



Fall 2016

Racing to War: Arms Competitions, Military Spending, and the Tendency of Nations to Engage in Armed Conflict

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Abstract

An essay exploring the relationship between arms acquisition, military spending, and the tendency of nations to engage in war.

Keywords

Arms Race, War, Military Spending

Disciplines

International Relations

Comments

Written for POL 103: Intro International Relations.

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11/2/2016
Intro IR Dr. Hartzell
IR Analysis Paper

Racing to War: Arms Competitions, Military Spending, and the Tendency of Nations to Engage in Armed Conflict

In today's world, states must come to terms with the myriad of threats they face. From international terrorism to geopolitical rivalries, nations have tended to counterbalance perceived threats with proportional increases in military spending. Such spending can have intended and unintended effects, however, on the overall foreign policy of nations. From sparking arms races to aggravating global tensions, military budgeting has always been a major factor in international relations between nations. While defense spending is supposed to protect a country and contribute to its protection, it may have the opposite effect in actuality. This observation raises the question of whether increasing military spending causes a corresponding increase in global tensions and, therefore, heightens the likelihood of war.

Many scholars have argued that arms spending does in fact increase the likelihood of conflict. Jervis, Wallace, Patchen, Fordham, and Vasquez all contribute research to this proposal, and additional thinking by philosopher Immanuel Kant reinforces the concept. Opposing this hypothesis is a smaller but still relevant body of work from Diehl and Intriligator/Brito, who point out that all-out war is not a common result of arms races. Both sides have valid points, and their research, models, and studies all lend relevance to their thinking. The question holds relevance for historical and future political scientists, as it is important to understand the effects of high military spending on the world and the implications it has for

conflict. Also of note is that domestic policy issues, such as the effects of the theorized military-industrial complex, policymakers, and interest groups, are not analyzed. Rather, the effects of their decisions regarding military spending on the international system is the sole focus.

Negative Effects of Military Spending

Some scholars of International Relations have long hypothesized on the negative effects on military spending. The association between large standing armies and a hostile environment for global peace has been prominent since at least the 1700's, when influential philosopher Immanuel Kant theorized that "Standing armies (miles perpetuus) excite the States to outrival each other in the number of their armed men. Peace becomes in the long run even more oppressive than a short war; and Standing Armies are thus the cause of aggressive wars undertaken in order to get rid of this burden" (Kant [1795] 2010, 3) Kant's initial proposal was one of the first arguments that a large standing army, and the implied heavy defense spending necessary to create such a force, could exacerbate or even create wars instead of deterring them. Modern scholars take the argument further, as according to Fordham and Walker scholars of liberal theory state that "Liberals claim that states can avoid conflict spirals and provide more resources for domestic needs by spending less on their militaries" (Fordham and Walker 2005). While liberal theory makes note of domestic factors such as improving discretionary investments as a major reason for lowering military spending, the implications of military expenditures on the international system are more crucial to the overall development of the hypothesis.

The overall spending on militaries during the Cold War, which is a good example of a protracted arms buildup, can offer support to the hypothesis. Using statistical data from 1964 to the present, Sandler and George are able to identify a correlation between the Cold War and increasing levels of spending. They note "[statistics show there was] an upward trend through

1990 when [global military] expenditure reached 1.221 trillion US dollars.” (Sandler and George 2016) The Cold War is the largest and most significant example of the increase in military spending having a negative effect on the world, as each side had massive militaries and alliances that were constantly on alert for an attack from the other. The conflict offers numerous instances of brinkmanship, aggression, proxy wars, and was overall a bipolar international system essentially held at the mercy of the two superpowers. As most of the tension behind the two nations is simply the result of military spending meant to protect against the other, the numerous arms races and conflict spirals speak to the destructive and counterintuitive nature of this practice. While some scholars are quick to note that the two nations never engaged in direct conflict, it is undeniable that the world was significantly and negatively affected by the military competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

As previously mentioned, another key negative factor of increased military spending is conflict spirals. The most common form of this phenomenon is expressed through arms races, and even Diehl acknowledges that “[war] is an almost inevitable and rather ironical result of the misguided efforts of a set of nations seeking security.” (Diehl 1985, 332) The end result of most arms races is that each side spends huge amounts of resources to acquire new implements of war, which does nothing or acts contrary to diffusing the situation. Wallace found, through examination of many conflicts using an arms race index, that “pairs of nations that end up going to war are characterized by much more rapid military growth in the period immediately prior to the conflict.” (Wallace 1979) Likewise, Patchen concludes that major arms races “will make war more likely by providing an incentive for each to strike first before the other does” (Patchen 1986), which applies particularly well to Cold War nuclear policy but also applies to conventional arms. Patchen notes that even “vigorous defensive measures may signal to an

adversary an intention to attack.” (Patchen 1986) which further raises the risk of war. Moreover, while many arms races are born out of the intent to deter conflict from another nation, they still create a “security dilemma” according to Jervis, which are the “intended and unintended consequences of actions meant to be defensive.” (Jervis 1976, 66) By referring to a state’s “actions”, Jervis references the process of acquiring new military resources, implements or technology, all of which fall under the umbrella of military spending. As Patchen observed, state may perceive purely defensive spending initiatives to be an overtly aggressive act, which can lay the groundwork for war. Jervis states “...The security dilemma can not only create conflicts and tensions but can but also provides the dynamics triggering war” (Jervis 1976, 67) Jervis’ proposition is probably the strongest and clearest statement backing the hypothesis. Further, In his well-researched model of predicting the chances of war, Vasquez found that the presence of an arms race between two nations significantly contributed to the likelihood of war developing, as “Dyads that are dominated by territorial disputes, have [alliances] and also have an enduring rivalry have a probability of going to war of .885, and dyads that have these three conditions and an arms race have a probability of going to war of .967” The chances of going to war is raised by over 10 percent if an arms race is present with other factors, according to Vasquez’s model. Overall, these scholars argue or acknowledge military spending has been proven to increase the risk of war and unintended outcomes. And, as Patchen noted, purely defensive systems can still raise the overall stakes and increase the risk of war.

Example of an Arms Race

An excellent example of defensive military spending causing serious international tensions is missile defense systems built by the United States from the 1980’s to the present day. While this type of military system was intended to be defensive in nature, it still has prompted

serious disagreements between the United States and other nations. The national missile defense program got off the ground under Reagan as the Strategic Defense Initiative, and Reagan helped to fund the proposed system with billions of dollars of defense money. This initial proposal prompted many scholars to argue against missile defense, with Quackenbush and Drury noting “There is a lengthy literature arguing that US development and deployment of missile defense creates dissatisfaction in other states and that this dissatisfaction undermines the stability of deterrence” (Quackenbush and Drury 2011) Beyond Reagan’s SDI and deterrence theory, current U.S. policy funds limited missile defense systems against rogue states, and this has raised serious ire with Russia who views the system as being directed at them. In fact, Yost notes that when countries agree to host U.S. missile sites, “Russian officials have declared that certain new allies have made themselves potential targets for nuclear attack by supporting US missile defense plans.” (Yost 2009, 760) With such potentially conflict-starting ramifications, it is reasonable to question why the U.S. would continue to pursue an expensive and confrontational system. To answer this question, Gizewski argues that “the result [of U.S. and Soviet arms races] were levels of armament far in excess required to deter and of little benefit to the security of either state.” (Gizewski 2001) In other words, the U.S.’s enormous military spending on missile defense follows Cold War patterns that produced systems that were not needed, like missile defense, yet still induced unnecessary conflict and tension in the international system. This example fits in with the hypothesis, as while there was not war in the international system, serious damage occurred to the relationships of the nations involved.

Positive or no effect on conflict due to Military Spending

While there is convincing evidence that wars may begin due to high military spending, some scholars argue that the practice does not contribute to increased global wars and, in fact,

helps to avoid their initiation. Further, in light of conflicts involving non-state actors without large military budgets, there may be no correlation between military spending levels and causes of conflicts.

Some realist scholars attempt to disprove the hypothesis by arguing that the only issue of relevance is whether or not all-out war occurred because of arms races. For instance, Diehl stands in contrast with other scholars of the spiral theory, as he concluded his research by finding that “Military buildups were found to have little direct effect on the likelihood that rival nations would go to war. Only approximately 20 percent of arms races and unilateral military buildups respectively were immediately followed by the escalation of a militarized dispute to war; this was not statistically different from militarized disputes that did not involve rapid arms acquisition” (Diehl 1985, 342). While he is indeed correct that few arms races have led to war itself, it is clear, however, that military spending can have significant impact on the international system and create serious tensions, a fact which Diehl himself acknowledged. For example, Diehl notes, in realist fashion, that there was never any hot war between the United States and the Soviets. In regards to the Cold War, Intriligator and Brito noted “...The quantitative arms races that had occurred earlier between the United States and the Soviet Union not only reduced the chances of war outbreak but provided insurance against later qualitative improvements in missiles.” (Intriligator and Brito 1984) In this specific instance, military spending on missile technology had the desired effect of deterring the other, creating an environment that seemed hostile but in actuality promoted peace. Intriligator and Brito’s theory complements Diehl’s analysis, as he notes that while there was the threat of war hanging over the world it never actually came to fruition due to successful deterrence through arms buildup. These theories

stand in direct contrast to the hypothesis and to the works of other scholars and therefore merit serious consideration.

Interestingly, the question of whether military spending deters or provokes war seems to apply to nation states but possibly not to the new threats of the 21st century. As defense spending fell following the Cold War's end, and with seemingly limited potential for powerful interstate rivalries of that type to ever reemerge, the expectation would be a continued fall in spending. However, 9/11 and the War on Terror decidedly changed that trend, as many countries throughout the world have increased their budgets to combat terror. This assertion is statistically sound, as Sandler and George note that "in 2014, world military spending was 1.69 trillion US dollars. Military expenditure grew by 57.6 per cent since 2000 in response to... the need to address transnational terrorism after 9/11...the Iraq and Afghanistan wars....and instability in the Middle East & North Africa." (Sandler and George 2016) The most recent measure is the highest level of military spending ever recorded, and although Sandler and George note there is some degree of rivalry between the U.S., China, and Russia and other minor conflicts that contributes to the increased spending, the majority of the increases appear to be due to the wars in the Middle East as opposed to arms races. Unlike nation-states, terrorists, insurgents, and similar non-state actors are outside the hypothesis because they do not respond to increased military spending by increasing the size of their own forces. Instead, these groups consistently employ inexpensive but persistent asymmetric warfare against the Western troops facing them, which has proven to be effective regardless of the latter's superior funding, training and equipment.

Conclusion

Overall, it seems clear that nations are at increased risk for war and global tension by engaging in higher levels of military spending in the form of arms races. It is also clear that

military spending can, but not often, have no correlation with the hypothesis, as increased military spending following the war on terror was not characteristic of an arms race. Overall In light of these conclusions, I agree with the many scholars arguing that war and conflict occur much easier when there is an arms buildup. In light of the factors, as Wallace argues, “It is difficult to argue that arms races play no role in the process of leading to the onset of war.” (Wallace 1979) Indeed, arms buildups may not always lead to war, but they certainly seem to play an unavoidably major part. Massive military spending meant to counteract an adversary nearly always has the negative effect of simultaneously raising the necessary equipment or technology for destructive conflict and heightening tensions, which provides the ingredients necessary to initiate violent conflict; in this scenario, whether or not war actually occurs isn’t even relevant in light of the damage already done by buildups. Unfortunately, there is no real solution to this problem. Since unilateral arms buildups only embolden a nation to attack by altering the balance of power, as what occurred with Germany during the 1930’s, it seems necessary for nations to always counteract this possibility by building up arms of their own. As the international system is anarchical at heart, it is impossible to build the trust necessary to achieve meaningful arms reduction. While this is a pessimistic reality, it is still the most important lesson of this research: While high military spending can and does contribute to war, it is hard to reduce arms spending from present levels to avoid becoming a weaker nation. As Thucydides once rightfully stated, the strong will always do as they will at the expense of the weak, and reducing military strength will surely condemn nations to fall from their perch at the top and be exposed to the whims of the world.

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