

## Enforcing Agreements

As we have seen, Hobbes's statement that "covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all," along with the Prisoner's Dilemma game, have helped make plausible the view that the central difference between international politics and domestic politics (or between "anarchy" and "hierarchy," to use Kenneth Waltz's terminology) is that within states contracts are enforceable and among states they are not. But this view rests on two confusions. One is a confusion about the relation between the enforceability of contracts and conflict over their terms, and the other is a confusion about enforcement.

The confusion about the relation between enforceability and conflict is illustrated by the comparison discussed in the previous chapter between wars and strikes. The fact that agreements that end strikes are enforceable does not prevent strikes but rather encourages them, since it increases their value. Similarly, we saw that wars might be more frequent if negotiated settlements are possible than if they are not.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, if a contract signed after a strike could never be altered, then no further strikes would be possible. But it would probably be harder to reach agreement on the terms of a permanent contract than one with a limited duration and harder to enforce it were it to be signed. A more promising way to deal with the cost of strikes is to try to reduce the inefficiency of bargaining over the terms of a contract or to agree on an alternative way of resolving conflicts, such as compulsory arbitration.

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1. This is a point that is insufficiently appreciated by writers who argue that interstate norms and international law are more efficacious than is commonly appreciated by Realists and infer that they are therefore more likely to prevent interstate wars than Realists believe (see, e.g., Kratochwil 1989). Hans Morgenthau wrote that "during the four hundred years of its existence international law has in most instances been scrupulously observed" (1948, 211). A willingness to fight over the rules that are to govern the international order may be the result of a belief in their efficacy, and the "anarchic" nature of the international order is in part the result of attempts by states to avoid conflicts by limiting the extent to which they will be constrained by that order. (On this point, see the section of Waltz's book *Theory of International Politics* called "The Virtues of Anarchy" [1979, 111–14].) And a rule that says effective control over a well-defined tract of territory is sufficient to elicit recognition as a sovereign state by other rulers greatly increases the value of capturing that territory by forceful means.

Thus a better way of characterizing the difference between domestic and international politics might be that within states there is agreement on procedures for resolving conflicts that are more efficient than the unrestrained bargaining that takes place among them. The important question, then, is how costly interstate bargaining must be and whether its costs could be reduced.

The confusion about enforcement derives from the idea, expressed in Hobbes's famous statement just quoted, that enforcement of agreements (including agreements to abide by procedures for resolving conflicts) always requires confronting violators with superior force. As we saw in chapter 3, such reasoning rests on a confusion between the government's role in enforcing agreements among individuals and the enforcement of the agreements that define the state itself. One such set of agreements defines the organization of the government, another its relation to its subjects, and a third the boundary between its territory and the territory of other states, and they are all subject to renegotiation by the use of force. There is no external enforcer of any of them, and therefore what enforces them all is a comparison of the benefits they provide with expectations about the consequences of trying to renegotiate them. A more economical way of saying the same thing is that all these agreements must be self-enforcing.

In evaluating any such agreement, therefore, whether hypothetical or actual, a party to it must consider not only its provisions but also how long it could be expected to last and what the consequences might be of an attempt to renegotiate it. Even if one did not expect to gain from future renegotiation oneself, someone else's attempt to renegotiate it would at least be costly and could perhaps lead to another agreement with different terms.

Since force can be used to negotiate the terms of all these agreements, the terms of any agreement that is accepted will reflect both how people are organized for the use of force and the distribution of instruments of violence among them. Changes in either of these conditions can therefore provide the opportunity for renegotiation. Such changes can be caused by exogenous factors, which might be expected or unexpected; they can be the result of efforts made by parties to the agreements to change them; and they can even be a consequence of the agreement itself.

Unexpected exogenous changes can lead to unexpected forceful renegotiation, but if they are totally unexpected they can have no effect on whether agreements can be reached or their terms. Changes that are anticipated with some probability, however, whether exogenous or not, make the negotiation of mutually beneficial agreements even more difficult than the analysis of forceful bargaining in the previous chapter implies.

We will see that it is the possibility of changes in the distribution of

bargaining power that makes the security dilemma seem plausible as an explanation of war. However, the problems caused by expectations of such changes are neither a necessary consequence of the absence of government nor always eliminated by the creation of one.<sup>2</sup>

### The Struggle for Power

We saw in the previous chapter that contests in forcible disarmament are contests to determine the relative bargaining power of the antagonists in subsequent forceful bargaining. Complete disarmament (which Clausewitz compared to pinning a wrestler to the mat) not only eliminates the defeated state's ability to threaten the victor's military forces but also enables the victor's military forces to replace the enemy's police and make take-it-or-leave-it demands of individual members of its government or other residents of its territory.

However, destroying the enemy's army may not eliminate entirely his capacity for organized resistance, perhaps through guerrilla warfare, or his ability to bargain collectively over the terms of a peace settlement. Thus the consequences of victory in a contest in disarmament are not uniform, and inconsistent expectations about what they will be are an additional possible impediment to a negotiated settlement.

In the previous chapter I assumed that victory in a contest in disarmament enabled the victor to appropriate the valuable territory of the loser. Using this assumption I showed that Clausewitz was right in suggesting that there will often be divisions of the prize that the antagonists will prefer to fighting over all of it, and any division that is agreed to will be influenced by the distribution of military capabilities between or among them at the time the agreement is made, whether this happens prior to fighting or after fighting has begun.

But contests in disarmament can be preceded by contests in armament. Like contests in disarmament, contests in armament can be inefficient. However, the source of this inefficiency is often misunderstood. Moreover, Kant's ideas suggest that such contests can have beneficial effects that are easy to overlook.

One obvious form such a contest might take is what is commonly called an arms race. Arms races might be inefficient because their result can be that the adversaries' relative military capabilities remain the same but they both spend more on arms. If so, they would both be better off if they could agree to reduce their military forces in a way that did not alter

2. The following discussion owes a great deal to Fearon 1994 and 1995b. For a general theoretical analysis of the effect of expected future changes in bargaining power on the ability of adversaries to avoid conflict, see Powell 2004.

their relative military capabilities. However, if one complied with such an agreement and the other did not, then the one that did not would gain a military advantage. As we saw in chapter 1, this might appear to imply that arms races exemplify the inefficiency explained by the Prisoner's Dilemma game and therefore that the explanation for them is the absence of any means of enforcing an arms limitation agreement.

But this inference is wrong, because it overlooks the possibility that one state's maintenance of an arms limitation agreement can be made conditional on the other's behavior, in which case violating the agreement would be self-defeating since it would lead to the rearmament of the other side. That is why arms limitation agreements are accompanied by arrangements for detecting cheating. Of course, the costs associated with such arrangements, and whatever residual arms capability is necessary to provide a base for rearmament if necessary, are themselves inefficient, but the magnitude of the inefficiency is far less than the inefficiency that an unrestricted arms race would entail.

However, such an agreement is possible only if states can agree on some level of armaments that they want to maintain. But if any distribution of military capabilities determines the terms of an agreement that might be accepted as an alternative to a contest in forcible disarmament, then it will not be possible to agree on some distribution of military capabilities without agreement on the terms of a political settlement that both would prefer to war—in the situation analyzed in the previous chapter, that would be an agreement on the distribution of territory. Thus just as states may fight if they have inconsistent expectations about the terms of an agreement that would be accepted after fighting, so may they engage in an arms race if they have inconsistent expectations about the terms of an agreement that would be accepted after a competition in armament.

But in that case an arms race resembles a limited war: it is a contest conducted prior to a contest in forcible disarmament, whose outcome will determine expectations about that contest. And like a limited war, an arms race may reveal enough information about the states' relative bargaining power that a more costly and dangerous conflict can be avoided—recall Clausewitz's observation that it was lack of information about the level of armaments that Napoleon could mobilize that accounted for the length and the cost of the wars that were fought in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Like any bargaining, therefore, such an arms race would be inefficient. But like limited war, its inefficiency would be far less than the inefficiency associated with a contest in forcible disarmament.

Moreover, just as states may engage in arms races, so may they also engage in competition in creating the resources from which armaments are derived. But these are bureaucracies, modern economies, tax systems, and the ability to persuade the bulk of one's male population to fight. As we

saw in chapter 2, it was this competition that drove much of the process of state building in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Rousseau was of two minds about whether on balance the effects of this competition were good or bad. Kant thought that in the long run they would be good, but during Hitler's and Stalin's time this might have seemed naive. The end of the cold war and the liberalization of China made many people take Kant's ideas more seriously.

During the winter, the future looks bleak, but during the spring optimism revives. To know what to expect, we must know what explains the cycle of the seasons. Unfortunately, we do not know what to expect from the struggle for power. But its explanation is neither that men are endowed with "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death," nor that "covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all." Three other explanations are possible: (1) the participants all remain too optimistic about how they will fare if the contest is continued to agree on the terms of an agreement that might end it; (2) it is not possible to coordinate the actions of everyone whose cooperation would be necessary to end it; and (3) an agreement to end it would not be self-enforcing.

Whatever the explanation, this competition is one important source of the recurring changes in bargaining power that make more difficult the construction of other stable, self-enforcing agreements. One of its possible consequences is the creation of incentives for states to attack their adversaries before they are attacked by them.

### Incentives to Attack First

One of the recurring controversies about arms races is whether they make war more likely. I have just pointed out one way an arms race could make war less likely, though in any given case this effect might be concealed by the fact that it ended in war: it may have failed to reveal enough information about the adversaries' relative bargaining power to make an agreement possible without fighting. However, an arms race could also make war more likely, if it leads to a military advantage from attacking before one's adversary does.

In any arms race one side or the other may achieve a temporary advantage. But the one that does may not want to attack immediately to capitalize on it, since it may be optimistic that the arms race will eventually reveal enough information about the two sides' military capabilities and interests to lead to a negotiated settlement on favorable terms. If it believes that its adversary has a long-term advantage in the struggle for power,

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3. For a recent survey, see Glete 2002.

however, it may have an incentive to attack before its own temporary advantage disappears. And whatever the distribution of military capabilities, it is possible that there is an advantage to being the one that attacks first. The first situation may lead to a preventive war, and the second to a preemptive one. I will discuss preemptive wars first. Throughout the discussion I will continue to assume that the competitors are predatory rulers competing over the distribution of valuable territory.

### Preemptive Wars

The possibility of a preemptive war became a preoccupation during the cold war, when many people worried that an incentive to attack first could lead to a nuclear war even though neither side wanted to fight one. Many discussions of this possibility are based on the assumption that a state can only choose between attacking another state and not attacking. In those circumstances, a state that chooses not to attack exposes itself to the possibility of an attack by the other state. If it believes the other is about to attack, its choice is then not between war and the status quo but between two different wars: a war in which the other state attacks first and a war that begins with its own attack. Thus if a state mistakenly believes that a nuclear war is inevitable but prefers one in which it attacks first, it appears that two states could fight a nuclear war even though neither in fact preferred such a war to the status quo. Such a war might be called “unwanted” or even “inadvertent,” though it would have been intentional.<sup>4</sup>

But this reasoning ignores the possibility of a negotiated settlement as an alternative to war. If a negotiated settlement is possible, the effect of incentives to attack first becomes more complicated.

In discussing the balance of power in the previous chapter, I pointed out that it can be thought of in two ways—as the distribution of military capabilities or potential or as the probability with which each side in a military contest could be expected to disarm the other—and I assumed that only the former was relevant to estimating the latter. But if there is an advantage to being the first to attack, then the probability of victory depends not just on the distribution of military capabilities but also on who attacks first.

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4. One must be careful with words like *accidental* or *inadvertent* when applied to wars. Weapons can be fired or detonated accidentally (with very costly consequences if they are nuclear weapons), or airplanes can accidentally fly over another state’s airspace, but it is not obvious how a military contest could occur by chance. However, an accident could cause a war that might be called inadvertent or unintended if it caused a state with an incentive to attack first to believe that its enemy was about to attack. For a recent discussion and citations to the literature, see Powell 2003.

We saw in the previous chapter that any state dissatisfied with the existing distribution of territory would have to attack the other state if it wanted to compel a redistribution of it, and therefore the probabilities of success that determine the range of possible settlements would have to take that into account. If there is an advantage to attacking first, then each side's probability of success would have to be its probability of disarming the other, conditional on its being the first to attack. In that case the probabilities in figure 6 need not add up to one, and so the effect is similar to the effect of inconsistent expectations discussed in the previous chapter. The result could be to narrow the range of possible agreements (if there is an advantage to attacking) or to expand it (if there is a disadvantage to being the attacker). But even if there is an advantage to attacking, this need not eliminate the range of possible agreements entirely. And if it does not, then the advantage to attacking first will already have been taken into account in determining the existing distribution of territory.

Thus if an advantage to attacking first is to lead to an attempt to change the status quo, the advantage must have increased. But a state confident of having the advantage of attacking first might still prefer a compromise settlement to fighting. And therefore if the effect of attacking first is common knowledge, and a state chooses to attack rather than to demand a concession, this cannot be just because there is an advantage to attacking first but must be because there is an advantage to a *surprise* attack. In that case it could not demand a concession without revealing its intention to attack, and the other state could not commit itself not to take advantage of that information. And therefore the state optimistic about capturing the advantage of attacking first might attack and then demand a concession, after it had secured its advantage.<sup>5</sup>

If it did, however, the resulting war would be no more unwanted or inadvertent than any other war, since the attacking state would expect to gain a bargaining advantage by attacking. It would, however, have been inefficient if the victim had been prepared to offer a concession that the attacker preferred to fighting.

Moreover, if the only information that is required to reach an agreement is information about which side owns the advantage of attacking first, then it should be possible to reach an agreement soon after fighting starts, and therefore wars fought solely because of first strike advantages should be short. Indeed, this is one possible explanation of some of the "limited aims" wars that Clausewitz wrote about, since the advantage of attacking first might consist of the ability to capture a piece of lightly defended territory before the enemy is able to respond. Ownership of this

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5. An incentive to attack by surprise is therefore similar to incentives to conceal other components of a state's military capabilities, in order to prevent the enemy from taking counter-measures against them.

territory could then be confirmed in a peace agreement, or it could be traded for some other gain instead.<sup>6</sup>

The preemptive war scenario assumes not just that a state sees an advantage to attacking without warning but also that its potential victim mistakenly anticipates an attack and decides to try to attack before the first state is able to. But if the incentive to attack without warning is the result of being able to catch the victim unawares before he is able to mount a proper defense, the potential victim might not want to preempt an attack but prefer instead to defend himself against it, thereby nullifying the advantage of a surprise attack. For preemption to be considered, the optimal military response to an expected surprise attack must instead be a surprise attack of one's own, which is not implied merely by the existence of an advantage from attacking first.

Moreover, this scenario overlooks the possibility that the second state might offer a concession instead. A state that had the advantage of a surprise attack would have to give it up if it demanded a concession from the victim. But a state that expected to be the victim of such an attack might prefer to concede the advantage of attacking first to its adversary, since if it attacked instead it could not be certain of forestalling the enemy's attack, and even if it did it would still have to face the cost and risk of fighting. If so, then the result might be an unnecessary concession, but not a war that neither wanted to fight.

Note that this is especially likely to be true if the war to be fought were a nuclear war, and therefore it is actually easier to construct a scenario leading to an inadvertent conventional war than a nuclear one.<sup>7</sup>

Note also that, if neither state is optimistic about the outcome of a competition for the advantage of a surprise attack, it may be possible to agree on measures that would reduce or eliminate it.

### Preventive Wars

A preemptive war would be the result of a state's attempt to prevent an adversary from acquiring the bargaining advantage that a surprise attack would give it. A preventive war would be the result of a state's attempt to

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6. World War I is sometimes explained as the result of Germany's incentive to attack first to avoid fighting Russia and France simultaneously. But such an explanation fails to explain why the war did not end as soon as it was clear what advantage Germany had gained by attacking first. For a discussion of why World War I lasted as long as it did, see Goemans 2000. Of course, the fact that the war did not last long would be small consolation if it were a nuclear war.

7. In the case of nuclear war, one must also explain why there would be an advantage to attacking first and show how a state could come to be confident that another was about to attack if it were common knowledge that the only reason either would ever attack was to preempt an expected attack by the other side.

prevent an adversary from acquiring the advantage that an expected future increase in its military capabilities would give it.<sup>8</sup>

Like preemptive wars, preventive wars are often discussed as though states faced a simple choice between attacking now and waiting to fight a less desirable war later. If so, then the difference between them is that in a preemptive war the disadvantage to waiting is that the enemy gets to attack first and its attack is imminent, while in a preventive war the disadvantage to waiting is that the enemy will grow stronger with time but the attack will come later. Once again, however, the problem is more complicated if one considers the possibility of a negotiated settlement as an alternative to fighting.

We saw that, if a negotiated settlement is possible, the alternative to a preemptive attack is a preemptive concession. The alternative to a preventive war, however, is acceptance of the possibility of having to make a concession in the future. But a concession will be required only if (1) the adversary's military capabilities increase as expected, (2) it is not possible to compensate for that increase by actions to increase one's own capabilities, and (3) the adversary's preferences will enable it to translate its new relative military capabilities into sufficient bargaining power to compel a concession.<sup>9</sup> These conditions might imply that the cost of the future concession should be discounted heavily.

If the only barrier to agreement without fighting is knowledge of which side will have the advantage of attacking first, a preemptive war, we saw, might be expected to be short. The aim of a preventive war, however, would not be to compel an immediate agreement that reflected the current distribution of military capabilities but to forestall a future agreement when the distribution of military capabilities would be less favorable. But that might imply that the initiator of a preventive war, if the war went well, could not cash in his success by accepting an early negotiated settlement but would have to proceed until he had weakened his adversary to the point that he no longer feared its future military capabilities—though he might quickly accept a negotiated settlement if he soon became pessimistic about how the war would end. A successful preventive war might therefore be expected to be far longer and more costly than a preemptive one.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the possibility of a preemptive war entails a choice between a

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8. Note that the expected future increase in the enemy's military capabilities might consist of a future advantage from attacking first, a fact that makes it even easier to confuse the two problems. For an influential early discussion of preventive war, see Levy 1987. A more recent discussion is in Fearon 1995b. Preventive war is the main theme of Copeland 2000.

9. Recall the discussion in the previous chapter of the determinants of bargaining power when the alternative to agreement is a contest in disarmament.

10. This would not be true if the attacker only wanted to destroy a part of the enemy's military capabilities, for example, a nascent nuclear weapons capability.

war that could be expected to be short (though one in which one might not be certain of having the advantage of attacking first) and an immediate concession, while a preventive war entails a choice between a longer and more costly war and the uncertain prospect of a possible future concession. The explanation of both is the inability of states to commit themselves not to exploit a future change in their relative military capabilities, and the effect of both is to reduce the range of agreements that are feasible as alternatives to war, but not necessarily to eliminate it. It seems plausible that in a world of conventional weapons, at any rate, fluctuations in relative military capabilities will lead more often to contemplation of preventive than preemptive wars; but the conditions that must be satisfied for a preventive war to be chosen imply that they will often be rejected.<sup>11</sup>

### The Security Dilemma Reconsidered

While any war is inefficient if the negotiated settlement that ends it would have been preferred by both combatants to fighting, many people came to believe that Herz's security dilemma implied that wars could occur even though both sides actually preferred the prewar status quo. We saw that that is not true. However, it can be true of both preemptive and preventive wars (though it need not be): the state whose attack is preempted might actually not have intended to attack, and the state whose increase in power is prevented might never have challenged the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

The absence of government alone does not imply that either preemptive or preventive wars will occur, so they cannot be explained solely by "anarchy." But might governments nonetheless prevent them, so that the absence of government is at least a necessary part of the explanation for their occurrence?

The belief that governments can reliably prevent such conflicts is another example of the confusion between the role of governments in regulating conflicts among the people they govern and the role of governments as parties to conflicts with the people they govern. The organizational advantage that governments have over potential domestic opponents or that political leaders have over potential dissidents within the government implies that leaders of opposition groups will often have an incentive to launch a coup d'état or a rebellion before the government

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11. Bismarck famously said that "preventive war is like suicide from fear of death" (quoted in Levy 1987, 103). Of course, people do commit suicide from fear of death.

12. See the discussion of the security dilemma in chapter 1. Note that for both states to prefer the status quo to war, it is only necessary that, given the existing distribution of military capabilities, both would prefer the existing distribution of territory to the expected outcome of trying to change it. Thus even predatory rulers competing for valuable territory might both be satisfied with the status quo.

is able to act against them or acquires the power to do so. And for that reason, many acts of political repression are designed to preempt or prevent dissent rather than to respond to it. Incentives to attack first can add to the inefficiency of forceful bargaining wherever it occurs, and it occurs not only among governments but also within them and between governments and the people they govern.<sup>13</sup>

Since the end of the cold war, some scholars have used the security dilemma to explain the civil wars in the Balkans and the attempted genocide in Rwanda. In doing so there has been a tendency to equate the security dilemma with an incentive to wage a preventive war. And since everyone assumes that the security dilemma is caused by anarchy, there is also a tendency to assume that if the cause of civil war is a security dilemma it must be because the government collapsed and plunged everyone into anarchy.<sup>14</sup> But the security dilemma does not imply the occurrence of preventive wars, and governments can lead to preventive civil wars that would not have occurred had the antagonists been separate states with separate military forces—hence the possibility of resolving domestic conflicts by partition.

#### Offense and Defense Reconsidered

To defend something is to “make or keep [it] safe from danger, attack, or harm” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Thus the aim of the defense is to maintain the status quo, and the aim of the offense is to change it. In the context of contests in disarmament, if force is not used the status quo will be unchanged, so the offense must be the initiator of the use of force. And if the use of force is to have any effect, the initiator must engage the military forces of the enemy, wherever they are. And therefore, given an equal distribution of military capabilities, to say that the offense has an advantage could mean either that the initiator of the contest is more likely to win a contest in disarmament than the side that awaits an attack or that the side that fights on its home ground is more likely to lose.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that incentives to attack first can make a connection between the security dilemma and war seem plausible is perhaps one reason why many people have found persuasive Robert Jervis’s (1978) claim that the severity of the security dilemma depends on whether the offense or the defense has an advantage in military contests, since saying that the offense has an advantage over the defense clearly implies that, other things being

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13. See Fearon’s (1994) discussion of ethnic war in the Balkans and Weingast’s (1998) discussion of the U.S. Civil War. See also the discussion in Lake 2003.

14. See the essays collected in Walter and Snyder 1999, especially Snyder and Jervis 1999.

15. See Clausewitz’s discussion of the distinction between offense and defense in Clausewitz 1976, 357–59.

equal, the attacker has an advantage in contests in disarmament.<sup>16</sup> However, we saw that, while the existence of an advantage to being the attacker may reduce the range of feasible agreements, it need not eliminate it. And if it did eliminate it, then *it could not be true that both states preferred the status quo to war*. Moreover, if there is a range of agreements that both states prefer to war, then the fact that the attacker has an advantage will lead to war only if (1) there is also an advantage to attacking without warning and (2) the defender is successfully surprised or the defender's optimal response to an expected attack is a surprise attack of its own.

The connection between the offense-defense balance and preventive war is less direct. However, if the offense has an advantage, then a state would find it more difficult to counter an expected future increase in its adversary's military capabilities than it otherwise would be and would be more optimistic about disarming its adversary if it attacked before the increase occurred. And therefore, while it is not necessary that attackers have an advantage for preventive wars to occur, they might be more likely if that were true.

But even if offensive advantages make preemptive and preventive wars more likely than they otherwise would be, it does not follow that they make wars more likely. We saw in the previous chapter that wars might be frequent even if the probability of success in a contest in disarmament was completely unaffected by whether a state attacked first or not, since it is not necessary to disarm one's adversary in order to use military force to change the status quo—force can be used to extract a concession instead. And, as we learned from Clausewitz, the less likely it is that a state will be disarmed in a war, the more attractive war becomes as a form of coercive diplomacy. In those circumstances what determines the frequency of war is not the offense-defense balance but the frequency of changes in relative military capabilities great enough to support an attempt to renegotiate the agreement that ended the previous war.<sup>17</sup>

### Bargaining over the Distribution of Power

So far I have assumed that what is at issue is the distribution of valuable territory among predatory rulers and argued that the distribution of mili-

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16. See the discussion in chapter 1. It is also easy to be misled and think that if the offense has an advantage over the defense then the offense is likely to be successful, which need not be true.

17. Note that Clausewitz claimed that "defense is the stronger form of waging war" but did not think that was inconsistent with the frequency of wars in the eighteenth century (1976, 359).

tary capabilities, by influencing the distribution of bargaining power, determines the distribution of valuable territory.

But this overlooks one of the most important facts about interstate conflicts: the distribution of territory can affect the distribution of military capabilities. Territory can affect military capabilities in two ways: its location or topography can directly affect the ability of states to deploy military forces against each other, and population and economic resources located within it can be converted into military capabilities. Thus an agreement about the distribution of territory between states might influence the subsequent distribution of military capabilities between them and therefore change the relative bargaining power on the basis of which the agreement was reached. A concession of territory by state A to state B, therefore, could enable state B to demand a further concession at a later point, and so on, until state A had ceased to exist. Since no state could commit itself not to take advantage of such an increase in its future bargaining power, it would appear that no agreement could be self-enforcing and therefore none was possible.

It would be wrong to leap to the conclusion that every possible agreement that states might accept instead of fighting has this property. Nonetheless, many obviously do, and it clearly implies a major constraint on their ability to reach agreements without fighting. It is what makes describing a struggle for territory as just a struggle for power seem plausible, and, as we will see, it helps explain much that has been written about the balance of power. In spite of that fact, it has not received much analytical attention.<sup>18</sup> Let us see if we can figure out what its implications might be.

One obvious implication is that territory with this property becomes even more valuable, since it not only has value in itself but also makes the forceful acquisition of additional valuable territory more likely. And territory that has no economic value might become valuable because of its strategic significance.

The problem, however, is not that territory might be valuable enough to be worth fighting for, since we have already assumed that to be true. Even if territory were just the same thing as military power, for example, then, in figure 6,  $p$  would always equal  $q$  and only rulers whose risk acceptance was great enough to outweigh the expected costs of an absolute war would ever want to fight for more. And if rulers are risk averse, there

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18. One of the few discussions is in Fearon 1995c. For a contemporary example of the problem, think of the claim made by some Israelis that trading land for peace with the Palestinians would be self-defeating, since giving the Palestinians land would enable them to demand more.

might be a wide band of territorial distributions around  $q$  that would be preferred by both sides to a military contest for all of it.

The problem is rather that an agreement that changed the relation between the distribution of territory and the distribution of power would not be self-enforcing. Since, as we saw, the opportunity to coerce a territorial concession by fighting makes war more likely than it otherwise would be, the fact that states could not be expected to make a concession to avoid an absolute war might actually make war less frequent, not more. But this increased stability in the distribution of territory would have a price: if the disparity between the distribution of territory and the distribution of power were great enough that one state or another would prefer a contest for all of it to the existing distribution, the contest could not be prevented by a negotiated settlement.

However, such an agreement would not even be considered unless there were an initial disparity between the distribution of power and the distribution of territory, which would imply that the two cannot simply be equated with each other. One reason such a disparity might exist is that states differ in their ability or willingness to convert the economic resources available in the territory they control into military capabilities.<sup>19</sup> And since territory that a state concedes to an adversary as an alternative to war might not immediately increase its adversary's military capabilities, the state making the concession might hope to compensate for it by increasing the resources it mobilized from its remaining territory in the meantime. If so, then making the concession might be preferable to fighting.<sup>20</sup>

This is what came to be known as "appeasement" in the period preceding World War II. One of the main arguments against appeasement is that concessions strengthen one's adversary, enabling him to demand more later. But a possible rebuttal is that appeasement buys time that can be used to increase one's own military capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, even if appeasement is rejected and war occurs, the result-

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19. Another obvious possible reason for such a disparity is that not all territory has equal military value.

20. James Fearon (1995c) has shown that if states discount the future then there are conditions under which states would prefer to make such a concession even if they did not expect to be able to compensate for it by increasing their own military forces. Note also that since preventive war is the result of an expected future increase in a state's military capabilities, the connection between territory and power could make it possible for a state faced with the prospect of a preventive war to avoid it by conceding in the present some of the resources from which its military capabilities are derived.

21. Thus appeasement of Hitler by Britain prior to World War II has been defended as allowing Britain time to rearm. Another, independent, argument against appeasement is that it may cause the adversary to make incorrect inferences about one's preferences, leading him to expect more concessions later even if the distribution of military capabilities is unchanged.

ing war need not be Clausewitz's absolute war. If territory changed hands as the war progressed or if the defender's success led the attacker to be less optimistic about the ultimate outcome, then at some point the distribution of territory might fall once again within the zone of agreement in figure 6, and the two sides could then agree to accept the status quo rather than continue fighting. This, then, is another possible explanation for the "limited aims wars" that Clausewitz wrote about.

But if the alternative to appeasement is not absolute war but limited war, then a state contemplating appeasement confronts a choice between the loss of territory for certain and a limited contest whose outcome might be that it retains the territory it would have conceded. This clearly makes the rejection of appeasement more attractive, and therefore, once again, reducing the expected severity of war makes its occurrence more likely.

### Balance of Power Theory Reconsidered

We saw in the last chapter that the relation between absolute war and negotiated settlements among three states is qualitatively similar to the relation when there are just two: given rulers' preferences between divisions of disputed territory and a costly contest for all of it, the distribution of military capabilities among all three states will determine what division they will all accept (if any) as an alternative to fighting. As we just saw, a connection between the distribution of territory and the distribution of power between two states makes peaceful agreement on a division of the territory more difficult. But its effects are somewhat different when there are more than two states.

If negotiated settlements are not possible, then two states fighting a third must anticipate a subsequent war between them if they succeed in disarming their enemy. If negotiated settlements are possible, however, then two allies negotiating with a third will anticipate a negotiated settlement with each other if they disarm their enemy, which is a more attractive prospect. An agreement leaving them each with half the territory, for example, would be more attractive than the prospect of a subsequent military contest that gave each a 50 percent chance of winning all of it. Thus an absolute war in which two states allied together to disarm the third and then divided its territory between them would be more attractive than an absolute war in which the victorious allies had to fight each other after defeating their enemy.

As I noted in the previous chapter, this is the scenario that is assumed implicitly or explicitly by most writers on the balance of power. It poses the problem of the stability of state systems in its starkest form, since if no state is more powerful than all the others combined, there will always be some coalition of states that is more powerful than an individual state, and

if they could always agree on the division of their victims' territory after defeating it, then it is not clear how any interstate system could be stable.<sup>22</sup>

As we saw, one possible answer is that a negotiated settlement among all three states is possible, which might lead to a territorial concession by the third state but not to the elimination of any of them. But a connection between the distribution of territory and the distribution of power would make such negotiated settlements problematic, because they might not be self-enforcing.

However, while this may inhibit agreements among all three states, it need not inhibit an agreement between two victorious allies about how to dispose of the territory of the third state if they disarm it. This is because the two allies would not be redistributing territory they already possessed (which would lead to a change in their relative power) but redistributing territory that belonged to the third state (whose power would be irrelevant if it is eliminated). Thus they could divide the territory of the defeated state in such a way that the prewar distribution of power between them was not altered.

This possibility is illustrated in the following description of predation in Renaissance Italy by Garrett Mattingly:

Historians have been able to discover one general principle in sixteenth-century diplomacy related to the idea of national interest, the principle of the balance of power. There are, indeed, episodes in the period 1494 to 1559 when it looks as if that principle was really being applied, especially when it was a question of the combination of two or more strong states against a weak one. Here the principle requires such a partition of the victim's territories as not to change decisively the strength of any victor in relation to his partners. . . . But since it really means little more than that the biggest dog gets the meatiest bone, and others help themselves in the order of size, it is hard to be sure that the sixteenth century appreciated the full beauty of a balanced system. (1964, 140–41)

The eighteenth-century principle of "reciprocal compensation" can be explained in the same way. According to Gulick, this principle required that "aggrandizement by one power entitled other powers to an equal compensation or, negatively, that the relinquishing of a claim by one power must be followed by a comparable abandonment of a claim by another" (1955, 70–71).<sup>23</sup>

But, as the quotation from Mattingly illustrates, it is easier to satisfy

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22. This is why William Riker claimed that writers on the balance of power were wrong and state systems were inherently unstable (1962, 160–187).

23. See also Schroeder 1994, 6–7.

this principle in negotiations among victorious allies than in negotiations between them and their victim. This, then, is a possible justification for the common assumption that three states could not reach a negotiated settlement as an alternative to war but two states could do so after defeating the third.<sup>24</sup> And it seems to imply that our discussion of the relation between bargaining and war among three states exaggerates the ability of states to maintain their independence. Both temporary appeasement of the aggressors by their victim and limited wars between them would still be possible, but if appeasement is followed by more appeasement then it cannot protect states' independence, and if the gains from limited wars are cumulative then states may eventually be eliminated. Perhaps we should take another look at why writers on the balance of power thought this would not happen.

As we saw, the idea that weak states could band together to defend themselves from stronger ones is not a good reason, since they will not necessarily do it, and even if they did, wars might nonetheless lead to the elimination of states.<sup>25</sup> But some writers on the balance of power claim not only that weaker states join together to "balance" stronger ones but also that they design peace settlements to restore a "balance" if they are victorious. Gulick's well-known book on the balance of power, for example, is not just about the formation of a coalition to counter Napoleon's France but also about the attempt to craft a peace settlement that would restore a balance of power after France was defeated, and Gulick claimed that the "necessity of preserving the components of the system may be taken as a corollary of the balance of power" (1955, 73).

This would imply that the independence of states is protected not by balancing but by the unwillingness of states to eliminate other states even if they are able to do so. But why would states forgo the opportunity to exploit a military victory to the fullest?

It might appear that they would behave in this way only if their sole interest were in protecting the territory they already controlled.<sup>26</sup> However, in their survey of interstate conflict during the eighteenth century, McKay and Scott say that

Rulers and statesmen strove ceaselessly to increase the power, and therefore the wealth, of their state. State power was everywhere

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24. For an alternative interpretation, see the discussion in Powell 1999, 160. Powell's explanation of this behavior is that it just reflects the relative bargaining power of the victorious allies. And it is true, of course, that an unconstrained division of the defeated state's territory between the victorious allies would reflect their relative bargaining power and therefore their relative military capabilities. But this just provides further reason for thinking that the victorious allies would find it easy to agree on a self-enforcing division of the victim's territory.

25. For a recent extended analysis, see Powell 1999, chap. 5.

26. This is what Schweller claims (1994, 1998).

measured in terms of territorial extent and population, which in turn determined revenue and the size of the army. . . . Additional territory was everywhere the aim of policy. (1983, 211)

If a lack of interest in territorial expansion is required for states to be reluctant to deprive other states of their independence, then it is hard to see why they would have been reluctant to do it in the eighteenth century.

A possible answer is that an agreement between two states to divide the territory of a third state between them is not as self-enforcing as I have made it out to be. The distribution of military capabilities, as we have seen, might be a function of the distribution of territory, but it cannot be equated with the distribution of territory, and therefore the relative power of two victorious states might change even if it is not changed by the distribution of the third state's territory between them. And if it does, then the postwar territorial distribution may no longer be stable.

Moreover, redistributing the third state's territory will make both of the victorious allies more optimistic about capturing all the territory than they were before the war. For example, if they were all initially equal, the probability with which each could expect to capture all the territory might be one-third. If two then join together to eliminate the third and divide its territory in such a way as to leave them still equal, then the probability with which each might expect to capture all the territory will have increased to one-half. Any further increase in the capabilities of one of them will leave it far more optimistic about complete victory than it was initially.

Thus when there are more than two states, one state cannot expand without giving some other state the opportunity to become more powerful. As we saw in chapter 1, this was the basis for Kenneth Waltz's claim that even expansionist states could not simply try to maximize their power. He claimed that this implied that states would form balancing coalitions, but we saw that this was not necessarily true. However, if agreements between victorious allies are not self-enforcing, it may imply that states would refrain from depriving other states of their independence.<sup>27</sup>

Consider the problem confronted by two equally matched states that have just succeeded in disarming the third. As already noted, if they divide the territory of the defeated state in a way that reflects the current distribution of power between them, then this division may no longer be an equilibrium if a change in their ability to mobilize military capabilities

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27. This is the focus of Wagner 1986 and Niou and Ordeshook 1990. However, these works assume that the outcomes of wars are predictable, which makes it hard to explain why they would have to be fought.

leads to a change in that distribution, and in an environment in which such changes occur frequently such an agreement may therefore not last long.

Suppose, however, that they do not redistribute all of the third state's territory but leave it with a reduced amount. If all three states agree that no state should be allowed to become more powerful than the two victors have become, then no state will accept an agreement giving either more territory than it has, and both may prefer to accept the existing distribution to the expected value of trying to defeat the other two.

Moreover, if subsequently one were expected to become stronger, then the other two would have an opportunity to wage a preventive war against it. McKay and Scott wrote of the balance of power:

In practical terms the balance of power meant simply that no one state, or alignment, should become too powerful; and that if it did, the other European states would join together to reduce its power. (1983, 211–12)

It makes little sense to think that two states would attack a third because the third state was too powerful, as this passage suggests, but two states might attack a third in order to prevent the third from becoming too powerful if it were expected to do so. If they did and were successful then they could divide the territory of the formerly powerful state between them in the same way, maintaining the independence of the victim as a way of securing their own possessions against an uncertain future.

Thus there appears to be a close connection between balance of power thinking and the incentive to wage preventive war: preventive wars are fought to protect states from expected future increases in the military capabilities of an antagonist, and maintenance of a balance of power, interpreted in this way, is designed to preserve the ability of states to cooperate in the waging of preventive wars. Immanuel Kant wrote, for example, that “an alarming increase of power” in another state “which has acquired new territories”

is an injury to the less powerful state by the mere fact that the other state, even without offering active offence, is *more powerful*; and any attack upon it is legitimate in the state of nature. On this is based the right to maintain a balance of power among all states which have active contact with one another. (1797, 167; emphasis in original)

An agreement between two successful aggressors that leaves some of the military capabilities of their victim intact is therefore like depositing some

of the military capabilities at their disposal in an escrow account that can be used against either of them, protecting both against the possibility that their agreement might be overturned by a subsequent change in their relative military capabilities.<sup>28</sup>

But we have already observed that, in a world of three evenly matched states, the expectation that two states, if victorious, could reach an agreement about how to divide up the territory of the third would increase the expected value to them of an attempt to disarm it. And therefore, if “balancing” provides a means of enforcing an agreement that would otherwise be unenforceable, it would not be inconsistent with what Waltz called “bandwagoning” (i.e., states ganging up on other states to deprive them of their territory) but would actually make it possible.<sup>29</sup>

The extent to which the expectation of balancing could be used to support the forcible redistribution of territory depends on how powerful each state is willing to allow other states to become, since obviously the more territory that must be left with the third state, the less attractive is a military contest to capture the rest. If balancing is the result of a willingness to sacrifice some territory in order to make possession of the remainder more secure, it is like buying insurance, and the amount of insurance rulers will choose to buy will depend on both their attitudes toward risk and the amount of it they believe they are exposed to. But this implies both that no definite answer can be given to the question of how powerful other states should be allowed to become and that the leaders of different states may give different answers to it.

If, then, in response to the description of balance of power policies by McKay and Scott just quoted, we ask how powerful is “too powerful,” the answer would have to be that there is no general answer to this question. Moreover, there is no guarantee that all states will buy enough insurance to protect them from the possibility that a single state will become powerful enough to coerce the others into relinquishing their independence.

Recall that McKay and Scott claimed that states were concerned not just that a single state might become “too powerful” but that an “alignment” might as well. We have seen that in a three-state world an unwillingness to allow another state to become as powerful as the other states combined can be explained as a way of controlling the risks that states are exposed to when the distribution of military capabilities is believed to be unstable. But this implies that when there are more than three states they all must also be concerned about the power of potential two-state coalitions.

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28. Compare this to Avner Greif's (1998) argument that warring clans in late medieval Genoa solved the problem of enforcing cooperation between them by creating a third party that would provide a balance of power.

29. For a discussion of balance of power thinking in the eighteenth century that emphasizes its close connection with predatory behavior, see Schroeder 1994.

tions, since a two-state coalition could secure its winnings by eliminating all but one of the other states, which would be expected to “balance” between the two winners. And therefore all states must worry that two states, and not just one, might become optimistic enough about their ability to disarm all the others to try it. Thus the interpretation of balance of power thinking offered here can easily be extended to coalitions in a world of more than three states.

When violent conflicts are about the distribution of territory, then, and the distribution of territory affects the distribution of military capabilities, there appears to be a close connection between the sort of behavior emphasized in the literature on the balance of power and the fact that agreements among states must be self-enforcing. However, these conditions do not always hold. Moreover, “moderation” in the behavior of states (as Gulick called it) could also just be a consequence of the ability of states to reach negotiated settlements when they are all relatively evenly matched. And therefore it is not clear how important this factor is in explaining the historical behavior of states, and it is possible that most of the time international politics is best understood as a complex multiactor bargaining process.<sup>30</sup>

#### Extended Deterrence and the Balance of Power

The balance of power reasoning just analyzed also casts some light on what is commonly called the problem of “extended deterrence” and helps explain why it received so much attention during the cold war.

The problem of extended deterrence is the problem of how to make credible one state’s commitment to defend another, which was the main preoccupation of U.S. foreign policy during the cold war.<sup>31</sup> Thus there are at least three states involved: a defender, a potential aggressor, and a third state that the defender is committed to defending. It is commonly assumed that the defender’s goal is to deter an attack on the client state by the

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30. Consider, for example, commentaries that portray recent efforts by Russia and China to thwart the “hegemony” of the United States by acting in concert as examples of modern-day balancing. Such actions are more likely designed to influence the terms of agreements that will be reached by all three states than to reflect the role either Russia or China would play in an all-out war with the United States in the future.

31. During the cold war, the problem of extended deterrence led to the problem of how to make threats to use nuclear weapons in defense of client states credible, but the former problem would have existed even without the latter. Indeed, initially nuclear weapons were seen as a way of solving the problem of extended deterrence, since they made it possible for the United States to devastate the USSR at little cost to itself. This changed when the USSR acquired missiles that could transport nuclear warheads to the United States. For a discussion of extended deterrence with citations to the literature, see Huth 1988. For a discussion of the debates about how to make extended nuclear deterrence credible, see Daalder 1991.

potential aggressor by threatening war against it if it attacks and that avoiding war by making a concession would be unacceptable. What is in doubt is the willingness of the defender to respond in this way, and the problem of extended deterrence is how defenders can credibly reveal their willingness to do it when they have an incentive to bluff. Left implicit in debates about this problem is the assumption that the reason for the defender's interest in preventing an attack is the fact that both a successful attack and any possible concession would increase the power of the aggressor and that both defenders who were bluffing and defenders who were not would have an interest in persuading the potential aggressor that an attack would be unacceptable for this reason.

The analysis offered here explains why these assumptions might be true, but it also shows that there are many circumstances in which they would not be. What is required for extended deterrence to be relevant is that (1) concessions would increase the military capabilities of an aggressor and (2) the potential aggressor is on the verge of becoming "too powerful" (as McKay and Scott put it). But not all concessions will change the relative power of states, and even when they would, a state will have an incentive to go to war just to prevent another state from making one only if the concession would make a third state unacceptably powerful.

I pointed out in chapter 4 that the fact that bargaining does not end when war begins poses a problem for much of the cold war literature about deterrence, which assumed that it did. The analysis offered here provides a possible justification for that assumption. Paradoxically, the inability of a dissatisfied state to commit itself not to exploit the increase in its bargaining power that a concession would give it implies that a potential victim, which might have wanted to make a concession to avoid war, can commit itself not to make one. And therefore a dissatisfied state cannot hope that an attack will lead to a concession. This is an example of the more general paradox already noted more than once that the possibility of a negotiated settlement as an alternative to war can make war more likely, not less.

However, the unwillingness of a state to allow another to become more powerful cannot be inferred from a knowledge of the distribution of military capabilities among states alone. And therefore the problem of extended deterrence is to find a way to reveal that information without actually fighting.

Situations in which some states believe that another state is already on the verge of becoming unacceptably powerful prior to war are unusual, and this is a plausible way of characterizing what was distinctive about international politics during the cold war. The cold war period was different, for example, from the periods prior to both the two world wars, when Britain was concerned about two potentially expansionist states, Germany and Russia (or the Soviet Union), did not want to encourage either, but

could not oppose both simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Germany did not reach the position of potential dominance that the Soviet Union achieved by helping defeat it until after a long process of expansion in Europe. And therefore, instead of joining a “balancing” coalition against Germany during the 1930s, the United States later fought a preventive war to prevent it from exploiting its control over Europe after it had defeated France.

But there is no objective way of distinguishing between distributions of power like the one prior to World War II and distributions like the one during the cold war. The only reliable indicator of when some state has crossed the threshold of tolerance of other states is the behavior of the other states, which is why the problem of extended deterrence exists.

### What Next?

With the help of Clausewitz, we have seen that the explanation for the recurrence of war among the predatory rulers of early modern Europe was repeated changes in their relative military capabilities, which provided frequent opportunities for renegotiating the distribution of valuable territory but left many of them able to maintain their independence. Expectations of such changes could make it difficult to construct self-enforcing agreements among competing predators, which might, paradoxically, actually reduce the frequency of war and help preserve the independence of states. But the price was to make war more severe when it occurred.

Many of these changes in relative power were the result of competition among rulers. But even if rulers had been willing to agree to restrict their competition, changes in relative power would still have occurred as a result of domestic political and economic developments, nothing could have prevented the beneficiaries from taking advantage of them, and often the only way of resolving disagreements about their effect on the relative bargaining power of states was by fighting.<sup>33</sup>

These wars could have been avoided had all the rulers been willing to give up their independence and subject themselves to a common ruler. But they were all too optimistic about how they would fare in future competition to agree to this, and if they had agreed, the result might have been to establish a super-predator and thus to eliminate one of the most important constraints on predatory rule in Europe.

Kant’s answer to the problem of recurring warfare among predatory

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32. Since the end of the cold war, this has also been true of U.S. relations with Iraq and Iran and with Taiwan and China. For an argument that it was this feature of the cold war that Waltz tried to explain by his distinction between bipolar and multipolar systems, see Wagner 1993.

33. This is the main theme of Blainey 1988.

rulers was to eliminate the connection between rule and predation, and this answer is arguably implicit in Hobbes's limited discussion of relations among rulers as well. Structural Realists claim this would not work, but none has offered a valid argument in support of their skepticism. In the next chapter, I will reexamine this question in light of this discussion of how to explain wars among predatory rulers.