Königgrätz was a shock to the world and thus routinely has been associated with terms like "thunderclap." As Dennis Showalter states, "Statesmen and soldiers throughout Europe were stunned by Königgrätz and its aftermath . . . (in most capitals) the question dominating newspapers, cabinets, and officers' messes alike was 'how did this happen?' "[20]

Austria, too, was overconfident in its ability to defeat Prussia. While not desiring war, brash Austrian officials believed that if Bismarck insisted on war, Austria alone could defeat Prussia, whose forces it outmanned by 50 percent.[21] In fact, as H. M. Hozier wrote, in March 1866 the Austrian council of war "decided that Austria was strong enough to take the field against Prussia and Italy at the same time. . . . Too high an estimate appears to have been formed of the strength of Austria, and far too low a calculation made of the powers of Prussia; for the opinion . . . seems to have been that Austria could only emerge from such a war as a decisive victor."[22]

14. Cobban 1965, 181.
15. See Lord Cowley to Lord Stanley, 26 July 1866, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 300; Sencourt 1933, 286; Gall 1986, 285 and 346; Friedjung 1935, 212; and Taylor 1971, 165.
16. Lord Cowley to Lord Clarendon, 4 June 1866, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 273–74.
17. Pottinger 1966, 106 and 155.
18. Napoleon is quoted by the British ambassador, Lord Cowley, in Corley 1961, 275.
19. Taylor 1967, 84.
20. Showalter 1975, 213.
21. Morrow 1993, 218.
22. Hozier 1908, 20.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

We have established that both Austrian and French leaders believed Austria was the dominant power in the intra-German struggle, so the puzzle about why France did not ally with Austria is fully solved. Given the prevailing consensus in Europe about Austrian dominance, by allying with Austria, Paris would have been bandwagoning, not balancing. But as far as the thesis here is concerned, one question remains: since Napoleon III believed Prussia to be the weaker party, why did he not ally with Prussia to deter Austrian aggression or assist Prussian troops once war started? In other words, although the question of why France failed to chain gang with a potential ally is valid, the potential ally at the question's center is Prussia, not Austria. The real puzzle thus lies not in Napoleon's allowing a free hand to Bismarck but rather in his concurrent promise of nonintervention to Vienna.

Napoleon's belief in attritional war. Snyder and I both argue that one cannot look at the actual balance of offensive versus defensive advantage when determining whether multipolarity will tend toward either buck-passing or chain ganging. Since the predictions of leaders before World Wars I and II were almost entirely wrong, we recognized the necessity of adopting an additional perceptual variable, leadership beliefs about the efficacy of various strategies.

A similar perceptual approach must be applied to the Austro-Prussian war. Prussian field marshal Moltke's offensive strategies were effective at Königgrätz, but neither French nor Austrian leaders had been able to predict such an outcome. Showalter writes, "Expert opinion in most capitals had predicted either an Austrian victory or a campaign of mutual exhaustion."[23] Louis Napoleon's analysis was the same.[24] René Arnaud writes, "The whole of Europe was expecting an Austrian victory, or at all events a long war . . . and it was for this reason that Napoleon III had dreamed of intervening as mediator and as the sovereign arbiter between two exhausted combatants."[25]

Of the two potential outcomes he anticipated—Austrian victory or a war of attrition—Napoleon III greatly preferred the latter, so to the degree that he took action at all during the crisis preceding war, he did so with the purpose of guaranteeing a lengthy war. Believing the combined forces of Italy and Prussia to be roughly equal to those of Austria alone, Napoleon fostered an Italian-Prussian alliance.[26] By encouraging Italy to attack the Austrian flank and tie down Prussian forces in the event of an Austro-Prussian war, Napoleon III believed he was guaranteeing an attritional outcome by reducing the likelihood of the only imaginable short-war scenario: a quick Austrian victory. For just such a reason, Napoleon intervened in order to end a paralyzing standoff between Italy and Prussia, each of whom wanted to secure concessions from Austria without war by involving the other in a conflict with Austria.[27]

23. See Showalter 1975, 213; and Pflanze 1963, 291.
24. See Duff 1978, 164; and Eyck 1958, 128.
25. Arnaud 1967, 298.
26. See Gall 1986, 285–86; and Friedjung 1935, 150–57.
27. See Pflanze 1963, 291; Taylor 1967, 83; and Friedjung 1935, 150–51.

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According to the Italian minister to Paris at the time, Count Nigra, misperception of the balance of power and his belief that the war would be lengthy drove Napoleon's desire for war and a Prussian-Italian alliance. In 1893 he recalled:

> Napoleon said: "It is advisable for Italy to conclude the treaty with Prussia, for only then will Prussia dare to attack Austria. Only then will the forces be equalised and a balance established, which will give Prussia a prospect for victory. In this way Italy will get Venice and France will enjoy the advantage of a conflict between the two powers {Austria and Prussia}, by whose alliance she is held in check." . . . He imagined that the forces of the conflicting states were now {after the Prussian-Italian pact} roughly equal, but there he made a great mistake. The battle of Königgrätz took him completely by surprise; he had assumed that battles would be won and lost, and that he would in the meantime be free to arrange matters as he liked.[28]

Count Nigra's recollection is consistent with the accounts of other contemporaries of Napoleon. William Edward Johnston, an American close to powerful members of the French elite at the time, wrote that Napoleon was profoundly astonished by the outcome at Königgrätz because he had expected a war in which "both parties were going to exhaust themselves."[29] In fact, according to various sources Napoleon was so confident that war would be attritional, he much preferred an Austro-Prussian struggle to peace.[30]

While we have no direct statement by Napoleon III about the advantage of defense, his well-documented belief that war would be attritional seems a fine proxy for the offense-defense variable employed in the model above. Given his belief in defensive hardiness, Napoleon III passed the buck to the local powers opposing Austria, the state Napoleon perceived to be the strongest. By adding perceptions of the distribution of capabilities to our earlier thesis about perceptions of defensive efficacy, we capture almost all of the important dynamics of the case. We can understand both why Napoleon III passed the buck and why he passed it to Prussia and Italy, not Austria.

As for Austria, the assurance in its own safety, based primarily on the relative size of its army in comparison to Prussia's, was amplified by its belief that defensive strategies had the advantage. Though new railroad and rifle technology allowed for effective Prussian offensive methods, those new methods were unknown outside of Prussia and were largely unavailable to other states, including Austria, which had less developed rail networks.[31] Showalter writes, "The Prussians' success in utilizing the railroads to their own advantage is thrown into even sharper relief by the performance of their enemies. *Feldzeugmeister* Benedek, despite his reputation as one of the most aggressive and hard-driving Hapsburg generals, was unable or

28. Friedjung 1935, appendix 3, 321.
29. Johnston 1907, 497.
30. See Friedjung 1935, 92; Aubry 1940, 380; and Wellesley 1929, 298.
31. See Showalter 1975, 112; and Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1992, 230.

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unwilling to overrule his Chief of Staff, *Generalmajor* Gideon von Krismanic. Krismanic's operations plan stressed the importance of concentrating the Austrian army at a suitable 'position' against which the Prussian offensive might shatter itself."[32] Though tactically the Austrians often rushed the well-armed Prussian troops once the latter had invaded an Austrian-controlled sector, the overall Austrian strategy was classically defensive, emphasizing the concentration of defensive forces against presumably overextended attackers and eschewing the mobile flanking maneuvers of the better-trained and better-equipped Prussian forces.[33]

Austrian policy toward the controversy over Venetia demonstrates that domestic political pressures related to Italy were of only secondary importance in Austrian strategy. Initially, Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph did not think he needed French assistance to defeat Italy and Prussia, so he would not cede Venetia as payment for an alliance with France (as we have already seen, this cession would have failed to secure such an alliance anyway). For similar reasons of overconfidence, in March he refused to cede Venetia to gain Italian neutrality in the war.[34] But later, when France bluffed by threatening to enter on the side of Prussia if Austria did not cede Venetia, Francis Joseph perceived the threat to Austrian security to be real.[35] He therefore discounted any domestic political costs and agreed to cession of Venetia as the price of French neutrality.[36] If we wished to argue that the domestic politics of the Venetia issue, not security perceptions, were driving Austria's policy toward France, we would have to explain why Austria had not been willing to give up Venetia for an alliance with France yet was willing to give it up for French neutrality.

By June 1866 France had guaranteed Austrian cession of Venetia regardless of the outcome of the fighting to come. Napoleon had forced both Prussia and Austria to promise Venetia to Italy as the price of French neutrality. Therefore, in no way can one argue that tacit French support for Prussia and Italy was driven primarily by concerns over the future of Venetia. The secondary nature of the Venetia issue is most clearly driven home by Napoleon's prompt about-face after he learned of the swift and dramatic Prussian victories against Austria. He not only reportedly regretted having weakened Austria by forcing it to cede Venetia but also began coercing Italy and Prussia to settle for an early peace and thereby helped prevent further advances at Austria's expense.[37]

32. Showalter 1975, 67, italics original.

33. For the distinction between tactical defensives and strategic offensives, see Howard 1961, 1–8. On the lack of Austrian mobility at the front and the disastrous decisions for bayonet charges by local commanders, see Whitton 1923, 90; and Friedjung, 1935, 220–21.

34. Pflanze 1963, 292.

35. For documentation of the French threat, see Prince Metternich to Count Mensdorff, 6 June 1866, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 274–78.

36. See Pflanze 1963, 288; Taylor 1971, 166; Sked 1989, 179; Mosse 1958, 213–14; and Kann 1974, 272–73. See also Lord Cowley to Lord Clarendon, 11 May 1866, and Prince Metternich to Count Mensdorff, 21 May 1866, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 266–67 and 269–71, respectively.

37. Wellesley 1929, 310–11. See also Lord Cowley to Lord Stanley, 10 July 1866, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 292–94.

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Bismarck in 1866: the benefits of justified and conditional confidence. While by 1866 Bismarck was confident that Prussia could defeat Austria alone in war, he did not ignore the inherent dangers of multipolarity. He did seek foreign assistance, in Italy, to increase the likelihood of victory over Austria. More important, he sought and secured a guarantee of French neutrality by agreeing to the cession of Venetia if Prussia won the war. As long as France did not ally with Vienna, Prussia was confident that it could overrun Austria.

Until the October 1865 meeting with Napoleon III at Biarritz, Bismarck had always sought a tight alliance with France before planning an attack on Austria. But at Biarritz, Bismarck became convinced by Moltke that Prussia could defeat Austria without French assistance. As a result, Bismarck's strategy changed to one of merely guaranteeing French neutrality.[38] The case fits the approach here perfectly. As Prussian leaders came to view Prussia as stronger than Austria, they pursued alliance with France less vigorously.

Bismarck was both fortunate and unfortunate that French leaders believed in defensive advantage in 1865–66. He was initially unfortunate in that Napoleon III's belief in attritional war meant that France would not ally tightly with Prussia before the war, even though France thought Prussia was weaker than Austria. So Bismarck's pre-Biarritz hope of building a strong alliance against Austria before risking war was eliminated by French buck-passing, as Snyder and I would predict. Once Bismarck decided Prussia could fight alone, however, France's belief in the likelihood of attritional war carried great benefits for Berlin. Because French leaders did not fear war as much as they might have if they had perceived offensives as highly effective, Paris did nothing to prevent war in Central Europe. This meant Bismarck had a free hand to begin hostilities if he so desired. In fact, Paris encouraged him. Moreover, Napoleon III's skepticism about the efficacy of Prussian offensives led him to believe that Austria's initial numerical advantage was likely to hold up against a Prussian offensive. He worried then that the combination of defensive advantage and Austrian numerical superiority would lead to a crushing defeat for Prussia if the latter attacked alone. To hedge against the possibility of postwar Austrian dominance of Germany and to foster Prussian belligerence, Napoleon III encouraged Italy to join on Prussia's side against Austria. French belief in both attritional war and Prussian weakness not only allowed Prussia to fight but also helped Berlin obtain an ally in that fight.

The Franco-Prussian war

If the myths of Austrian superiority and attritional war drove alliance behavior before Königgrätz, they certainly did not do so after that decisive battle. So a puzzle remains about why Austria and France did not form a tight alliance before the next major European war. While the answer to this question is complicated, the approach

38. Taylor 1967, 80–81.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

offered here captures many more of the important dynamics of the case than does Morrow's trade-off thesis.

The war was sparked by France's contentious diplomacy toward Prussia, which was driven largely by a governmental legitimacy crisis and popular hypernationalism. The approach here does not address the domestic politics of French belligerence, but it helps explain why France found itself fighting alone. Four major factors prevented a Franco-Austrian alliance: (1) France's confidence in its ability to defeat Prussia quickly and alone in at least the early stages of war, particularly if France mobilized first and launched the early offensives; (2) Austria's fundamental agreement that France was likely to win the early battles of the war even without Austrian assistance; (3) the continuing inability of Austria to mobilize quickly in the event of war, which had helped seal its fate in 1866; (4) and the Russian threat to Austria's flank, a problem directly related to Russian overestimation of French power and one that a less confident France may have tried to eliminate through diplomacy before fighting erupted.

The impact of domestic politics in France. The Franco-Prussian war, if not caused by, was at least hastened by France's attempt to humiliate Prussia after Berlin agreed to remove the controversial Hohenzollern candidacy (Prince Leopold) for the Spanish throne. Though Bismarck's infamous response, the Ems dispatch, was indeed provocative, it followed a vindictive French attempt to secure not only Prussian reversal on Spanish policy but also a statement by Kaiser William suggesting his culpability for ever having supported Prince Leopold. Confident and still bitter over France's about-face after Königgrätz, Bismarck dragged his reluctant Kaiser into war via the Ems dispatch. It was French diplomatic clumsiness, however, that angered William and provided Bismarck a clear opportunity to do this.[39]

France's high-stakes strategy was driven by two factors: the desire for a great diplomatic victory to bolster state legitimacy at home and arrogance about the prospect of war with Prussia, driven partially by the first factor above but more so by the mistaken, but historically rooted, beliefs that French forces were more effective than their Prussian counterparts and that France would gain great military advantages by mobilizing first for war.[40] In psychological terms, the French leadership suffered simultaneously from both motivated and cognitive biases.[41]

French weakness and overconfidence. French diplomatic aggressiveness meant that war came before the military had completed the more important phases of its reform program, and this was partially to blame for the army's pathetic performance against the Prussians. Moreover, French leaders' overconfidence together with their belief in offensive advantage meant that Paris believed allies, especially those with slow mobilization rates, would be unnecessary to France in the

39. Aubry 1940, chap. 33.

40. See Cobban 1965, 193–206; and Prince Metternich to Baron Beust, 8 July 1870, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 363.

41. Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1985, especially chaps. 1 and 2.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

early going. As Morrow himself writes, "The Austrians and Italians informed the French that their forces could not be ready for combat for at least six weeks after the start of mobilization. The French believed they would gain victories over the Prussians in that period that would draw Austria and Italy into the war {on France's side} without a formal alliance. The French also saw little advantage in sacrificing their interests in Rome as the price for an alliance that offered little immediate support."[42]

Morrow's historical account is accurate, but he draws the wrong lesson from it. After the passage above, he concludes, "An alliance by the two {Austria and France} against Prussia was difficult to form because of the Italian issue that had dramatic implications for both states' domestic politics."[43] This may be true enough, but it misses the main point. If France wanted an alliance guarantee from Austria, it would have to offer something in return—if not Italian interests, then something else. One possibility would have been a public guarantee to assist Austria if it were attacked by Russia. But France did not want to pay anything to Vienna because Austrian assistance against Prussia was seen as unnecessary to winning the crucial early battles of the war, after which Napoleon III correctly believed that Austria planned to enter the war against Prussia anyway.

A more cautious France may have stalled for time, allowing further French military reforms, Austrian preparation for war, and an alliance agreement with Austria and Italy. Because his military and civilian advisers predicted the early course of the war very poorly, Napoleon III did not make the necessary effort to secure early support from Italy and Austria before declaring war on Prussia.[44] French overconfidence spilled into the streets. As Cobban describes it, " '*A Berlin*' was the war-cry on the boulevards and the password of the army. There was a run on maps of Germany in the shops; it would have been unpatriotic, defeatist, and absurd to suggest that maps of France might be more useful."[45] The French army leaders were so confident that they distributed only German maps to their own troops.[46] Battle forecasts by military advisers were beset with hyperbole, and members of the French Senate were supremely confident of French victory.[47]

Most French leaders in 1870 may have believed that offense had the advantage, but since they falsely believed that France could mobilize an effective offensive force before Prussia could respond they applied this assessment only to their own offensives—at least in the opening stages of the war. Napoleon said to the Austrian ambassador just before the war, "the winner will be the one who can be ready first."[48] French leaders also believed that when French offensives were shown to be effective, the southern German states over which Prussia had gained dominance in

42. Morrow 1993, 223.
43. Ibid.
44. Pflanze 1963, 449.
45. Cobban 1965, 202.
46. Brodsky 1978, 279.
47. See Bierman 1988, 335; and Carr 1991, 200–201.
48. Prince Metternich to Baron Beust, 8 July 1870, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 363.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1866 would defect, thus damaging Prussia's numerical power and allowing France to "cut Germany in two," as Empress Eugenie put it.[49]

But this was all fantasy. The French would learn not only that their own military was extremely weak and poorly organized but also that the Prussian military was more effective than the French military on both offense and defense. Moreover, the theory, created in Vienna, that the southern German states would defect from Prussia and join France rested on specific assumptions and preconditions not met by the overconfident French leaders. Such a defection would occur only if southern Germans viewed the war as having been provoked by Prussia purely over Hohenzollern interests in Spain. After Prussia removed Leopold's candidacy, many (including Austrian leaders) saw France's obnoxious insistence on humiliating the Kaiser as the real cause of war. Southern Germans then viewed France as the aggressor, and they rallied behind Prussia.[50]

Before the battle at Königgrätz, European analysts believed France had the strongest military by far, with Austria as its closest rival.[51] From Königgrätz France seemed to have learned only two lessons: a real one about Austria's weakness and a more questionable one about offensive advantage. But most French military leaders failed to learn the most important lesson, namely, that the rising Prussia could not be defeated with certainty by any single European army, including their own. After 1866, Napoleon III instituted military reforms so that France could mobilize more soldiers in case of war. Though Napoleon himself was consistently nervous about French preparations during 1866–70, in July 1870 General Lebouef convinced the French leadership that France was ready for war. Moreover, Napoleon subscribed to the Austrian theory that when war started, initial French victories would lead to the defection of the southern German states from Berlin's federation, thus diminishing Prussia's overall power and providing a pretense for Austrian entrance into the war on France's side.[52] A. J. P. Taylor writes: "The Second Empire had always lived on illusion; and it now committed suicide in the illusion that it could somehow destroy Prussia without serious effort."[53]

In 1870 most leaders outside of Prussia also agreed that French forces were superior and would win at least the opening rounds of the war.[54] Though Prussia had more men under arms than France in 1870, France had been the greatest land power on the Continent since long before the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1870 France also spent significantly more on defense than any Continental European power except Russia.[55] Many, including the French, comforted their nationalist egos after Königgrätz by attributing the Prussian victory over Austria to new technologies, namely, new rifles, not to the superior skill and discipline of Prussian officers and

49. See Howard 1961, chap. 2; and Bierman 1988, 335.
50. For documentation, see Baron Vitzthum to Count Andrassy, 16 January 1873 (reporting events of 11 July 1870), and Lord Lyons to Lord Granville, 12 July 1870, in Wellesley and Sencourt 1934, 365–69.
51. See Showalter 1975, 121; and Cobban 1971, 202.
52. Howard 1961, chap. 1.
53. Taylor 1971, 204.
54. Ibid., 208.
55. Taylor, 1971, xxvii.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

soldiers.[56] If one accepted this self-serving myth, then it would follow that once the French army had obtained new rifles (which it had by 1870), there was no reason to believe that France could not maintain its position as the premier ground force in Europe. As Michael Howard states, "the completeness of the Prussian success in 1870 thus astounded the world."[57]

Austria and the Russia problem. The widely held belief in the superiority of French troops helps explain Austrian behavior in 1870, as well. Austrian leaders believed that France would likely win at least the early phases of the war without significant Austrian assistance.[58] Austrian leaders still hoped France would win because Austria needed to worry about both Prussia and Russia, Prussia's supporter and Austria's eastern threat.[59] Given Austrian leaders' beliefs about the likelihood of early French dominance in the war and France's failure to reassure Austria publicly that, if Austria entered the war early, France would assist it in defending against Russia, France was unsuccessful in gaining an early alliance with Austria. Still, the Austrians were prepared to enter into the conflict on the French side after the first round of French victories. This would not only ensure against potential Prussian counteroffensives in the next round of fighting but, by moving Austrian troops north, would also hedge against French domination of the south German states if Prussia totally collapsed.[60] So whether French offensives were to be successful only in the first rounds of the war or whether France's anticipated early victories were to cripple Prussia more permanently and more fully offset the Prussian military's numerical advantages, Austria had a national interest in joining the fight against Prussia, but not at the onset of hostilities.

Of course, once Vienna realized that France was losing, it had a clearer incentive to assist France against Austria's intra-German rival, Prussia. But after the war started, it quickly became too late for Austria to take effective action to save France. Austrian mobilization would take six weeks. Within a few weeks of the initial fighting, French defeat seemed inevitable; Vienna thus rejected any eleventh-hour action to save France. As Taylor describes the problem for Vienna, "The Austrians kept out of the war solely from a well-founded reluctance not to tie themselves to a country that was already defeated."[61]

Though Napoleon did offer secret prewar assurances to Vienna regarding Russia, the mistakenly confident French were unwilling to take the real risks necessary to guarantee allies overtly and warn their adversaries before declaring war.[62] Had the French been less confident, they may very well have allied tightly with Austria before war broke out.

56. Showalter 1975, 213.
57. Howard 1961, 1.
58. See Taylor 1971, 208–9.
59. Howard 1961, 46.
60. Taylor 1971, 208.
61. Taylor 1967, 127. See also Sked 1989, 242.
62. For evidence that Austria would have entertained an alliance with France if the latter had made guarantees concerning Russia, see Gall 1986, 338.

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This perceptual approach explains Russian behavior as well. Russian leaders believed that France was likely stronger than Prussia and, therefore, warned Austria early that if it entered the war on the side of France, Russia would attack it from the east. The Russians believed that the short-term threat was to Prussia (not France) and so they chained themselves to Prussia by threatening to enter the war if Austria mobilized.[63] As the actors at the time seemed to realize, a tighter Austro-French alliance may have created two opposing chain gangs (France, Austria, and Italy versus Prussia and Russia) that might have dragged all of continental Europe into war, as tight alliances would in 1914.[64]

In his treatment of the Austrian case, Morrow offers domestic political reasons for why Vienna could not ally with France against Prussia. In addition to continuing disputes over Italy, these included Hungarian ambivalence toward any increase of Austrian power within Austria-Hungary and the resistance of the Austrian public to helping France gain control over German populations near the Rhine. However, the evidence strongly suggests that Vienna's policies were not driven primarily by domestic political concerns but rather by Austrian leaders' perceptions and misperceptions of standard security considerations. If domestic politics were really the deciding factor in keeping Austria from fighting with France against Prussia, then why was Austria preparing to join France in feeding off of a wounded Prussia after the first rounds of the war?

The two world wars

Before the two world wars, states engaged in very little trade-off between arms and allies. Instead, security policy seemed largely driven by the degree of threat perceived by political and military leaders. Before World War I, when leaders felt they or their allies were relatively vulnerable to offensives, most European nations built weapons and tightened formal or informal alliances at a rather frantic pace.[65] Alternatively, before 1939, when defense was believed to have the advantage in Continental warfare, tight alliances did not form, and where loose ones existed, they were quickly abandoned, as in the case of France and the Little Entente in Eastern Europe.

But interwar alliances were not weak because the future allies were arming at an extremely fast pace. Between 1931 and 1935 France cut its defense expenditures by nearly 30 percent, with the bulk of the cuts coming from arms procurement funds. In 1930 France implemented a 1928 decision to reduce conscription service to one year, thus reducing the quality and quantity of potential combatants at a time when the demographic catastrophes of World War I were soon to cut deeply into the potential

63. Jelavich 1974, 154–57.
64. Pflanze 1963, 429.
65. On European defense spending in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Taylor 1971, xxviii. For a careful analysis demonstrating that alliances were not used to substitute for domestic defense spending in Europe from 1870 to 1914, see Siverson and Most 1987, 131–60.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pool of French soldiers.[66] Between 1934 and 1938 neither Britain nor France increased weapons procurement at anywhere near the rate of their rival Germany.[67] While the Socialist Premier Leon Blum committed much more toward French defense after the 1936 Rhineland crisis than his conservative critics would later recognize, even measured as a share of gross national product, Germany's defense budgets were still more than double those of France in the late 1930s.[68]

When Britain and France did accelerate their weapons procurement most impressively—after Hitler secured control over the Sudetenland at the Munich conference (September 1938) and then seized the Czech rump state (March 1939)—they also simultaneously increased their strategic cooperation. Arms and alliances were complementary, not rival, goods, and leaders determined their proper mix more by strategic analysis of the international environment than by measuring the relative costs of each in the domestic arena.

World War I

In 1914, both beliefs about the offense-defense balance and the balance of power affected the security policies of the major powers. Most of the important dynamics are captured by the standard thesis in the literature, which emphasizes the importance of offensive biases in creating tight alliances and quick escalation in the early phases of the war. Because it is persuasive and widely accepted, I will only review that thesis briefly here. I will focus instead on how adding the variable of perceptions about the distribution of capabilities sheds light on other interesting aspects of this case.

Before World War I great powers tied themselves tightly to allies, so a small conflict quickly spread, involving all of the major powers. They did so largely because they believed that offensives had the strategic advantage, that the war would be short, and that early victories could easily snowball into major advantages.[69] As Raymond Aron argued, one need only observe the lack of financial and military preparedness for the long war that ensued to be certain that European leaders were shocked by the hardiness of defenses and the attritional nature of land warfare.[70]

Though not challenging the widespread consensus on the importance of perceptions of the offense-defense balance before World War I, Wohlforth's work helps us understand how estimations of the balance of power also contributed to the conflict. French and Russian beliefs that they were each individually weaker than Germany helped convince Russia to adopt an active offensive strategy against the Central Powers. If Germany were allowed to attack France while Russia remained on the defensive, then Russia would lose an opportunity to attack a weakened German flank abandoned by forces attacking westward. Moreover, if France were knocked out of

66. See Kirshner 1995, 93; and Lee 1985, 56 and 64.
67. Schweller 1993, 88.
68. Doughty 1985, 164.
69. See Van Evera 1984; Snyder 1984; and Christensen and Snyder 1990.
70. Aron 1954, chap. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the war Russia might later have had to face the Central Powers alone.[71] If the Russians had believed that either Russia or France was individually more powerful than Germany, then Russian attitudes about the desirability of offensives and early entrance into the war might have been different.

Britain was a bit of an outlier in 1914, limiting its initial commitment to France and Russia. This strategy was partially based on Britain's natural defensive advantages as an island, and British analysts' prescient predictions that conflict in Europe might bog down in attritional warfare.[72] As Wohlforth points out, British analysts also valued more highly than others the overall capabilities of the French and Russian militaries, particularly the latter.[73] So, the combined perceptions of the offense-defense balance and the balance of power made the British leaders relatively sanguine about the chances of French and Russian containment of the Central Powers on land. Therefore, at least in comparison to France and Russia, Britain was relatively uninvolved in prewar military and diplomatic developments on the Continent. Even so, this was not because Britain had chosen arms over allies; British military expenditures increased more slowly in the years 1909–13 than those of any of the major powers on the Continent.[74] As in the case of Russia, British beliefs about the balance of power reinforced the tendencies created by beliefs about the offense-defense balance.

World War II

British strategy toward France. One of the standard conclusions of neorealist treatments of World War II is that Britain, France, and the Soviet Union passed the buck to one another, leaving Hitler a free hand in Central Europe and a greater opportunity to eliminate the great powers through piecemeal aggression. One of the classic examples of the buck-passing phenomenon is the lack of stronger strategic cooperation between Britain and France in the years leading to General Guderian's blitz. Whereas authors have differed over whether, given multipolar conditions, defensive doctrines led to buck-passing or whether the desire to pass the buck led to defensive doctrines, many accounts agree that beliefs about defensive efficacy and the desire to pass the buck combined to lead to suboptimal alliance formation in the face of Nazi aggression.[75]

Implicit in the standard accounts is an important argument about the distribution of power within the multipolar set. Particularly in the case of British and French relations with Germany, the assumption is that Germany was stronger than either of the allies individually and that leaders in both Paris and London knew that alliance

71. Wohlforth 1987, 358–60 and 376.
72. Christensen and Snyder 1990, 155–56.
73. Wohlforth 1987, 355–58.
74. Hobson 1993, 465.
75. For the argument that multipolarity led to buck-passing and in turn to defensive doctrines, see Posen 1984. For the argument that multipolarity and defensive biases combined to lead to buck-passing, see Christensen and Snyder 1990. For a domestic political culture explanation of great power doctrines, see Kier forthcoming.

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with the other would therefore be necessary if Germany were to attack. If this were not the case, defensive biases might not have had anything to do with British and French alliance behavior. Instead, the weak alliance might have been better explained by British and French overestimation of their national capabilities. As I will demonstrate below, British and French leaders understood that Germany was stronger than either France or Britain alone, but British leaders in particular believed that defensive advantages would strongly reduce the importance of those power gaps. Therefore, as the approach here would predict, Britain allied with France but not very vigorously.

In a 1993 article, Schweller argued against the standard account from two perspectives. First, citing London's concern about German knockout blows against Britain, he calls into question the notion that British leaders believed that defense had the advantage in 1939–40. Schweller points out that as May 1940 approached, the British became increasingly concerned that Britain, not France, would become the first target of German aggression in the west; thus Britain was even less likely to send forces to France.

Second, Schweller argues that the security of Britain and France did not constitute a collective good. In a nutshell, Schweller contends that, as "middle powers" or "second-ranking powers," Britain and France were so outclassed by the powerful Germany that even if they had tightly coordinated their efforts they would have been unable to take on Germany effectively. They had little choice but to wait for the assistance of one of the other true poles in the system (the Soviet Union and the United States) to enter the fray. In the meantime they rationally "distanced" themselves from each other in the hopes that they could avoid being targeted next by the third pole, Germany. For Britain, then, any significant effort to assist France would serve only to drain British resources and annoy Hitler, thus making an attack on Britain more likely in the short term.[76] Finally, Schweller contends that, as an island, Britain's defense requirements were incompatible with those of France, a land power. Schweller writes, "Britain was threatened by an air and sea assault; France by a land invasion. Thus, if one of the allies was able to secure its borders against a German attack, it does not follow that the other's frontiers were thereby defended."[77] Robert Kaufman offers a thesis that dovetails with Schweller's on this score, arguing that British alliance behavior toward France was too weak to qualify as balancing behavior at all.[78]

Both in the period before the Munich conference, when Neville Chamberlain and other civilian leaders were attempting to prevent war through appeasement, and after Munich and the fall of the Czech rump state, when leaders abandoned appeasement, British strategists considered carefully what course a war with Germany would take if either accommodation or deterrence failed to keep the peace. Schweller's account misses important aspects of British strategic analysis in both periods. First, British

76. Schweller 1993.
77. Ibid., 88.
78. Kaufman 1992.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

strategists' focus on the danger of a knockout blow from Germany against the home islands was integrally related to the belief that such a blow would be impossible on the Continent. As early as September 1936, British strategist Colonel Ismay linked the inability to win quick victories on land with the possibility that Germany might try to level a knockout blow against Britain.[79] In September 1938, Ismay justified the accelerated home air defense program by "bearing in mind the advantage which the defensive has over the offensive in land warfare, and in particular the strength of the Maginot Line." He believed this meant that Germany "could hardly hope for a rapid decision on land."[80] Despite these beliefs, the British understood that the French would need assistance on land over the long run. They accordingly planned to create an expeditionary force and a territorial army to send to the Continent. The main issue was one of timing: was a large ground force to be created and equipped in advance of hostilities or should current resources be devoted to air defense? Largely because of belief in the efficacy of French defenses, the answer was generally to emphasize air and naval defenses.[81] There would be plenty of time to send reinforcements later, British analysts believed, because the next war on the Continent would likely resemble the last one.[82]

Though the fear that Britain might be struck first persisted and grew in 1939–40, especially after the German attack on Poland, it did so not because German seizure of France did not matter in British calculations nor because Britain felt it could do nothing to help France. Rather, it persisted because British leaders believed France's defensive advantage in ground warfare made France too tough a nut to crack in the short term, even without a massive early infusion of British assistance. As a February 1939 Chiefs of Staff report clearly states, Britain feared it might be the first target of attack because, "France could not resist alone after the defeat of Great Britain; (and) a full-scale attack on France would involve heavy losses which might have a serious effect on German morale."[83] Britain had such faith in short-term French defense that it often placed less value in the protection provided to Britain by the English Channel than that provided to France by the Maginot Line.

British leaders indeed feared attack from the air and sea, but this did not mean that France was unimportant. They realized correctly that such attacks would be made much easier if Germany controlled air strips and ports across the channel from England. German access to the French coast meant shorter flights for German bombers and fighters, allowing the Luftwaffe more time over British targets. British access to French air strips would similarly ease British air assaults on Germany. Moreover, German control of French ports would make a German sea landing in Britain much easier in the same way that access to British ports would be critical to the Allied landing at Normandy in June 1944. While Schweller correctly points out that German seizure of Belgium alone would have significantly closed the gap for

79. Peden 1979, 126.
80. Ismay is quoted in Howard 1972, 123.
81. Peden 1979, 136–38.
82. Mearsheimer 1988, 117 and 170.
83. Cited in Schweller 1993, 89.

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Germany, even in such circumstances France would have been important for Britain. French bases would allow for easier attacks on German positions in Belgium as well as easier counterattacks on Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr, positioned dangerously close to France's eastern borders.[84]

This strategic analysis is not just twenty-twenty hindsight; it was shared by British analysts at the time. British documents from 1938 and 1939 clearly demonstrate that Britain viewed French security as important to its own; Britain understood that France would eventually need its assistance against the larger Germany; Britain expected French defenses to hold for a considerable period of time with only limited assistance from Britain; and Britain planned to offer France more significant help after that initial period.

As early as spring 1938, British analysts made one thing very clear in their strategic assessments: French defense mattered to Britain, even if Belgium fell. Britain wanted France to extend its defenses from northeastern France, where the formal Maginot Line ended, to the sea. While heavy Maginot-type defenses would sink in the lowlands along the Franco-Belgian border, various lighter antitank barricades were considered possible. British discussion of this shortcoming in France's strategy demonstrates not only the importance of France but also the early problem of buck-passing in the budding alliance. Lord Hankey wrote to Chamberlain on 28 April 1938, "All our co-operation with France, whether by air or sea and eventually by land, will be very much less effective if the Germans get the {French} channel ports. It is therefore a strong *French* interest to cover them by an extension of the Maginot Line {to the sea}. . . . Incidentally it is a strong British interest, but it would be advisable *not* to say so or else the French might ask us to pay!"[85] Whereas Chamberlain expressed concerns about losing the Belgian ports and argued that a Maginot Line to the sea would abandon Belgium, the overwhelming British concern was with the French ports. As Hankey put it, "It would be a nuisance to have the Germans in Belgium again, but better in Belgian ports than in French ports."[86] Even before Munich French defense was "vital" to British security, but Ismay and others suspected that French leaders might be trying to pass the costs of defending northern France onto Britain.[87]

As for Britain, it too intended largely to ride free on France's defensive efforts but only to the degree that French defenses were deemed to be sufficiently strong to hold out. As Hankey communicated to the earl of Halifax, the level of faith in French defenses would determine the size and readiness of the British Expeditionary Force.[88] Some British analysts, such as Orme Sargent, did not bemoan the possible dissolution of the British-French alignment on the Continent, adopting a position

84. On the importance of French air bases to Britain, see Young 1978, 222–23.
85. Hankey to Prime Minister, 28 April 1938, in CAB 21, 554 14/4/13, PRO. Emphases and exclamation original.
86. Hankey to Chamberlain, 28 April 1938, CAB 21, 554 14/4/13, PRO.
87. Ismay to Hankey, 26 April 1938, CAB 21, 554 14/4/13, PRO.
88. Hankey to Halifax, 26 January 1938, CAB 21, C 8452/580/18, PRO.

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consistent with Schweller's distancing strategy.[89] Sargent's views on this matter, however, were not widely held and were explicitly criticized by his peers. One colleague wrote to Sargent, "If we and the French are really to fall apart into some sort of isolation or bisolation, we shall not long be even second-class powers. And if we aren't going to try to hold even that rank, any 'extent' of armament will have been wasted."[90] In case of war, Britain clearly needed both arms and allies, and most British leaders correctly saw that there was no trade-off between the two. But even if one accepted this general prescription, two important questions remained: how much of a commitment should Britain make to France for the first round of hostilities, and how much should it build up home forces? Here we see a trade-off between arms and allies but one that has nothing to do with the domestic political costs of rearmament. Both strategies would require strengthening of the British military and sacrifice from British taxpayers.

After Munich, British concerns for French security only increased. In February 1939, the chiefs of staff argued that "It is difficult . . . to say how the security of the United Kingdom could be maintained if France were forced to capitulate."[91] In a similar tone, the Committee for Imperial Defense reported, "We are indeed assuming a mutual commitment which is even more close and binding than those existing with some of our Dominions."[92] Despite this commitment in principle, the British strategy toward French defense in 1939 was based strongly on Britain's general faith in defensive advantage and in particular on the effectiveness of the Maginot Line. With the initial upgrading of the German threat after Munich, Britain planned on sending only two advance divisions before a declaration of war. Approximately ten additional divisions were to be sent in two shifts, one sixty days after the outbreak of war and one six months after its outbreak. In order to reassure France and prevent it from accommodating Hitler, in March 1939 Leslie Hore-Belisha discussed a larger potential expeditionary force of nineteen divisions in the House of Commons.[93] Britain's goal was to reassure Paris that Britain was committed to French defense for the longer term. London feared that, otherwise, France might panic and seek a separate peace with Hitler.

In the first nine months of 1939, just prior to the British and French declarations of war, Britain upgraded its assessment of the importance of France to its own security and began planning a larger and more promptly deployed British Expeditionary Force (BEF) for the Continent. Although the British made grandiose plans in September 1939 for a thirty-two division BEF by the second year of war and for an

89. Minutes of Discussion about Letter Dated October 13, 1938, 17 October 1938, FO 371 21612 C 12161/1050/17, PRO, 137–38.

90. A letter signed "RB" (apparently Robert Barclay) in response to a strategic analysis by Orme Sargent, 18 October 1938, FO 371 21612 C 12161/1050/17, PRO, 137–38.

91. Howard 1972, 127.

92. Committee for Imperial Defense to Strang, 14 February 1939, FO 371 22923 C2751/281/17, PRO, 323, par. 4.

93. "Committee for Imperial Defense Strategical Appreciation Sub-committee Procedure for Meeting to be held on the 1st March, 1939," section 6, FO 371 22923 C2751/281/17, PRO. For the Hore-Belisha statement, see Adamthwaite 1977, 253.

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eventual commitment of fifty-five divisions, London never managed to assemble more than ten divisions for the BEF by the time of Germany's invasion of the Low Countries and France in May 1940. That force was only about half the size of what Britain had sent to Europe by the first half of 1915, and it constituted only 10 percent of joint Anglo-French forces on the Continent. Two reasons underlay London's anemic effort: first, Britain's goal was to save its strategic resources until its forces were absolutely necessary on the Continent, and, second, Britain simply lacked the large number of sufficiently trained forces to fulfill its longer-term plans more promptly. Both the general lack of preparedness in the British army and the conservative deployment of available troops were rooted in the long-held belief that the French army would hold on the defensive. The British strategists held this belief even more strongly than their French counterparts, though the latter were also often supremely overconfident on this score.[94]

As a British strategic memorandum for the Anglo-French Staff Conversations in March 1939 confirms, the British knew that their strategy meant that when Germany attacked France, combined French and British land forces on the Continent would be outnumbered, even if relative parity could be obtained on the northern French border in the earliest rounds of fighting. But they believed that "from a defensive point of view France's numerical inferiority . . . is, to a great extent, mitigated by her foresight in creating a strong system of fortifications along the Eastern frontiers."[95] In fact, Britain was so confident in the ability of defensive strategies to offset the effects of power differentials that London held real hope that even Belgian defenses might be able to hold out for a significant period of time against Germany.[96] While British analysts worried about the possibility of Germany going around the Maginot Line, as it eventually did in 1940, Britain seemed reassured that the French troops freed up by the Maginot Line would allow for sufficiently high troop concentrations both in northern France and in the south, facing Italy.[97] While British leaders recognized France's material weakness compared with Germany, they were falsely reassured by their faith in defensive advantage.

When British leaders pointed to the relative weakness of combined British and French forces in comparison to German forces at the onset of hostilities, they were referring not to forces in a single theater but to forces on the Continent as a whole. There can be little doubt that it was underestimation of the potential for effective offensives by British and French leaders, not the overall material weakness of the British and French nations, that most directly led to the quick collapse of France in spring 1940. Even though the BEF and British air contingents in France almost certainly would have been larger had British leaders realized earlier the danger of German offensives, even with the smaller BEF the German and the Anglo-French

94. Gates 1981, 26–36.

95. "Anglo-French Staff Conversations: 1939 British Strategical Memorandum," 18 March 1939, FO 371 22923 C 3893/281/17, PRO, 11, par. 17.

96. Ibid., 30.

97. "Conversation with General Gamelin: Meeting Presided Over by Sir Thomas Inskip," 26 September 1938, FO 371 21782 10722/18, PRO.

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forces in the northern French theater were roughly equal in spring 1940. John Mearsheimer and others have argued that, for this reason, numbers of troops and weapons were not the main problem for France and Britain on land; strategy was.[98] But there was one important way in which defensive biases did make Anglo-French forces weaker than their German enemies. As Mearsheimer points out in a later work, the long-held faith in French defenses led Britain to devote relatively few resources to training its land army in the 1930s, so British soldiers were no match for their German counterparts in May 1940.[99]

Even after General Guderian's blitz, rather than simply distancing itself from the French crisis, London underwent torturous deliberations about whether or not to send more British air power to France. Although Britain never devoted more than 25 percent of its home-based fighters to France, after the initial assault on France Britain rushed additional air force units to the Continent. Subsequent to receiving extremely negative reports from the front, however, the cabinet decided in mid-May against any further increase of Britain's commitment on the Continent. The pace of French collapse, not British apathy, drove Britain's decision.[100] Even after the fall of Paris, Britain did not distance itself from France. To preserve some hope of future resistance to Hitler in France, London offered to merge with the remaining Free French troops, thus removing any lingering doubt about who would be attacked next by Hitler.

In discussing the problem of British and French alliance, the approach here merely makes explicit the argument that already has been made by scholars who emphasize the importance of British defensive biases in the late 1930s. If British and French leaders had believed that each of their nations was individually stronger than Germany, they would not have perceived a need for joint British and French action, and, therefore, no tragedy of the common would have occurred.[101] The real difference between Schweller's account and the standard accounts is not his argument that Germany was more powerful than Britain or France individually but his contention that Germany was more powerful than Britain and France combined. However well-supported by data on steel ingots and shipping tonnage, Schweller's argument that Britain was not a pole but a middle power in Europe does not hold much weight when one observes British staying power in a one-on-one conflict with Germany.[102] Britain's repelling of German air assaults, many of which were launched from French soil, and the slim margin of victory in that painful battle demonstrate both that Britain was a very significant actor in the war and that the fall of France was strategically important to London.

98. For an analysis that stresses the importance of Germany's strategy over its capabilities, see Mearsheimer 1983, chaps. 3 and 4. Also see Walt 1992a, 455–56.

99. Mearsheimer 1988, 172–73.

100. See Willmott 1989, 93–95; and Gates 1981, 79 and 378–79.

101. Schweller 1993, 87–91. For the original collective goods theory, see Olson 1965. For Olson's application of his ideas to alliance theory, see Olson and Zeckhauser 1966.

102. For examples of important data sets that disagree with Schweller's finding that Britain and France combined were weaker than Germany prior to World War II, see Kennedy 1987, 202 and 330.

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France as a frontline seeker of allies. As a frontline state, France was naturally seeking a tight alliance with Britain. Unsurprisingly, France was clearly unhappy about Britain's level of commitment to continental defense. British ambassador Phipps reported to London in late 1938 that the small size of the British army signaled to some French observers that "France can only rely on Great Britain 'to fight to the last Frenchman.'"[103] French statistics suggested that the British government mobilized its citizenry for war at only one-fifth the rate of France, a contention the British rejected bitterly in bilateral discussions.[104]

As war approached, France predictably remained very concerned about the short-term implications of Britain's long-war strategy. French general Dentz complained in November 1938 that "France does not intend to allow England to fight her battles with French soldiers."[105] A November 1939 British memorandum reported that the French were hoping for more help in 1940 than the British were offering. The British had attempted to convince the French that if they offered less in 1940, they would be able to offer substantially more in what Britain believed to be the crucial year of 1941. However, the report stated that Paris "would rather have more immediate help at the risk of less eventual help, than more help in 1941 at the expense of 1940."[106]

French leaders' demand for a tighter alliance with Britain was related more to France's position as a frontline state than it was to any fundamental disagreement with British predictions about the long-term and attritional nature of land warfare.[107] As Martin Alexander argues, during the so-called Phony War (September 1939–April 1940) Paris's efforts to limit the costs of opposing Germany early had as much to do with French civilians' desire to emerge economically competitive from the expected Allied victory as it did from French military leaders' concern that France might be knocked out of the war if it did not secure massive British assistance in the earliest stages of war.[108]

In 1939–40 France was upset both by the size of British army deployments in France and by Britain's cautious attitude toward the use of airpower on the Continent. Not only did Britain keep the bulk of its air force in Britain for home defense but it proposed air strategies on the Continent that reflected Britain's defensive biases and beliefs in long attritional wars. As one might expect from a frontline state, France urged Britain to use its airpower to provide support for French ground troops. Britain believed that the Allied air forces should instead be used to attack German industrial centers to injure German morale and slow German production for the long haul. France worried that this would increase French costs on the battlefield while putting at risk French cities, which seemed to French leaders to be the easiest civilian targets for German retaliation. While France eventually did

103. Phipps to Halifax, 16 November 1938, FO 371 21600 C 14025/55/17, PRO.
104. Gates 1981, 29.
105. Dentz is quoted in Adamthwaite 1977, 246.
106. Burgin (Minister of Supply) to Halifax, 15 November 1939, FO 371 22918 C 18731/130/17, PRO.
107. Gates 1981, 27–28 and 58.
108. Alexander 1990, 21–22.

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convince British leaders to use some airpower against German forces in the early rounds of war, many of the British forces were not well-equipped or trained for such missions. As with the BEF ground forces, this lack of preparation is partially traceable to British strategists' long-held faith in the staying power of French land defenses.[109]

The Soviet Union as buck-passer. Both Schweller and Morrow make valid points about the domestic political differences that led to the rocky relationship between Joseph Stalin and the Western Allies, particularly France. Coding the Soviet Union as a revisionist state, Schweller argues convincingly that because of their different goals, revisionist states will find it difficult to ally with status quo states. These differences were important, but the ability of all the nonfascist powers to overcome them by 1942 suggests that something in addition to domestic politics was also at work. Domestic political differences made earlier improved relations difficult at least partially because leaders perceived themselves as less threatened than they actually were. In other words, while friendlier countries may indeed have allied more quickly, once all the powers in Europe realized that their security was scarce, they overcame their domestic inhibitions and allied with one another against Germany.

Schweller agrees with the basic thesis that Soviet leaders hoped for a prolonged war of attrition between France and Germany, during which the Soviet Union would build its strength while its rivals sapped each other's. In Schweller's account Stalin was surprised that France fell quickly because the Soviet leader misperceived the balance of power in the system as multipolar (when, Schweller contends, it was tripolar). Whereas Snyder and I emphasize that Stalin overestimated the hardiness of French defenses, Schweller argues that Stalin overestimated the power of France more generally. Both arguments fit the approach offered in this article.

Cynthia Roberts offers an explanation of Stalin's behavior that bridges the gap between the perception of offensive or defensive efficacy and the perception of the relative power of various nations. Roberts argues that with the exception of his belief in the potential for successful Soviet offensives, Stalin subscribed to the World War I lesson that war among the great powers would likely be attritional. However, his belief in defensive advantage and attritional war was limited only to countries he believed were of sufficient size. Roberts writes:

> {A factor} that qualified Soviet perceptions of defensive advantage was Stalin's assumption that many states on the European continent could not hold their own against an aggressor for a prolonged period. He distinguished between strong states such as France and weak, unreliable ones, particularly those that occupied the Western border of the Soviet Union. Fearing that the neutral states along the Soviet frontier were falling dominoes that would either succumb to the German hegemon or willingly engage in bandwagoning, Stalin sought security through expansion and domination, exhibiting a pattern of behavior more common when offense has the advantage.[110]

109. Gates 1981, 58, 78–79, and 378–79.
110. Roberts 1992, 107.

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Thus, Stalin believed in the likelihood of attritional war only if the defender was of sufficient size not simply to be overrun by the larger attacker. While France was deemed by Stalin to be of sufficient size, the nations of Central Europe were not.

Like Napoleon III after the Austrian defeat at Königgrätz, Stalin was shocked that the war in France ended so quickly, complaining to the politburo, "Couldn't they {the French} put up any resistance at all?"[111] Either Stalin was wrong because he failed to realize that France was just another weak, falling domino, as Schweller suggests, or because he did not realize the full implications of the new armored blitz strategies employed by Germany, as Snyder and I suggest. Actually, Stalin apparently misperceived the European security environment on both counts. Not only did he (falsely) believe that defense had the advantage in the western theater but also he believed that Britain and France combined were much more powerful than Germany.[112] Though this latter belief was indeed incorrect, I believe that Schweller exaggerates Stalin's mistakes by arguing that France and Britain combined were weaker than Germany. I take the position that the relative numerical parity of German and Franco-British forces on the northern French frontier in May 1940, and the later survival of Great Britain alone in circumstances less favorable to blitz offensives together suggest that Stalin's most important error was his failure to recognize the effectiveness of German land offensives, rather than his misreading of British, French, and German national endowments. In any case, as D. C. Watt argues, Stalin's misreading of Franco-British staying power in ground warfare and his general fear of Western buck-passing contributed to his failure in 1939 to pursue more vigorously a security arrangement with Great Britain.[113]

Conclusion: potential implications for the post–cold war world

Misperceptions of the balance of power are most likely during radical shifts in the distribution of power, when traditionally powerful states are overtaken by formerly weaker ones. Lessons of history and habit may cause leaders to deem the traditionally more powerful state to be the stronger, but this is not always the case. Most European analysts made this mistake in 1866 and 1870, underestimating Prussia's power as it quickly overtook Europe's second-ranking land power, Austria, and then the longtime leader on the Continent, France.

Given the major power shifts occurring in the region, sensitivity to perceptions and misperceptions of basic security conditions may be especially important in analyzing the stability of a rapidly changing post–cold war East Asia. Post–cold war East Asian multipolarity could prove especially dangerous because miscalculations of the balance of military power seem almost inevitable given the complex factors at

111. Stalin is quoted in Christensen and Snyder 1990, 157.
112. Ibid., 157.
113. Watt 1989, chaps. 20 and 24.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

work in the region: the collapse of Russian influence, the rise of China, the uncertain level of future U.S. deployments, the possibility of a unified and nuclear Korea, the uncertainties about the degree and timing of Japanese militarization, and the lack of institutional frameworks to improve transparency. For example, analysts already have difficulty in determining how continued economic growth in China will convert into power that Beijing can harness and project abroad. It is similarly difficult to know whether unification under Seoul's leadership will quickly make Korea a major actor in the region or whether that outcome will be slowed greatly by the costs of absorbing and integrating the North. Also, as Stephen Walt argues, the kind of revolutionary political changes that seem possible in China and likely in Korea may lead potential adversaries to misread those nations' overall strength in potentially destabilizing ways.[114]

Some might argue that the era of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century power politics is over and that because of technological and normative changes, very few, if any, lessons might be drawn about the future world from European balance-of-power politics before World War II. Hence, even if East Asian governments cannot accurately assess one another's power, this failure will have few real-world consequences because leaders will no longer be thinking in terms of relative military power, security threats, and alliance problems. This argument is dubious for a variety of reasons. First, leaders in East Asia continue to view one another with the type of mistrust that was endemic to traditional European balance-of-power politics. Regional actors view with concern the rise of Chinese power and would likely view with even more concern the development of Japanese force projection capability. Even if we believe that a normative and institutional revolution in Western Europe has rendered that region peaceful and thus traditional balance-of-power theories obsolete, such a revolution is at best in its larval stages in East Asia.[115] As Aaron Friedberg points out, because it lacks the institutions, domestic political structures, and dense economic interdependence of contemporary Western Europe, traditional realist concerns may prevail in East Asia for the foreseeable future.[116]

Aside from norms and institutions, the existence of nuclear weapons provides another reason to believe the post–cold war world will be fundamentally different from the pre–cold war era. Scholars have argued that, along with cold war bipolarity, the condition of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which nuclear weapons made possible, made alliances in the cold war less critical to the great powers than in the earlier period. The tendency of superpowers to "balance internally" enabled them to avoid becoming dragged into crisis and war by obstreperous allies.[117]

Even if we accept such an argument about the pacifying effects of MAD during the cold war, it may not apply to post–cold war East Asia for two reasons. First, whether all of the significant powers in the region will indeed develop nuclear arsenals is not clear. While Japan and a future unified Korea certainly will have the capability to

114. Walt 1992b.
115. See Johnston 1995; and Christensen 1995 and 1996.
116. Friedberg 1993–94.
117. Jervis 1989, 24–25 and 121.

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develop them if they so choose, domestic political forces and international pressures may prevent them from traveling the nuclear road. As post–cold war Germany so clearly demonstrates, the realist argument that advanced states will mimic the capabilities of the greatest powers in the system is hardly a lawlike rule of international politics.

Additionally, even if all the states in the region should acquire nuclear weaponry, the condition of MAD would be very difficult to achieve among all of the potential rivals. Many scholars believe the cold war peace to have been caused by the dual factors of MAD and bipolarity, but they have not carefully considered that the former condition may have depended almost entirely on the latter.[118] Because each superpower was certain of which targets it needed to retaliate against and which first strikes it needed to survive, bipolarity may have made possible the bedrock precondition of MAD—secure second-strike capability against all possible foes. The likelihood that each state in a multipolar East Asia could design nuclear arsenals to provide secure second-strike capability against all potential foes, including regional alliances of nuclear states, is extremely small.

The best argument against the relevance of pre–cold war lessons for post–cold war East Asia is that the United States is now playing the role of honest broker and guarantor of regional security. American deterrence prevents states from exploiting perceived advantages, and American reassurance comforts nervous elites about the potential threats posed by their neighbors. For example, leaders in all capitals of the region seem reassured by the U.S. presence in Japan, which they generally view as a welcome alternative to Japanese remilitarization. If the United States were to withdraw its forces from the region, not only would this likely spark security dilemmas, arms races, and spirals of tension, but, given the difficulties discussed above, it would likely lead to gross and potentially dangerous miscalculations of the balance of power in the region by local actors. For this reason a careful study of the causes of multipolar instability prior to the cold war may still be relevant for the future of international politics. If both American leaders and the American public understand these problems, they may more readily accept the role of outside arbiter in regions like East Asia where there are few homegrown forces for long-term stability.

Whether studying historical or future cases of security politics, the most recent realist scholarship is correct to focus on both the distribution of capabilities and the relative efficacy of offensive and defensive doctrines. As the historical cases above have shown, however, to analyze actual policy decisions we must understand how leaders at the time perceived both the power balance and the offense-defense balance. Unless we have reason to believe that leaders in the next century will face a simpler world than their counterparts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we must allow for the possibility that future leaders might misread in dangerous ways either or both of these important determinants of national security.

118. See Waltz 1986, 327–28; and Jervis 1989, 24–25 and 121.

https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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